

## Definition Essay

### APSU Writing Center Handout

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 like or different from related ideas.

**Example:** confidence vs. arrogance, leadership vs. management

**Sentence:** Unlike arrogance, confidence is grounded in self-awareness rather than superiority.

### **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, and 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

**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.

## References

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