Classification and Definition Essays: Purpose and Organization

Inquire: Definition/Classification Arguments

Overview

Definition and classification arguments are all around us: Is a hot dog a sandwich? Is Die Hard a Christmas movie? Both of these questions require a definition of the category. What makes a sandwich? What qualifies as a Christmas movie? Once we have a definition to work from, we can decide whether a hot dog classifies as a sandwich or whether Die Hard classifies as a Christmas movie. This is the basic structure of a definition/classification essay: define your topic, then determine whether something can be classified as meeting the definition.

Big Question: What does a definition/classification essay look like?

Watch: Definition and Classification in Daily Life

Definition and classification arguments are all around us. You might argue with a friend about whether a band is rock n’ roll. You might argue about whether a movie is for children or for adults. You might argue whether french toast is breakfast or a dessert. All of these arguments are forms of definition arguments. What makes something rock n’ roll? What makes something “for children?” What makes a “dessert?”

One of the most common types of arguments employed in everyday communication is the definition/classification argument. Particularly, we engage in these arguments when we discuss things that blur the lines of classification.

Consider, for example, when the Harry Potter book series first launched. Many parents worried that the books were unsuitable to be young adult literature because they contained witchcraft. Parents disagreed over what defines a suitable young adult book. For some, any mention of the occult meant that the book was inappropriate. For others, however, the fact that the book was fiction was enough to alleviate any concerns over occult subject matter. The inability to agree on a definition of "suitable young adult literature" created confusion over whether Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone should be classified as young adult literature. This kind of conflict forms the basis for definition/classification arguments.

Definition and classification arguments go together. Generally, an essay in this genre will consist of two parts:

1. The definition section, where you develop criteria for your own definition, or where you use a commonly accepted definition to form the basis of your essay.
2. The classification section, where you show whether something can be "classified" under your definition, by matching your topic to the criteria you developed in the first section.

This kind of argument can be used to explore and solve all sorts of conflicts in your everyday life, but it can also be used to great persuasive effect in important situations. For example, you might transfer to a university some day.

What if the university refuses to take a credit of history that you have on your transcript because it doesn’t “meet their requirements?” You could use a classification argument to show how the syllabus and content of that course meet the criteria they have laid out in their own course catalogue.

Are there times when you’ve argued with someone’s definition of something?

Read: Definition and Classification Writing

Overview

When Jordan Peele’s directorial debut film Get Out hit theaters, most audiences considered it a horrifying and artful examination of interactions between black and white Americans. What baffled audiences, however, was when Universal Studios submitted Get Out as a comedy for awards season. As director, Jordan Peele disagreed forcefully with the categorization and questioned what exactly anyone found funny about the film. So, what makes a comedy? What was it that led Universal Studios to submit this particular film as a comedy? Was it simply that the director had a history of producing comedic material? Or was it that the film contained a few punchlines?

This kind of conflict is foundational to definition and classification writing. The first question at hand is what is it that makes a comedy. Who gets to decide: directors, film studios, art associations? The second question at hand is whether Get Out as a film meets that criteria.

Purpose of Definition/Classification Writing

The purpose of definition/classification writing is not too difficult to ascertain from the titles of the genres themselves. The goal of a definition argument is to argue for a particular definition of a term or concept that could have several definitions. For example, during the Olympics, many find themselves watching curling wondering who decided this was a sport?

What is needed to answer this question is an agreed-upon definition of what is meant by the term sport. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term as “a game, competition, or similar activity, done for enjoyment or as a job, that takes physical effort and skill and is played or done by following particular rules.”*

You can see how broad this definition is, and how it might lead to some arguments over what actually requires “skill” and what is meant by “physical effort.” If you wanted to provide a narrower definition for this term in order to make the Olympics more exclusive, you would begin to develop a definition argument.

A classification argument is what follows a definition argument. Once you have a common and agreed-upon definition, you can use that definition to argue whether something meets the definition’s
criteria or to break it down into smaller parts. This is a classification argument, which argues for how things are classified within a definition.

In a classification argument, you might say, then, that there are three types of Olympic sports: sports of strength, sports of skill, and sports of leisure. In this, you have created three classifications that fall under the definition of sport.

**Identifying Criteria**

The first step in writing a definition or classification argument is to identify and develop the criteria you would like to include in your definition.

