

16 Tactics of Definition

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There is more than one way to define a word. In fact, relying only on a dictionary for help is often too limited and too general, which is why you should never start a paper with the cliché “The dictionary defines...” Rather, you must think about different tactics of definition, tactics that extend, expand, and explicate denotations and connotations. Depending on your term, your claim, and your audience, the tactics that you use will vary. Pick the ones that work best and that are appropriate to your rhetorical goals.

Tactic of Definition	Examples
<p>1. Synonym. Use an equivalent word or phrase, use a term with similar meaning. The synonyms should be words your reader already knows and they should enhance your definition (rather than detracting or digressing).</p>	<p><i>nerd or dork or geek</i></p> <p><i>altruism or self-sacrifice</i></p> <p><i>productivity or output</i></p>
<p>2. Contrast with Close Terms. Contrast your term with a word that someone might think is a synonym.</p>	<p><i>Frugality is not quite the same as parsimony, though the two are sometimes confused.</i></p> <p><i>A sousaphone differs from the standard tuba in having a large bell, which enables it to make louder sounds.</i></p>
<p>3. Negation. Define your term by what your word is not, what your term does not cover, or what borders but does not include your word.</p>	<p><i>A square is always a rectangle, but a rectangle is not always a square.</i></p> <p><i>A dialect is a social or regional form of a language. A dialect differs from slang, in that slang refers to informal terms and usages that are not usually accepted in the standard dialect.</i></p>
<p>4. Comparison. Use an analogy to compare your term to a concept, thing, or process that is more familiar to your audience. An analogy is a literal comparison. The comparison can be partial (your term may be like one thing in one respect, like something else in another respect), but be careful of faulty analogies.</p>	<p><i>Dust devils are very small tornadoes.</i></p> <p><i>A whippet are like a half-sized greyhound.</i></p>
<p>5. Metaphor. Use this figural comparison to compare your term to some other concept or category to reveal an interesting resemblance or connection. This tactic of definition is often used to suggest judgment, evaluation, like, or dislike. Here both metaphor and simile function as a figural comparison.</p>	<p><i>The Pentagon is a wasps' nest aswarm.</i></p> <p><i>Musak is like bubblegum for the ears.</i></p> <p><i>Valentine's Day is our national booty call.</i></p>

<p>6. Description. A basic tactic of definition for terms that are tangible, material, apprehendable by the senses. Descriptions are used to give the term sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, textures, and shapes. When describing, make sure all of the details are in service of the definition.</p>	<p><i>An erlenmayer flask is shaped like a cone with a broad base and a narrow neck.</i></p> <p><i>A true hollandaise sauce is light yellow in color, light and creamy, and tastes of butter and lemon.</i></p>
<p>7. Exemplification. Another basic tactic of definition is to provide examples or specific instances of your term or word. Examples can be prototypical or exemplary. Examples can express a range of possibilities, too. Examples and description can be very useful but should not be used as substitutes for defining the term.</p>	<p><i>An idiom is an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of the individual words, like “hail mary” and “throw in the towel.” You can know what throwing is and what a towel is without knowing that “to throw in the towel” means to give up.</i></p>
<p>8. Analysis by Parts. If your term defines a concept or object or process that is made up of a number of different features or elements, specify those features or elements and articulate how the parts relate to one another.</p>	<p><i>A traditional sentence consists of a subject and a predicate.</i></p> <p><i>An essay contains three sections: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.</i></p>
<p>9. Process. This tactic is useful for terms that refer to a method or procedure or practice. Defining by process is telling how something is done and how the different steps relate to one another.</p>	<p><i>Decoupage is the technique of decorating a surface with cutouts.</i></p> <p><i>The best peanut butter and jelly sandwich does not begin with the filling or the bread. Rather, it begins with how you toast the bread and how you put the sandwich together.</i></p>
<p>10. Genus/Difference. Identify the genus or category your term belongs to or in. Identify how your term fits into that genus using a category your audience will know. Then identify how your term is different from the other terms that belong in that category. Genus/Difference definitions are commonly found in dictionaries and reference texts.</p>	<p><i>Performance art is a kind of live theatre. However, performance art differs from traditional, mainstream theatre in several ways, including a tendency to reject the conventions of theatre.</i></p> <p><i>The squirrel belongs to the rodent family Sciuridae, which includes chipmunks, prairie dogs, and woodchucks.</i></p>
<p>11. Classification. If your term represents a category of concepts, things, or processes with several parts or kinds of members, you can identify the members or subcategories. Classification definitions are appropriate when your reader needs to know that your word or term is a category containing a number of smaller concepts or terms.</p>	<p><i>The courts have defined two kinds of sexual harassment: ‘quid pro quo’ and ‘hostile environment’.</i></p> <p><i>There are three major types of video games: first person shooter, real time strategy, and role-playing game.</i></p>

<p>12. Contrast with Alternative Definitions of the Same Term. Unlike using the tactic of contrasting with close terms, some words have more than one meaning or multiple connotations. Contrast your intended meaning with other meanings, particularly to narrow down your term. This tactic is about defining a particular shade of meaning, directing the audience to one definition over another.</p>	<p><i>Most of the time, when we hear the word ‘rhetoric’ used today, it refers to bombast, empty promises, or outright lying. However, in its broader, non-colloquial usage, however, ‘rhetoric’ refers to the art of persuasion.</i></p>
<p>13. Social Context or Circumstances of Use. Define your term by describing how your term is used in a particular situation or social setting or context. This tactic is valuable if your term is used differently by particular groups or in different social contexts. This tactic is useful for slang, colloquialism, and regional idioms.</p>	<p><i>Striking union members call anyone who works for the company they are boycotting a “scab.”</i></p> <p><i>In legal proceedings, the person who brings a suit against another is called the “plaintiff.”</i></p> <p><i>In most video game communities, a new player is often called a “noob” or “newb,” short for “newbie.”</i></p>
<p>14. Operation. An operational definition is a test, an action, or a rule of measure by which some concept, thing, or process qualifies or fits as part of your term. Operational definitions are useful in avoiding confusion with other usages of your term and in helping you set the limits of your argument.</p>	<p><i>For our purposes here, “family” will mean the traditional nuclear family with a mother, father, and children.</i></p> <p><i>If the “bug” has only six legs, then it is an insect.</i></p>
<p>15. History. This tactic traces the origin of your word and its development over time. Talking about the history of a word is useful for definitions that focus on how the term shifted meanings over time. This is not the same thing as etymology.</p>	<p><i>The meaning of “secretary” has developed from a confidential assistant, a meaning reflected in the root word “secret,” to the modern clerical worker.</i></p> <p><i>In the middle ages, something that was “awesome” was terrible, was something that invoked the fear of the divine. Today, something “awesome” is great, good, happy, or enjoyable.</i></p>
<p>16. Etymology. This tactic traces how the word itself came about by taking the word itself apart to show how it was formed from its roots, how it was combined from other words, or how it was borrowed from another language. Like the tactic of history, etymologies are useful for definitions that focus on how the word came to be and came to be used.</p>	<p><i>The word “etiquette,” French for “ticket” or “small card,” originally referred to a card containing instructions for what was expected behavior at court. It now refers more generally to any more or less formalized and accepted code of behavior.</i></p> <p><i>An oxymoron is a figure of speech that combines contradictory terms. It comes from the Greek and the word oxymoron literally means sharply dull.</i></p>

*Based on the “Tactics of Definition.” [Introduction to Academic Writing 2003-2004](#). Freshman Writing Program. Department of English. University of Maryland. College Park, MD. 53-63.