

MyLabs: *What is Definition Writing?*

Definition is the process of explaining what a word, an object, or an idea is. A good definition focuses on what is special about a word, object, or idea and what sets it apart from similar words, objects, or ideas. Definitions can be as short as one word (a hog is a motorcycle) or as long as an essay or even a book. Here are some guidelines for writing a good definition essay:

- **Choose your word or idea carefully, and give a working definition of it in your thesis statement.**

First, you need to choose a word, object, or idea that can be defined and explained from several angles. You also need to give your readers a working definition right at the start. Put that brief, basic definition along with the purpose of your essay into your **thesis statement**.

- **Decide how you want to define your term: by synonym, by negation, or by category.**

These are the three common ways to develop a definition. When you **define by synonym**, you provide readers with a similar word or a short explanation using synonyms. When you **define by negation**, you say what the term is not. That is, you define a term by contrasting it with something else. **Defining by class** is a more formal type of definition, as in a dictionary. Defining by class has two parts: the general category that the word belongs to and the way that the word is different from other words in that group.

- **Develop your definition with examples.**

Nearly every definition can be improved by adding examples. Well-chosen examples show your definition in action. Definitions can be **objective** (strictly factual, as in a dictionary definition) or **subjective** (combined with personal opinions). A definition essay is usually more subjective than objective because you are providing your personal opinions about a word or concept. You are explaining to your readers your own meaning, which is what makes your essay interesting.

- **Use other rhetorical strategies, such as description, comparison and contrast, or process analysis, to support your definition.**

When you write a definition essay, you should look at your word or idea in many different ways. The techniques you have learned for developing body paragraphs can help you expand your definition even further. Perhaps a **description**, a short **narrative**, or a comparison will make your definition come alive. You may also choose **process analysis**, a technique in which you explain how to do something, how something works, or how something happened.

- **Organize your essay in a logical way.**

Because a definition essay can be developed through several strategies and techniques, there is no set pattern of **organization**. So, you need to figure out the most logical way to explain your word or idea. You might arrange your ideas from **general to specific**, by **importance order**, **chronological order**, or **spatial order**. What's important is that you

move in some logical way from one point to another so your readers can follow your ideas easily.

This is the thesis statement for a definition essay about what a true friend is:

A true friend is someone who will always be there in times of need, will always be the best company, and will always listen and give advice.

And here is a sample body paragraph from that essay:

Without any questions asked, a good friend will always be there in times of need. If someone is in trouble with a difficult paper, a friend will help brainstorm to figure out the problem. If someone is sick, a friend will be the first one at the door with chicken soup and will baby-sit the kids until the sick person feels better. If someone is stranded across town with a broken-down car, a friend will drop everything to make a rescue and drive the person wherever he or she needs to go. No matter how bad a problem is, a true friend will be the person who sits up nights and takes days off work just to help a friend. A true friend will always be the first one there, no matter what.

In this essay, the word friend is defined by category. The author states in the thesis that a friend is the type of person who will always be there in times of need. The paragraph gives several examples of the ways that good friends are there for each other in times of need to show the author's definition in action. The examples are organized from least important to most important in this paragraph to make the flow of ideas easy for the reader to follow.

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