

The Definition Argument Essay Outline

Goal Statement: Arguments of Definition

Arguments of Definition will teach freshman writers how to think critically about people, places, and things in the world and the definitions or categories we unthinkingly ascribe to them. The resulting assessment will demonstrate that the student has identified a word that, upon inspection, needs a better or more useful definition or category. The student will provide evidence to support the new definition or category, and he or she will write an argument that, through sound argument and formal and mechanical competence, persuades an audience to think more critically about the word.

Task Analysis: Understanding and Writing Arguments of Definition

1. Understand why a definition argument is made
 - a. Accepted definitions are often inadequate and based on uncritical acceptance of formal dictionary definitions or operational definitions.
 - b. Society can outgrow a definition
 - i. Definitions can be harmful to people (in the case of stereotypes or racial slurs that hurt people)
 - ii. Definitions can have outlived their use (as in "primetime" in the age of Internet broadcasting on demand)
 - iii. Definitions can mislead (as when "intellectual property" is given the same rights as real property; when corporations are given the status of "individuals" without being beholden to the assumption that individuals have ethical obligations.)
2. Understand how a definition argument is made: formal definition, operational definition, definition by example.
 - a. Formal Definitions
 - i. The best definition of x is ...
 1. Example: Dictionary definition (a definition "argument" that is no longer arguable to most people)
 2. Example: Parks hold a much more important role in the American mind than just as a place to have fun. Parks allow recreation, which builds community, they help us appreciate our country and landscape, and they help us mourn injustices of the past.
 - b. Operational Definitions

- i. X must satisfy Y requirements in order to be considered useful, safe, effective, etc.;
 - 1. Example: Laundry is not complete unless it is folded and put away
 - 2. Example: The insurance industry does not consider water damage to houses caused by hurricane storm surges as insurable under hurricane insurance policies; instead the homeowners need flood coverage.
- ii. X is in category Y or X is defined by a), b), and c).
 - 1. Example: cheerleading is a sport
 - 2. Example: the legal corporate individual is a psychopath
 - 3. Example: graffiti isn't always art; sometimes it's just plain vandalism.
- c. Definition by Example
 - i. X is defined by examples A, B, C that we all accept as being part of that category. So is D also in that category?
 - 1. Good when the category itself doesn't have a standard definition but is a "know it when you see it" type category.

3. Choose a topic

- a. Topic is a question about a definition of a term or its category
- b. The question must be arguable
- c. Avoid poor topics: topics that are too extensive or aren't arguable
 - i. questions that can be answered by looking at a dictionary or other reference make poor topics. No one is going to argue that an elephant is a pachyderm.
 - ii. papers about the definition of love or friendship tend to be weak because people are used to thinking of their characteristics a matter of personal rather than public preference.
 - iii. "Abortion is murder" is a definition argument, but you can't address the definition of life and the definition of murder in the page length you have available to you. Stay away from these clichéd topics. Stick with arguments that people are likely to disagree about or have never thought of but still can be persuaded by.
 - iv. Avoid defining something only as "good" or "bad." That is an evaluation argument and not necessarily a definition

argument. Whether the category is good or bad can be what's at stake, but it shouldn't be the only argument.

1. Example: "Sweatshop labor is bad" is a poor topic, but "Sweatshop labor is slavery" is a good topic choice. Whether you define sweatshop labor as slavery or not will certainly matter. People already feel that is bad, so if you can convince people that sweatshop labor is slavery, you've won your definition argument and people will hopefully disapprove of sweatshop labor as they disapprove of slavery.
4. Identify the ways in which the accepted definition or category ascribed to a term is lacking or doesn't hold up to critical inquiry.
 - a. Identify what's at stake. Why should people care about the definition at all?
 - b. What are the consequences of people's misunderstanding?
5. Identify modifications to the definition that will help the readers define or categorize the term in a way that is more useful.
 - a. List the accepted characteristics or definition of the terms and categories you are exploring
 - i. Explore accepted dictionary definitions
 - ii. Explore people's assumptions about the definitions—ask your friends and family members their definition. Are the definitions the same as yours or each others'?
 - iii. Look in books about the topic to see how people are using the word or category
 - b. Identify what's missing from the definitions
 - i. What does the accepted definition exclude?
 - ii. Use logic and evidence to explain why what is excluded should be included.
 1. Example: Cheerleading isn't often thought of as a sport, but similar activities such as rhythm gymnastics have Olympic events, so cheerleading should be considered a sport.
 2. Provide evidence: If you are making a comparison, explain how your comparison is sound.
6. Write the first draft of the essay
 - a. Draw upon planning and drafting skills from previous lessons
7. Revise according to revision procedures

- a. Revise using revision strategies introduced in the beginning of the course.
- b. Pay special attention to the grammatical concepts introduced in the previous lesson.
- c. Ensure that the argument meets the rhetorical situation by considering what the audience will need to read to be persuaded.

Instructional Objectives

After completing this lesson, students should:

1. Choose a topic that is suitable for a definition argument
 - a. Explain why definition arguments are made
 - b. Identify whether a definition argument fits the pattern of formal definition, operational definition, definition by example
 - c. Identify the ways in which the accepted definition or category ascribed to a term is lacking or doesn't hold up to critical inquiry.
2. Propose a definition argument structure that provides reasons and evidence to support the argument for the new definition or category
3. Argue for the proposed definition in a draft essay that is able to, through sound argument, persuade an audience to think more critically about the word or category being defined
4. Revise the draft essay into a polished final draft that demonstrates mechanical competence using previously acquired revision procedures.