



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
UNIVERSITY OF CRETE

Academic English

Section 1: Writing Definitions

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Introduction

- In academic work students are often expected to give definitions of key words and phrases in order to demonstrate to their tutors that they understand these terms clearly. When important words are not clearly understood misinterpretation may result. In fact, many disagreements (academic, legal, diplomatic, personal) arise as a result of different interpretations of the same term.

Description

- A formal definition is based upon a concise, logical pattern that includes as much information as it can within a minimum amount of space.
- A formal definition consists of three parts:
- The **term** (word or phrase) to be defined
- The **class** of object or concept to which the term belongs.
- The **differentiating characteristics** that distinguish it from all others of its class.

Examples

- Water (*term*) is a liquid (*class*) made up of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen in the ratio of 2 to 1 (*differentiating characteristics*).
- Astronomy (*term*) is a branch of scientific study (*class*) primarily concerned with celestial objects inside and outside of the earth's atmosphere (*differentiating characteristics*).

Although these examples should illustrate the manner in which the three parts work together, they are not the most realistic cases. Most readers will already be quite familiar with the concepts of water and astronomy. For this reason, it is important to know when and why you should include definitions in your writing.

When to Use Definitions

- When your writing contains a term that may be key to audience understanding and that term could likely be unfamiliar to them.
- When a commonly used word or phrase has layers of subjectivity or evaluation in the way you choose to define it.
- When the etymology (origin and history) of a common word might prove interesting or will help expand upon a point.

Additional Tips for Writing Definitions

- Avoid defining with "X is when" and "X is where" statements. These introductory adverb phrases should be avoided. Define a noun with a noun, a verb with a verb, and so forth.
- Do not define a word by mere repetition or merely restating the word
- Define a word in simple and familiar terms. Your definition of an unfamiliar word should not lead your audience towards looking up more words in order to understand your definition.
- Keep the class portion of your definition small but adequate. It should be large enough to include all members of the term you are defining but no larger. Avoid adding personal details to definitions. Offering personal definitions may only increase the likeliness of misinterpretation that you are trying to avoid.

Introductory phrases

- It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by ...
- There is a degree of uncertainty around the terminology in ...
- This shows a need to be explicit about exactly what is meant by the word X.
- X is a term frequently used in the literature, but to date there is no consensus about ...

Simple three-part definitions

- A university is an institution where knowledge is produced and passed on to others.
- Social Economics may be defined as the branch of economics[which is] concerned with the measurement, causes, and consequences of social problems.
- Research may be defined as a systematic process which consists of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem, or hypothesis, (2) data, and (3) analysis and interpretation of data.
- Braille is a system of touch reading and writing for blind people in which raised dots on paper represent the letters of the alphabet.

General meanings or application of meanings

- The term X refers to ...
- The term X encompasses A), B), and C).
- X can be defined as ... It encompasses ...
- X can be loosely described as a correlation.
- The term X has come to be used to refer to ...
- The term X is generally understood to mean ...
- The term X has been applied to situations where students ...

General meanings or application of meanings

- In the literature, the term tends to be used to refer to ...
- The broad use of the term X is sometimes equated with ...
- Whereas X refers to the operations of ..., Y refers to the ...
- The term disease refers to a biological event characterized by ...
- The term X is a relatively new name for a Y, commonly referred to...
- In broad biological terms, X can be defined as any stimulus that is ...
- Defined as XYZ, obesity is now considered a worldwide epidemic and is associated with ...

Indicating difficulties in defining a term

- A generally accepted definition of X is lacking.
- Unfortunately, X remains a poorly defined term.
- The term X embodies a multitude of concepts which ...
- A further definition is given by Smith (1982) who describes ...
- In the field of language teaching, various definitions of X are found.
- Smith (2001) identified four abilities that might be subsumed under the term X: a) ...
- Although differences of opinion still exist, there appears to be some agreement that X refers to ...
- X is a commonly-used notion in language learning and yet it is a concept difficult to define precisely.

Specifying terms that are used in an essay or thesis

- The term X will be used solely when referring to ...
- In the present report, X was therefore defined in terms of ...
- In this essay, the term X will be used in its broadest sense to refer to all ...
- In this paper, the term that will be used to describe this phenomenon is X.
- In this dissertation, the terms X and Y are used interchangeably to mean ...
- Throughout this thesis, the term education is used to refer to informal systems as well as ...
- While a variety of definitions of the term X have been suggested, this paper will use the definition first suggested by Smith (1968) who saw it as ...

Referring to people's definitions: author prominent

- For Smith (2001), fluency means/refers to ...
- Smith (2001) uses the term 'fluency' to refer to ...
- Smith (1954) was apparently the first to use the term ...
- The term 'fluency' is used by Smith (2001) to refer to ...
- Macro-stabilisation policy is defined by Smith (2003: 119) as '... ...'
- This definition is close to those of Smith (2012) and Jones (2013) who define X as ...
- In 1987, sports psychologist John Smith popularized the term 'X' to describe ...
- According to a definition provided by Smith (2001:23), fluency is 'the maximally ...

Referring to people's definitions: author prominent

- Aristotle defines the imagination as 'the movement which results upon an actual sensation.'
- One of the first people to define nursing was Florence Nightingale (1860), who wrote: '... ...'
- Chomsky writes that a grammar is a 'device of some sort for producing the ...' (1957, p.11).
- Smith, has shown that, as late as 1920, Jones was using the term 'X' to refer to particular ...
- The term 'matter' is used by Aristotle in four overlapping senses. First, it is the underlying ... Secondly, it is the potential which ...
- Smith et al. (2002) have provided a new definition of health: 'health is a state of being with physical, cultural, psychological ...'

Referring to people's definitions: author non-prominent

- Validity is the degree to which an assessment process or device measures what it is intended to measure (Smith et al., 1986).

Commenting on a definition

This definition

- includes ...
- allows for ...
- highlights the ...
- helps distinguish ...
- takes into account ...
- poses a problem for ...
- will continue to evolve.
- can vary depending on ...
- was agreed upon after ...
- has been broadened to include ...

Commenting on a definition

The following definition

- is intended to ...
- modelled on ...
- too simplistic:
- useful because ...
- problematic as ...
- inadequate since ...
- in need of revision since ...
- important for what it excludes.
- the most precise produced so far.

Sources

- <http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/writing-definitions/>
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/622/01/>

End of Section



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