



**Academic Support Center  
Writing Center**

## **Definition Essay**

Resource: website “Essay Info”

A **definition essay** is writing that explains what a term means. Some terms have definite, concrete meanings such as glass, book, or tree. Terms such as honesty, honor, justice, or love are abstract and depend more on a person's point of view.

### **Thesis Statement of a Definition Essay**

The thesis statement usually identifies the term being defined and provides a brief, basic definition.

- Assertiveness is standing up for one's rights.

### **Choosing a Definition**

Choosing a definition is a key step in writing a definition essay. You need to understand the term before you can define it for others. Read the dictionary, but don't just copy the definition. Make sure that you explain the term in your own words.

It's also important to limit your term before you start defining it. For example, you could write forever on the term “love,” but you could limit it by writing about “romantic love,” “platonic love,” or “first love.”

### **How to Write an Effective Definition**

**1. Create a definition.** There are several ways to define a term. Here are a few options:

- Define by **function**. Explain what something does or how something works.
  - *Pi is typically expressed as 3.14.*
- Define by **structure**. Tell how something is organized or put together.
  - *In a business, a general manager has overall responsibility over various departments or functions within the corporation.*
- Define by **analysis**. Compare the term to other similar things and then illustrate the differences. These differences are special characteristics that make the term stand out.
  - *A Siberian husky is a dog reputed for its ability to tolerate cold, its distinctive features, and its keen strength and stamina.*
- Define by **what the term does not mean**. This distinction can sometimes clarify a definition and help a reader to better understand it.
  - *A person that is kind would not laugh at the misfortune of others.*

**2. Use understandable facts, examples, or anecdotes.** Ask yourself, "Which examples will best help readers understand the term? What examples would most appeal to my readers? Will a brief story reveal the term's meaning?" Do not use any examples that will not support the definition.

Here are the examples of popular definition essay topics:

- Kindness
- Sense of Humor
- Charisma
- Team Player
- Optimism
- Beauty
- Respect

Whatever essay topic you choose, you should be interested in the subject and familiar with it. It would be great if you had your personal experience in the matter you are going to **define**.