Classification and Definition Essays: Technique, Topic, and Style

Inquire: Where Do I Even Begin?

Overview

As with any genre of essay, to begin writing a definition or classification essay, you first need a topic. Finding your topic can be difficult, but there are some tried-and-true brainstorming methods that can help you get started. Once you have an idea of your overall topic, you might find yourself wondering what a thesis for this genre of essay looks like. Definition or classification thesis statements all generally follow the same pattern, so once you have a good idea of this pattern, you are ready to start writing your essay!

Big Question: How do I develop an idea and write a thesis for a classification or definition essay?

Watch: What’s in a Name?

Often, we think of definitions as being a hard and fast way to understand a word, concept, or idea. Have you ever considered, however, who developed those definitions? Who are these people to decide the meanings of our words? Are definitions created and changed over time as the meaning of words change? Or do the writers of dictionaries create meaning for us?

If you ever read the book *Frindle* as a child, you probably have considered these questions. In it, a young man decides to use the term “frindle” to refer to a pen as a method of annoying his 5th grade teacher. He works diligently to convince his friends to use the term, and it eventually becomes a phenomenon. The book concludes with the word “frindle” being added to the dictionary.

When you write a definition essay, you are creating meaning. The goal of a definition essay is to take a term that has multiple meanings or conflicting definitions and to make an argument for a single definition. In this process, you get to make an argument that creates meaning for your readers. It is a way to better understand and categorize the world around us, especially topics that are hotly debated or difficult to understand. Consider, for a moment, how difficult it is to define love. How hard it is to define success. How long we could talk about what it means to achieve the American dream.

Similarly, classification essays help us break down the world so we can better understand it. Generally speaking, a classification essay takes a bigger concept and separates it into smaller classes, so we can better understand how the parts come together to create a whole. This process can also help us understand those difficult terms mentioned earlier; perhaps “success” is difficult to define because there
are different kinds of success: financial, personal, and physical. By breaking such a large concept down into classes, it becomes easier to talk about.

What concepts can you think of that have complex definitions?

Read: Choosing a Topic for a Definition or Classification Essay

Overview

As with most essays, one of the most difficult parts of writing a definition/classification essay is choosing a topic. This can be difficult particularly because your topic will dictate whether your paper focuses on the subject’s definition or if it also does the work of determining whether something meets your chosen definition.

Choosing a Topic

Choosing a topic for a definition or classification essay can be difficult, even if you have been assigned a specific prompt that narrows your topic.

First, you need to decide if your paper will simply make an argument about a definition, or if it will expand into a criteria matching argument. You could write a paper that focuses entirely on how to define a particular term, or you can extend it into a classification essay by matching a topic to your definition.

Either way, your paper will begin with an argument about a definition. The easiest place to start is to find a term that has conflicting or competing definitions. Concepts like happiness, family, success, beauty, love, or the American dream all have many definitions that vary from person to person. The definition of the word *family*, for example, might be very narrow to someone who was raised in a loving, nuclear household with a lot of siblings. Conversely, someone who was raised without the presence of a traditional family — or in a very small one — might be more inclined to have a broader definition of family because they developed familial relationships with people who aren’t related by blood.

Brainstorming a Definition or Classification Essay

Using the brainstorming method of listing can be especially helpful here. Set a time limit and generate a list of as many terms with big, broad definitions as you can. From there, you can examine your list for terms that interest you.

Once you have chosen a term that interests you, mapping can be a helpful brainstorming tool. Try to identify things that are clearly examples of that category and try to identify things that are borderline examples of the category. In your beginning circle, write one of the terms you generated in the listing activity. From there, try to create a web or a map of terms that are definite members of the category, borderline members of the category, and terms that are never considered members of the category.

For example, if you are working with the term “family,” you know that “mother” and “father” are undisputed terms that meet the definition of family, but “godmother” could be disputed, depending on the definition. You can use these “borderline” items to help refine your definition.
Using Examples to Define

Listing members and borderline members of a category can help you develop criteria for a definition. If you know, for example, that the shared assumption is that baseball, basketball, and football are sports, you should begin by finding out what qualities those three things share.

- They are played with an offense and a defense
- They are activities that require physical exertion
- They are played with a ball
- They have set rules
- They have a score-keeping system

Once you have generated a reasonable list, you need to start asking questions to refine your definition. You can do this by examining borderline cases. For example, it is often disputed whether cheerleading is a sport. In looking at the above list, we can determine that cheerleading meets the second and fourth criteria.

If you believe that cheerleading is a sport, you should now know that you need to refine your criteria, as a sport does not necessarily include an offense/defense and a ball. If, however, you believe that cheerleading should not be qualified as a sport, you can use your previously developed criteria to support that argument.

You can always test your criteria to be sure that it is workable for all members of that category. Take concepts that are commonly considered members of your category, and be sure that they line up with your criteria. If you find that they do not, you will likely need to adjust your criteria. You can also test your criteria with things that certainly do not meet the definition or things that are borderline.

Reflect Poll: Redefine Success

If someone you view as successful told you they feel unsuccessful personally, how would you first react?

- By asking them how they define success
- By pointing out the parts of their life that you view as successful
- By telling them how you define success
- Reevaluate your personal definition of success

Expand: Refining Your Argument

Developing Your Definition Thesis

Once you have developed a complete list of criteria, you need to consider how you want to order those criteria and how to compose your overall argument. A thesis for a definition or classification essay must include the following:

- The overall term being defined or broken down
- The criteria or classifications for which you are arguing

So, for a definition essay, your thesis might look something like this: [Argued concept] must include [criteria one], [criteria two], and [criteria three]. Of course, this is a very simple example, and it can change dramatically. You might, for example, include in your argument a borderline example: [Example]
can/cannot be considered a member of [argued definition] because it doesn’t meet [criteria one], [criteria two], or [criteria three].

Additionally, your thesis might increase in complexity if not all criteria are necessary. For example, in a thesis statement arguing for an alternative definition of family, you might say: To be considered family, one must be an immediate blood relative or one must offer a sustained example of unconditional love and support at no personal gain.

In this example, you have one automatic criteria (blood relative) that can be replaced by meeting three other criteria: a sustained example, unconditional love and support, and no personal gain. It can be difficult to tell that there are three separate criteria represented in that sentence, but each of the components must be met separately in order to meet the definition of “family.”

Developing Your Classification Thesis

Developing a classification is not much different from a definition thesis. The elements you must include are as follows:

- Your overall topic
- The classifications you propose for that topic

If, for example, you were focusing on types of cars, you might say something like this: “There are three types of cars: practical cars, sports cars, and gas-guzzling cars.”

Your argument, then, would be that you can divide all cars into three classes. Every car you see should be able to fall under one of these three categories.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A document providing guidance on writing an effective classification thesis


A site offering guidance through the entire definition essay writing process

- Link to resource: https://owl.excelsior.edu/rhetorical-styles/definition-essay/

Examples of definition essays on a variety of topics

- Link to resource: https://www.bartleby.com/topics/Definition-Essay-Examples

More information on writing classification essays

- Link to resource: http://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/style_purpose_strategy/classification_paper.html

More examples of classification-focused essays

- Link to resource: https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-classification-composition-1689849
Lesson Glossary
None

Check Your Knowledge

1. A definition thesis can include criteria that don’t necessarily have to be present.
   a. True
   b. False

2. The easiest place to start a definition essay is to find a term that has conflicting or competing definitions.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Most definition essays will borrow a pre-existing definition.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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