
Definition

CHAPTER

9

Definition



PART A Single-Sentence Definitions

PART B The Definition Paragraph

To **define** is to explain clearly what a word or term means.

As you write, you will sometimes find it necessary to explain words or terms that you suspect your reader may not know. For example, *net profit* is the profit remaining after all deductions have been taken; a *bonsai* is a dwarfed, ornamentally shaped tree. Such terms can often be defined in just a few carefully chosen words. However, other terms—like *courage*, *racism*, or a *good marriage*—are more difficult to define. They will test your ability to explain them clearly so that your reader knows exactly what you mean when you use them in your writing. They may require an entire paragraph for a complete and thorough definition.

In this chapter, you will learn to write one-sentence definitions and then whole paragraphs of definition. The skill of defining clearly will be useful in such courses as psychology, business, the sciences, history, and English.

Part A

Single-Sentence Definitions

There are many ways to define a word or term. Three basic ways are **definition by synonym**, **definition by class**, and **definition by negation**.

Definition by Synonym

The simplest way to define a term is to supply a **synonym**, a word that means the same thing. A good synonym definition always uses an easier and more familiar word than the one being defined.

1. *Gregarious* means *sociable*.
2. *To procrastinate* means *to postpone needlessly*.

3. A *wraith* is a *ghost* or *phantom*.
4. *Adroitly* means *skillfully*.

Although you may not have known the words *gregarious*, *procrastination*, *wraith*, and *adroitly* before, the synonym definitions make it very clear what they mean.

A synonym should usually be the same part of speech as the word being defined, so it could be used as a substitute. *Gregarious* and *sociable* are both adjectives; *to procrastinate* and *to postpone* are verb forms; *wraith*, *ghost*, and *phantom* are nouns; *adroitly* and *skillfully* are adverbs.

5. Quarterback Payton Manning *adroitly* moved his team up the field.
6. Quarterback Payton Manning *skillfully* moved his team up the field.

- In this sentence *skillfully* can be substituted for *adroitly*.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to come up with a good synonym definition.

Definition by Class

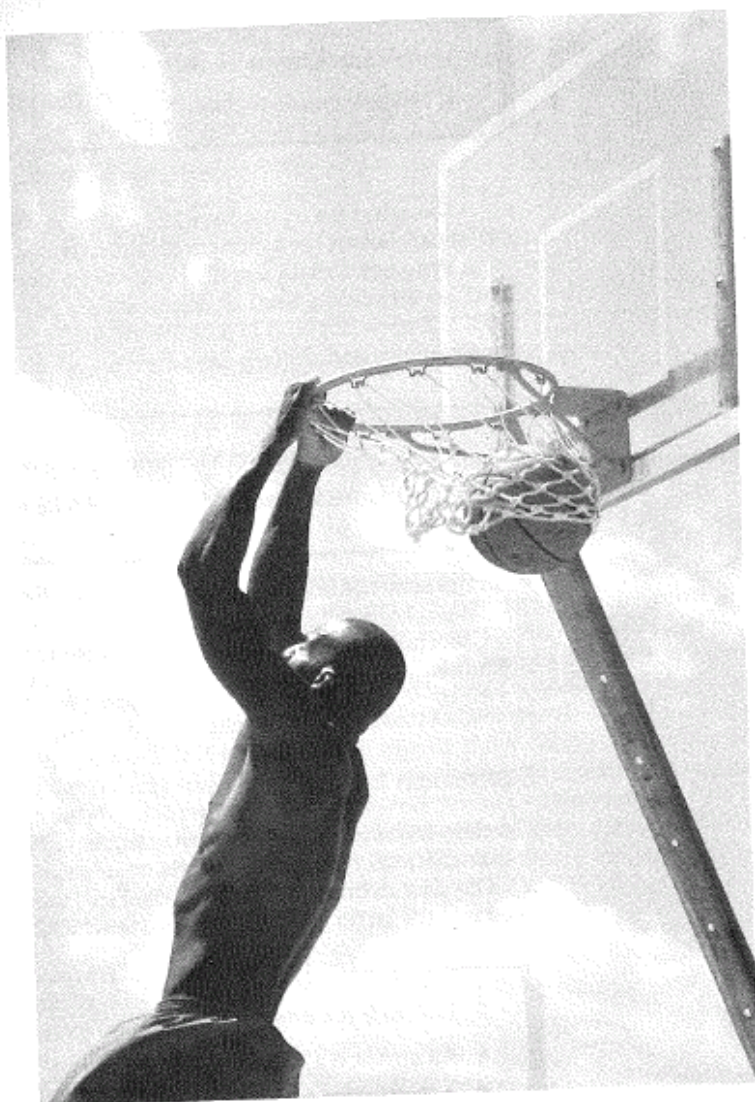
The **class** definition is the one most often required in college and formal writing—in examinations, papers, and reports.

