

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 create your own unique definition, 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.

Informal (Brief) Definition

Sometimes you need to define 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 informal (brief) definition the first time you use it in a sentence. Notice in the first example below that the informal 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 word form (i.e. part of speech) 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 informal 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 informal definition, however, is an accurate substitution for the term.

A Formal Definition

A 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 too complicated.

When defining provide this information in this order:

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

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

- **Incorrect: A chill pad is a device in a laptop.** [missing the unique features]
- **Correct: A chill pad is a device that protects a laptop computer from heat damage.**
- **Incorrect: Commencement is when people get their diplomas.** [missing the category]
- **Correct: Commencement is a ceremony for awarding academic degrees.**
- **Incorrect: A psychiatrist is a physician who practices psychiatry.** [attempting to define the term with the term itself]
- **Correct: A psychiatrist is a physician who diagnoses and treats people with mental illness.**

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 consist of at least one 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. Here's an example:

A paper clip is a device for temporarily holding together more than one document. 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 this "novelty," 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. Because of their usefulness, paper clips are used in homes, schools, and workplaces. Fortunately, paper clips are inexpensive. A box of 100 can be purchased at most grocery stores, office supply stores, and major retail outlets for under fifty cents.

In an expanded definition, you can use other strategies like description, illustration (i.e. examples), process, classification, comparison, cause and effect, or even a combination of strategies, but not all of them in the same composition. You also can use negation, which is explaining what the term does not mean.

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

Examples of Definition Writing

See the Online Writing Center's "WINK: An Online Journal" to read well-written examples of definition writing by Western Technical College students.

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