

**APSU Writing Center**  
Definition Essay

### **Definition Essay**

- A definition essay explores the meaning of a term.
- It develops a clear, arguable interpretation of the word and supports it with evidence and examples.

### **Choosing a Term**

- Select a word with multiple meanings or interpretations.
  - **Examples:** success, freedom, loyalty, etc.
- Choose a meaning you can analyze, not just describe.
- Move beyond the dictionary definition and explain what the term truly means in context.

### **Thesis Statement**

- Your thesis should present a clear claim about how the term should be understood.
  - **Weak Example:** “Success has many meanings.”
  - **Strong Example:** “True success is not measured by wealth, but by personal growth, resilience, and meaningful relationships.”

### **Ways to Develop Your Definition**

- You may use one or more of the following strategies:

#### **Description**

- Explain key characteristics or qualities.
  - **Examples:** resilience, integrity, freedom
  - **Sentence:** Resilience involves emotional endurance and the ability to recover after setbacks.

#### **Comparison & Contrast**

- Show how the term is similar to or different from related ideas.
  - **Example:** confidence vs. arrogance, leadership vs. management
  - **Sentence:** Unlike arrogance, confidence is grounded in self-awareness rather than superiority.

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**Function**

- Explain what the term does or how it operates.
  - **Examples:** education, laws, friendship
  - **Sentence:** Education functions to develop critical thinking and prepare individuals for civic and professional life.

**Structure**

- Break the term into types or parts.
  - **Examples:** financial, personal, social success
  - **Sentence:** Success can be divided into financial stability, personal fulfillment, and meaningful social impact.

**Analysis of Essential Traits**

- Identify what makes the concept unique.
  - **Examples:** intentional kindness, mutual trust
  - **Sentence:** Courage is not the absence of fear but the decision to act despite it.

**Distinction (What It Is Not)**

- Clarify common misunderstandings.
  - **Example:** ambition does not equal greed
  - **Sentence:** Ambition is not greed; it is the drive to achieve meaningful goals.

**Common Mistakes to Avoid**

- Copying a dictionary definition without analysis
- Choosing a term that is too simple or concrete such as “chair”.
- Listing examples without connecting them to your thesis

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Definition Essay Outline

**Introduction:** Introduce the term, explain significance, and present the definition in a thesis.

**Paragraph 1:** Use one defining strategy to explain the term and support it with examples.

**Paragraph 2:** Use a different strategy to expand your definition with examples.

**Paragraph 3:** Add another strategy to further clarify or strengthen your definition.

**Conclusion:** Restate your definition in new words and explain why it matters.



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### References

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