

Definition Essay

From the Owl at Purdue

I. A definition essay defines a word, term, or concept in depth by providing a personal commentary on what the specific subject means.

A. Most physical objects have a definition about which most people agree.

1. Most people will agree on what trees, windows, computers, and pencils are in general.
2. These objects all have specific physical properties that most people can agree on through the use of their physical senses.

B. However, abstract terms, such as *love*, *pain*, or *patriotism*, have different meanings for different individuals since such terms play on people's feelings more than their physical senses.

C. The definition essay provides a personal, extended definition of such terms by linking or comparing the term to a previous definition and by illustrating how that term should be applied.

II. Setting up the definition essay

A. Select a subject carefully.

1. Since such essays are personal in nature, select your subject based on your own need to clarify the term.

- a. For example, if you feel that the word *marriage* should be defined in a limited manner, that term would make a good subject for a definition essay.
- b. Perhaps as a parent, you want to define what the term *discipline* means from your point of view.

2. Select a term or subject that you know well enough so that you can provide specific examples to illustrate your definition.

- a. For example, if you aren't familiar with the term *platonic love*, don't attempt to define it in an extended essay.
- b. The subject of the essay must be familiar enough to you that you can readily supply specific examples.

3. Don't select a subject either too broad or too narrow to fit the parameters of your essay.

- a. For example, the word *hat* may be too narrow for you to define in an extended essay.
- b. On the other hand, the term *love* may be too broad or general since pinning it down to a single definition is very difficult.

B. Once you have selected a subject, outline your paper carefully before writing.

1. Outlining will help you determine the specific points you want to cover in the definition and point out where you need examples.
 2. Here are some suggestions for how to outline a definition paper:
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Suggested Outline for a Definition Essay

I. Introduction

A. Attention getter

1. You may want to include the traditional or dictionary definition here to provide a basis for your personal definition.
2. You may want to open with a contradictory image to what would be your image to illustrate that definition.

B. Thesis: State how you define the term. If you can write the definition using specific points, you will find the definition easier to follow when writing the paper.

II. Body

A. Background information:

1. Often unnecessary in this type of paper
2. However, you may need to provide some background about the term or your connection to the term.

B. Point one

1. The first part of your definition of the term.
2. Example to illustrate that point.
3. Analysis of how the example illustrates the point.

C. Point two

1. The second part of the definition of the term.
2. Example to illustrate that point.
3. Analysis of how the example illustrates the point.

D. Point three

1. The third part of the definition (if there is one)
2. Example to illustrate that point.
3. Analysis of how the example illustrates the point.

E. Point four, etc.

III. Conclusion

- A. Review your definition's main points
- B. Closing attention getter

1. Sometimes a reference back to the opening attention-getter is a good way of unifying the entire essay.
2. You may want to close with an explanation of how your definition has affected you.

Example Definition Essay Outline: Patriotism

Here is an example of an outline for a definition essay on *patriotism*:

I. Introduction

- A. Attention getter: Traditional definition of patriotism (as perceived in an image)
- B. Thesis: Patriotism is speaking out when a person feels the country is right or wrong, voting, campaigning, and respecting others.

II. Body

- A. Speaking out when country is wrong
 1. Vietnam
 2. Slavery
 3. Women's right to vote
- B. Speaking out when country is right
 1. Afghanistan
 2. Health care
- C. Voting
 1. Making a choice based on one's needs
 2. Being involved in the voting process
- D. Campaigning
 1. Finding a candidate who represents country's needs
 2. Barbara Boxer from California
- E. Respecting others
 1. Paying taxes.
 2. Respecting others' points of view
 3. Arab-American prejudice after 9/11.

III. Conclusion

- A. Review of patriot as protestor, voter, and respectful citizen.
- B. Closing attention getter: return to introduction's image of patriot

III. Writing the definition essay

- A. Make sure that you have a good, specific thesis that tells readers just how you will define the term.
- B. Follow your outline to remind yourself when you need examples and analysis of those examples.
 - 1. Modify your outline when you think you need to.
 - 2. Remember not to paragraph based on your outline's points.
- C. Use good, specific examples to illustrate each point.
 - 1. Examples allow readers to visualize how the definition can be applied.
 - 2. You may need to do research to find good examples.
 - 3. See [Researching the Topic](#).
- D. Provide good transitions to link all parts of the essay.
- E. Have a good conclusion that brings the parts of the definition together and leaves readers with an image of how the definition is applied.
- F. Proofread carefully.