A definition argument can be used to determine whether something “matches” the definition. To continue the above example, you might take issue with whether curling meets the definition of a sport. If you wanted to argue whether it meets the definition of sport, you would develop a classification argument.

Generally, the structure of a definition/classification argument consists of two major parts:

1. Developing the criteria for your definition
2. Determining how or if your subject matches the criteria outlined in the first section

You can do this simply by using an already accepted definition, whether that definition is produced in a dictionary or by an expert in the field. If you choose to use an already developed definition, your only job is to break that definition down into the criteria that are represented within it.

If, for example, you use the definition of sport from the Cambridge dictionary, your criteria might look like this:

- Is it a game, competition, or similar activity?
- Is it done for enjoyment or as a job?
- Does it take physical effort and skill?
- Is it played or done by following particular rules?

You could, however, develop your own criteria, if you find that all existing definitions are insufficient. So, an alternate definition of sport might include the following criteria:

- Requires intense physical exertion
- Requires athleticism and skill
- Is played by following particular rules
- Requires an opponent (there is a defense and an offense)

You can see how this alternative definition provides a much narrower scope of sport. Whether you use existing criteria or whether you develop your own will depend entirely on how much you accept the existing definitions.

**Matching Criteria**

The second part of a definition or classification essay is referred to as **criteria matching**. Simply put, this is the portion of your essay where you match your particular topic to the criteria you developed in the first section. You could divide your paragraphs into the separate criteria, or you could combine similar criteria into common paragraphs.
You can either argue that your topic meets the criteria or that it does not meet the criteria. Either way, you will need specific examples to support your claim.

For example, you could choose to argue that curling is *not* a sport according to the second set of criteria above:

- Curling does not require intense physical exertion from all players.
- Curling requires skill, but it does not necessarily require athleticism.
- Curling *does* use particular rules.
- Curling *does* require an opponent.

For this argument, you would argue that, because it does not meet two of the foundational criteria, curling is not a sport.

If you used the commonly accepted definition for your criteria, however, you would likely argue that curling is classified as a sport, as it meets those criteria.

*https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sport

Reflect Poll: Have You Ever...

Have you ever disagreed with a friend over the genre (classification) of a movie or song?

- Yes
- No

Expand: The Rhetorical Situation in Definition/Classification Essays

Ethos

As with the majority of academic writing, you will want to project a credible ethos in definition/classification writing. Of course, the kind of language you use will depend on your audience and the context of publication. If you’re writing an article for *Buzzfeed*, you will use more informal language that employs slang and references to popular culture. Alternatively, if you are writing an essay for a scholarly journal, you will use formal, academic language to appeal to your audience.

In either case, you should come off as a reliable and trustworthy source of information. You should take special care to research and provide evidence to support your claims, particularly if you are making an argument that will be unpopular with your readers.

Audience and Shared Assumptions

Understanding and appealing to your audience is one of the most challenging aspects of writing a definition/classification argument. Particularly, this is important, because you need to be sure that you have an understanding of the *shared assumptions* that are brought to your essay by your reader. The term shared assumptions refers, quite simply, to the assumptions that are shared by most people. It’s important to understand shared assumptions because when your readers don’t share your assumptions, they will become resistant readers. Be sure that you don’t take for granted that your audience will share the assumptions you make.
For example, if you were to argue that Harry Potter is a suitable young adult book, you might assume that the magical setting is a non-factor because the text is fiction. You might, however, encounter a large audience that does not assume that fictional texts are harmless. Similarly, to borrow from the above example of sports: if you are writing an essay for a group of curlers, you might not use curling as the example to help support your narrower definition of sport.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Examples of definition essays on a variety of topics
- Link to resource: https://www.bartleby.com/topics/Definition-Essay-Examples

Additional elaboration on classification essays
- Link to resource: http://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/style_purpose_strategy/classification_paper.html

Examples of classification focused essays
- Link to resource: https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-classification-composition-1689849

Lesson Glossary

**shared assumptions**: assumptions that are generally common among all people; the absence of shared assumptions can result in conflict between people

**criteria matching**: the process by which a writer or speaker determines whether a person, place, or thing matches the criteria of a particular definition

Check Your Knowledge

1. Your language will always be formal in definition/classification writing.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Your criteria matching section will be comprised of only one paragraph.
   a. True
   b. False
3. A classification argument is what follows a definition argument.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A