

Definition Essay Guidelines

Structuring a Definition Essay

Definition essays should provide an understanding of an object or concept. When writing a definition essay, consider the following guidelines.

1. A definition essay should be original, something more distinctive than a quotation from a dictionary or encyclopedia. A successful definition essay should provide readers with a personal perspective, not a repetitive phrase, sentence, or paragraph from a reference source.
2. A thesis statement should clearly identify the term or concept being defined and present a brief, basic definition.
3. Support paragraphs for definition essays may take several forms, including the following: history, examples, a process, comparison/contrasts, or cause and effect. Consider the following examples.
 - Definition by function: an explanation of what something does or how something works.
 - Definition by structure: a description of how something is organized or put together.
 - Definition by analysis: a comparison of a term to other members of its class, including specific examples of the differences.
4. Details should clarify the differences or special characteristics that make the subject unique. For example, an essay about German shepherds may compare them to other breeds, such as boxers, Chihuahuas, or poodles.
5. Circular logic should be avoided, especially in thesis statements.

Examples

- A computer virus is a virus that infects computers.
- Fanaticism is the characteristic of being a fanatic.
- Success can be defined as being successful.
- She likes *Survivor* because it's her favorite television show.

Definition Sample

Title:

Note how title provides a clue to the topic. Title of essay is not underlined, italicized, or placed within quotation marks.

Introduction:

First paragraph leads reader to the thesis statement, which clearly identifies the topic.

First body paragraph:

This body paragraph provides specific examples of the concept (sports cars) that is being defined.

Second body paragraph:

This paragraph indicates additional examples. Note the use of a transitional word: "Another."

Third body paragraph:

Additional examples might be necessary to expand the definition. Note the use of specific details.

Another approach:

Comparisons and/or contrasts might help clarify a definition.

The True Sports Car

Many automobile manufacturers offer vehicles that are mistakenly labeled as "sports cars." The definition of a sports car appears to be subjective, but several distinctive attributes separate true sports cars from ordinary vehicles. The primary characteristic of a sports car should be the fun factor. When someone gets behind the wheel of a sports car, he or she should experience a feeling of exhilaration, an eagerness to challenge an open road. In addition to the fun factor, however, true sports cars should possess several other attributes, including searing speed, superb handling characteristics, and eye-catching appeal.

Some models – such as the Nissan 370Z, Dodge Viper, and Chevrolet Corvette - may differ in mechanical engineering and body designs, but they each meet the criteria of a sports car. These front-engine, rear-wheel drive sports cars offer an exciting driving experience, which includes adrenaline-charging acceleration and outstanding road behavior. Their muscular designs also attract envious looks from those who find themselves stuck behind the wheels of boring, sedate sedans, or SUVs. These sports cars all look fast even when sitting motionless in a parking lot.

Another universally recognized sports car is the Porsche 911. The 911's unusual opposed-piston, rear-engine design distributes weight more equitably than front-engine cars. As a result, the Porsche 911 provides a fast, maneuverable, and thrilling drive. Its visual appeal is unquestionable since it has employed the same basic flowing design since 1958. Loyal Porsche owners often claim the 911 is the epitome of sports cars.

Some of the more glamorous (and expensive) examples of sports cars include Ferraris and Lamborghinis. In these sleek, aerodynamic vehicles, a powerful engine is center-mounted in the chassis. Therefore, weight distribution is a positive factor that allows amazing handling to complement awesome horsepower. These exotic sports cars can tempt drivers to seek long, open stretches of highway where they may delight in speeds that exceed 200 mph.

Because they look fast, some autos often are mistakenly labeled as sports cars. Mustangs, Challengers, and Camaros are examples. While they share a few characteristics of a true sports car, these are actually pony cars: relatively fast and fun but whose handling characteristics fall short of those of true sports cars.

Essay continues on next page

An argument can be effective:

Presenting and disputing an alternative viewpoint can also be effective.

Conclusion:

Final paragraph sums up the information in a definition essay. A conclusion should never include new examples or information.

Muscle cars, such as the Dodge Charger, Ford Taurus SHO, and Chevrolet SS also often are mislabeled as sports cars. These high-horsepower sedans can be exciting – as long as they are driven in a straight line. Their greatest attribute is neck-snapping acceleration in linear quarter-mile dashes. On a road course, however, these heavy, awkwardly handling cars would pose no challenge to a true sports car, such as a Corvette or Porsche.

Smaller sedans, such as the Subaru WRX or BMW F30/F31 series, also often are referred to as sports cars. However quick and enjoyable these vehicles might be, most automotive aficionados believe that a true sports car should have only two doors, which drops even these stylish four-door vehicles into the category of sports sedans.

Overall, many vehicles have been labeled as sports cars, but few truly match all of the criteria. Although the “perfect” sports car might exist only in the eyes of an individual driver, a true sports car must be fun to drive, handle winding roads with ease, possess the power to easily outrun humdrum vehicles, and reflect eye-catching styling.

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