

Definition Notes -- 075/110
A Definition Paragraph/Essay

1) A definition paragraph or essay can explain one of the following:

- A) what a concept word means;
- B) what a holiday or ceremony represents;
- C) what a type of person acts like;
- D) what an occupation involves.

NOTE: Although objects (things) can be defined, more often than not paragraphs or essays attempting to define objects actually describe them instead.

2) Examples of definition topics:

- A) concepts - compassion, bravery, horror, creativity, death, beauty;
- B) holidays - Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Valentine's Day, Memorial Day, Halloween;
- C) ceremonies - baptism, confirmation, marriage, divorce, graduation, a funeral;
- D) types of people - a bore, a flirt, a pervert, a true friend, a bad neighbor, a skillful driver;
- E) occupations - a successful parent, a great baseball player, a bartender, an obnoxious sales person, an effective teacher, an airline stewardess.

NOTE: With types of people and occupations, often an adjective is necessary to bring the topic into focus: true, bad, skillful, successful, great, obnoxious, effective, etc.

3) To develop ideas about your subject, think in terms of

- A) meanings -- for concepts, holidays, and ceremonies;
- B) qualities and characteristics -- for types of people;
- C) functions, duties, and responsibilities -- for occupations.

NOTE: There may be some overlapping here: For example, you might discuss the characteristics, as well as the responsibilities, of a bartender.

4) The definition you develop in your paragraph or essay should go beyond the traditional, accepted definition contained in a dictionary. You should try to offer a personal (unique, original) definition. This personal approach will provide you with an opinion for your topic sentence or thesis statement.

5) Approaches for a topic sentence or thesis statement:

- A) REDEFINITION approach (The commonly accepted definition is incomplete, inadequate. Your definition is going to add a new dimension to it.)

EXAMPLE: Although it is traditionally accepted that courageous people act out of inner heroism, I feel that they act mostly out of necessity.

- B) VALUE JUDGMENT approach (Something is good, bad, or important.)

EXAMPLE: 1. Nuclear energy could be man's undoing.
2. Death is something everyone has to confront.

- C) FILL-IN-THE-BLANK approach

EXAMPLE: Being a successful mother is a _____ task. (You might use the words "challenging," "exhausting" or "rewarding.")

6) There are two common ways to organize a definition paragraph or essay:

- A) Define your word (in your terms) in the topic sentence or thesis statement and then follow this definition with examples throughout the paragraph or essay.

- B) Indicate in your topic sentence or thesis statement that the word you are defining has multiple meanings and then present a series (two or more) of different definitions for this word. (This is similar to a classification paragraph/essay.)

EXAMPLE: Love is a complex emotion that can appear in at least four forms: romantic, platonic, familial, and materialistic love.

NOTE: In a paragraph, it is best to follow each new definition with an example or two. In an essay, at least one paragraph must be devoted to each point.

- 7) If you use one of the above methods of organizing your paragraph or essay, you might also want to apply climactic order--that is, starting off with your least important example and progressing to your most important one.

- 8) Don't forget to use transitional devices wherever necessary and to include concrete details to bring your definition(s) into clearer focus.