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.