

Lesson Plan: Writing Definitions

Ed Sams

Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

Lesson: Writing definitions

Timeframe: 45 minutes

Target Audience: Students preparing to write a definition essay on the term “Wonder”

Materials needed: hand-outs

Objectives: After this lesson, students will be able to

- Understand the different parts of a dictionary definition
- Distinguish between a formal and informal definition
- Distinguish between the denotation and connotation of a word
- Write a formal definition, emphasizing its three distinct parts, in a complete sentence.

Introduction to Lesson [5 minutes]:

Definitions are important rhetorical strategies that help develop thesis statements in expository prose. Remember exposition is writing that explains one’s topic and point of view. Defining terms helps readers focus on your topic and understand your point of view.

Procedure Plan: Review Handout

Step one: Distribute handouts

Step two: Discuss the logical problems with each example

Definitions: Formal, Informal , & Implausible

Formal

Man, a featherless biped

Informal

Brute , n. See Husband.

--Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*

Descriptive

Happiness is a warm puppy.

--Charles Schultz

Tautology

Adam called the elephant an elephant because that's what it looked like.

--Mark Twain

Abstruse

Cough: A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity.

--Samuel Johnson's Dictionary

3-Part Formula

Term

Group

Difference

Analysis of Logical Errors in Handout

Formal definition

Once upon a time, the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle were arguing about the nature of man. Aristotle defined “man” as a biped (or two-legged), so Plato handed him a chicken. Nettled, Aristotle amended his definition: “Man is a featherless biped,” to which Plato handed him a plucked chicken.

What is the problem with Aristotle’s definition?

[The definition is incomplete; it places the term within the group, but does not differentiate it from other items in the same group. A formal definition requires three parts: the term, the general group in which it belongs, and the difference between it and all other items in the same group.]

Informal definition

An informal definition is a synonym, usually placed in parentheses, which explains an unfamiliar term like jargon that interferes with reading a sentence. Looking at the example provided by Bierce, can you tell what is wrong with this definition?

[It is inexact. Synonyms only approximate the meaning of a term.]

Descriptive definition

A descriptive definition can be an objective account of how a concrete object appears, but usually it is a subjective attempt at describing an abstraction. What is the problem with Charles Schultz’s definition of happiness.

[Happiness is not a warm puppy if you are afraid of dogs.]

Tautology

A tautology is a logical fallacy when the second part of the sentence tells no more information than the first part. How is Twain's definition a tautology?

["Elephant" is used in the second part of the sentence to identify "elephant" in the first part of the sentence.]

In defining terms, avoid tautologies by not using the word root to define the word (for example, do not say that uncouth means not couth.)

Abstruse

Do not define terms with words that require definitions themselves.

What words in this definition need to be defined?

[*vellicated* or irritated, *serosity* or watery fluid]

Do not define abstractions with abstractions. For example, do not define "wonder" as a state of amazement. (What is amazement?)

Closure and Evaluation:

There are different kinds of definitions: the formal, the informal, the descriptive, and the humorous. The humorous is intended not to inform the reader on the topic but only on the writer's point of view. The descriptive is often used to explain a concrete item or else an abstract term that is hard to categorize. The informal definition is used when a brief word substitute can help identify technical terms that appear in reports. Only the formal definition provides a complete and logical separation of the term from all other possible terms.

Lesson Analysis:

Sometimes terms can best be defined by contrast. Showing different kinds of definitions helps students understand the advantages of the formal definition. Pointing out the weaknesses of incomplete, informal or descriptive definitions not only strengthens student writing skills but also helps their critical thinking.