Inquire: Writing Your Classification or Definition Argument

Overview

It's now time to sit down to write your classification or definition essay. This genre of essay has a clear goal: you're either defining or you're classifying. But, defining or classifying what exactly? It's important to start with a good brainstorming session to identify a clear topic. From there, you can move into the process of planning, content generation, and revision. This lesson will provide you with the step-by-step tools for writing your own essay.

Big Question: What is the process for writing my classification/definition essay?

Watch: The Essay Writing Process

It's easy to read about writing an essay, but it is much more difficult to sit down and write one yourself. Now that you're ready to write your classification or definition essay, where do you begin? To start, find a good place to work. Do you want to work in complete silence, or do you need some noise to help you focus? Do you want to start on paper, or are you better at generating ideas on a laptop?

No matter where and how you begin writing, you will need to find a good place to start — physically and mentally. Every essay writing process should begin with a session of brainstorming. It can feel somewhat tedious, but if you've ever found yourself staring at a blinking cursor with nothing to say, you will soon understand the importance of brainstorming before writing an essay.

For a definition or classification essay, you will need to decide on a topic before brainstorming. Next, you will need to come up with criteria for your definition or classifications for your overall topic. These tasks are made easier by simple brainstorming techniques like listing and clustering.

Once you've found your topic and your criteria, you will need to take some time to order your criteria. These criteria will become the topics for your body paragraphs. Now, you're ready to start writing! Since you have the topics for your body paragraphs, you just have to fill them in. Body paragraphs in definition and classification essays should include:

- Topic sentences that preview the paragraph's content
- A thorough explanation of your criteria
- Concrete examples that match your criteria
After you’ve drafted your essay, you’ll have a paper that needs revision. Every essay, no matter the genre, will require you to sit down and read over what you’ve written. For classification and definition essays, you’ll need to give special thought to your audience and the kinds of assumptions they may share.

Once you’ve completed the revision process, it will be time to edit your paper for grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Completing these processes will leave you with a polished and complete essay!

Are you ready to begin the essay writing process? Where will you start on your essay?

Read: Getting Started on Your Essay

Overview
To write an effective definition or classification essay, you need to have a solid starting point. The process of writing an essay in this genre is fairly similar to writing essays in any other genre: you need to brainstorm a topic, develop a plan for writing, draft an essay, and then revise and edit, before you have a final product. However, there are a few tips and tricks that are unique to writing a definition or classification essay, some of which are covered below.

Brainstorming
The first obvious step in writing any classification or definition essay is to identify the topic you want to define or provide classifications for. So, where do you start when searching for a topic? If you’re writing the essay for a class, you might be provided with a prompt that asks you to cover a specific topic. Depending on your personality as a writer, you might find this helpful or you might find it frustrating. Sometimes, students who are provided a prompt don’t particularly care about the topic they’ve been asked to write about, and one of the hardest things to do is write at length about something you do not care about. Alternatively, having no prompt at all can feel like you’re stranded without direction.

So, if you haven’t been given a prompt, where do you start?

Using the brainstorming method of listing can be especially helpful. 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, clustering can be a helpful brainstorming tool. Try to identify clear examples of that category rather than 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.

Identifying Purpose
Next, you need to identify your purpose in writing. For the particular term you selected (or for the term you were assigned), you need to decide whether you would be better off defining it or providing classifications.
Is your term broad or abstract enough that it has many different definitions, or can it mean a variety of things to different people? If this is the case, you have a good topic for a definition essay.

However, you could use the clustering brainstorm again to determine if your topic might instead benefit from a classification essay. If you can see clear relationships between some of the branches of your maps, you should ask yourself whether your term can be divided into distinct classes or categories. If so, you have the beginnings of a great classification essay topic.

Developing Your Criteria/Classifications and Thesis

Next, you need to develop the criteria or classifications that you want to include in your argument. The brainstorming method of listing can be especially helpful here. List as many clear examples or traits of your topic as you can. For example, if your topic is “success” you might begin a list that looks like this:

- Financially stable
- Home ownership
- Marriage
- Children

After reviewing your list, however, you should ask whether all of those things are really necessary to your topic. If someone is unmarried, can they still be successful? Sure! Once you’ve considered that, you’ll need to refine your criteria to make sure it’s applicable.

At this point, you need to officially decide if you are writing a definition or classification essay. If you’re writing a definition essay, you simply need to determine the criteria that must exist for that definition to be met. If, however, you are writing a classification thesis, you need to figure out what different “versions” of your term exist. To return to the above example, you might say there are three types of success: monetary success, personal success, and emotional success.

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

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

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

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

Reflect Poll: Parts of the Process

Which part of the writing process do you find to be the easiest?

- brainstorming
- planning
- drafting
- revising
- editing
Expand: Writing and Revising Your Essay

Generating Content
Now that you have a direction for your paper, it’s time to begin writing! At this point and with this genre of writing, you fortunately already have a good idea of the topics of each separate body paragraph. These will simply be the criteria for your definition or the classifications you’ve proposed for your topic.

The content of these paragraphs will consist of a few things; you should explain your criteria or classification and provide clear examples of times when your criteria or classification has been met.

Revising
Once you’ve written your essay, it’s time to engage in the revision process. As you read back through your essay, you’ll need to give special thought to the ways in which you appeal to your audience. Remember the audience for whom you are writing the essay. What are their shared assumptions? Which of your claims might they take issue with? How can you make sure that you are not alienating or pushing them away with any of your claims?

Try to read through your paper carefully, as if you’re reading it for the first time and as a member of your target audience. Taking their values and shared assumptions into consideration, make sure your points do not alienate them. Additionally, try to keep in mind the level of knowledge and understanding your audience has. Is the topic completely new to them? If so, make sure that you take the time to explain important terminology and key concepts. If, however, your audience generally has expertise in the subject, don’t waste time explaining things they already know.

Finally, as you reread your essay, be sure to consider what kind of ethos you are projecting to your readers. Do you come across as knowledgeable? Do you come across as trustworthy? Do you support all of your claims with reasonable and reliable evidence? Is your language professional and courteous?

These questions can help you revise your essay and ensure that it is exactly what you need to persuade your audience.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
Some helpful tips for preventing and curing writer’s block
- Link to resource:
  https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/writers_block/more_writers_block_strategies.html

Some guidelines for proofreading your paper
- Link to resource:
  https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/proofreading/proofreading_for_errors.html
Lesson Glossary

**clustering:** a brainstorming activity that involves drawing an idea map using words and basic concepts

### Check Your Knowledge

1. All people should write in complete silence.
   - a. True
   - b. False

2. Your body paragraph topics will come from your criteria.
   - a. True
   - b. False

3. Classification and definition essays accomplish the same purpose.
   - a. Ku Klux Act
   - b. Enforcement Acts
   - c. Restoration Acts
   - d. Newly Freed Slaves Act

**Answer Key:**

### Citations

**Lesson Content:**

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