The class definition has two parts. First, the writer places the word to be defined into the larger **category**, or **class**, to which it belongs.

7. *Lemonade* is a *drink* . . .
8. An *orphan* is a *child* . . .
9. A *dictatorship* is a *form of government* . . .

Second, the writer provides the **distinguishing characteristics** or **details** that make this person, object, or idea *different* from all others in that category. What the reader wants to know is what *kind* of drink is lemonade? What *specific* type of child is an orphan? What *particular* form of government is a dictatorship?

10. *Lemonade* is a drink *made of lemons, sugar, and water*.
11. An *orphan* is a child *without living parents*.
12. A *dictatorship* is a form of government *in which one person has absolute control over his or her subjects*.



Here is a class definition for the action pictured: A slam-dunk is a basket that is scored when the shooter leaps high, forcefully throwing the basketball through the rim from above.

Think of class definitions as if they were in chart form:

Word	Category or Class	Distinguishing Facts or Details
lemonade	drink	made of lemons, sugar, and water
orphan	child	without living parents
dictatorship	form of government	one person has absolute control over his or her subjects

When you write a class definition, be careful not to place the word or term in too broad or vague a category. For instance, saying that lemonade is a *food* or that an orphan is a *person* will make your job of zeroing in on a distinguishing detail more difficult.

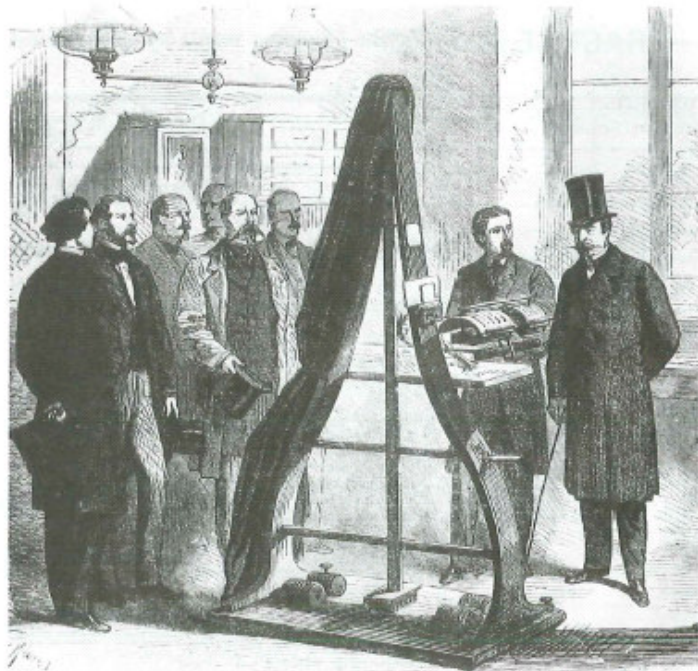
Besides making the category or class as limited as possible, be sure to make your distinguishing facts as specific and exact as you can. Saying that lemonade is a drink *made with water* or that an orphan is a child *who has lost family members* is not specific enough to give your reader an accurate definition.

Definition by Negation

A definition by **negation** means that the writer first says what something is not, and then says what it is.

13. A *good parent* does not just feed and clothe a child but loves, accepts, and supports that child for who he or she is.
14. *College* is not just a place to have a good time but a place to grow intellectually and emotionally.
15. *Liberty* does not mean having the right to do whatever you please but carries the obligation to respect the rights of others.

Definitions by negation are extremely helpful when you think that the reader has a preconceived idea about the word you wish to define. You say that *it is not* what the reader thought, but that *it is* something else entirely.



Here is a definition by negation: The fax machine is not the revolutionary new office machine that people think but an invention patented in 1863 and used to send words and pictures between the United States and France.

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