

DEFINITION

Definitions are important because they help the reader understand your ideas. You can use definitions in all types of writing. You can quote the Webster's dictionary or another credible source, but you can also write it yourself, which can be equally effective. Definitions also can be helpful when the term has more than one meaning or when you need to explain a new idea, trend, or process. Here are three types of definitions that will benefit your writing.

Parenthetical Definition

Sometimes you need to a technical term or a complex word more than once in a piece of writing. If it is not a simple word, you can use an parenthetical (synonym) definition the first time you use it in a sentence. Notice in the first example below that the definition in parenthesis (**choice**) is behind **prerogative**. The definition in parenthesis should always be a simple word or phrase, and it should always be in the same form as the term.

- **Correct:** It was the tenant's prerogative (choice) to install the track lights in the apartment.
- **Correct:** His blog contained a lengthy expostulation (objection) to the proposed change in zoning laws.
- **Incorrect:** His blog contained a lengthy expostulation (politely objecting to something) to the proposed change in zoning laws.

The third parenthetical definition above is incorrect because the definition is not in the same form as the term. How can you tell? Read the sentence without the term: *His blog contained a lengthy politely objecting to something to the proposed change in zoning laws.* That doesn't make sense. The second parenthetical definition, however, is an accurate substitution for the term.

A Sentence Definition

A sentence definition, also called an essential or formal definition, is one sentence that explains a term. This type of definition works well when you need to explain a term that isn't very complicated.

The sentence definition follows a pattern in this order:

- 1) The term **is/are**
- 2) its broad category
- 3) features that distinguish it from others in the broad category

A vacuum cleaner (**the term**) is a household appliance (**broad category**) that uses suction to remove dirt (**distinguishing feature**) from surfaces such as floors, carpets, and upholstery.

- **Correct:** A vacuum cleaner is a household appliance that uses suction to remove dirt from surfaces such as floors, carpets, and upholstery.
- **Correct:** A chill pad is a device that protects a laptop computer from heat damage.
- **Incorrect:** A psychiatrist is a physician who practices psychiatry.
- **Correct:** A psychiatrist is a physician who diagnoses and treats people with mental illness.

- **Incorrect: Commencement is when people get their diplomas.**
- **Correct: Commencement is a ceremony for awarding academic degrees.**

An Expanded Definition

An expanded definition, also called an extended definition, is a paragraph or composition explaining a complex or abstract term. Expanded definitions are frequently used to explain new technology or economic, medical, legal, or social terms. Because they are a full paragraph, they can also contain information that is paraphrased or quoted from a credible source.

To compose an expanded definition, you begin with a formal definition (one sentence) and then expand on those basic ideas, eventually providing more details. In the expanded definition, you can use other strategies like description, exemplification, process, classification, comparison, or cause and effect (but not all of them in the same composition). You also can use negation, which is explaining what the term does not mean. When written as a paragraph, an expanded definition should stick to the primary purpose of the term, like the paper clip expanded definition below.

- **A paper clip** is a device for temporarily holding together more than one document. It can be found in the home, at school, or in the workplace. The standard paper clip is 1 inch long and 1/4-inch wide—much smaller than an adult’s smallest finger. It sits flat on a table and is made of one piece of thin metal wire bent into U-shapes at each end; this is the “gem” design, which was patented in 1899. To use a paper clip, a person easily slides it over the corners of two or more pieces of paper. This holds the papers together for as long as needed. A box of 100 paper clips is inexpensive and can be purchased at most grocery stores, office supply stores, and major retail outlets.

An expanded definition can also be developed into a **Definition Essay**, which would provide a fuller understanding of the term.

Links to Additional Information

- [“Writing Definitions”](#) from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab