

✓ Final Tips for an Evaluative Response Essay

- **Read carefully** the essay you intend to evaluate, underlining or recording in a journal any language that you find interesting.
- Determine whether you **agree with or oppose** the author's main point and shape this view into your thesis.
- Find good material in the text, especially **choice language**, as well as examples from your own experience to support your position.
- **Reread the original essay** after you have written your evaluative response to see whether there is additional material you should pull into your paper.
- Refine your conclusion to insure that you have **restated your thesis in different words** and that your conclusion offers important insights.

START ↓

Definition

Whether your entire essay is a definition or you have incorporated a definition into your essay to clarify a term or concept for your reader, explaining what a term means is an integral part of writing. Knowing your intended audience and purpose in writing will help you determine which words you need to define.

When to Use Definition

In a paper for a psychology class, for example, you would not need to define terms generally used in that field. But when you write for a general reader and use language unfamiliar to most people—a technical or foreign term, or a word peculiar to an academic discipline—you will need to define the term so your reader can understand it. Even if you are using a familiar word, you need to explain its meaning if you or an author you are quoting use it in a unique way.

Sometimes a brief definition is all that you need. In that case, a few words of clarification, or even a synonym, may be incorporated into your text quite easily:

Los Vendidos, or "The Sellouts," is the Spanish-language title of Luis Valdez's play (124).

Achondroplasia—a type of dwarfism—may affect overall bone structure and cause arms and legs to be disproportionately smaller than the rest of the body.

Eating disorders include “bingeing, chronic dieting, and ‘aerobic nervosa,’ the excessive use of exercise to remain one’s body ideal” (Erens 186).

As these examples show, incorporating definition into your text is unobtrusive and superior to writing a separate sentence to define the term.

Organizing and Developing a Definition Essay

When an assignment calls for an extended definition of a concept or term, the following methods may be used alone or in combination:

- *Dictionary definition:* Including a formal definition of a word from a dictionary before developing your point. Even common words may require you to take this route so that you and your reader have the same sphere of reference.
- *Expert’s definition:* Presenting an expert’s definition of a term to show that you have sound support for your understanding of a word.
- *Comparison-contrast:* Contrasting your definition of a word with the way it is typically used or with the actual dictionary definition of the term. If the term is unfamiliar, you might show how it is similar to another concept.
- *Description:* Defining a term by describing its characteristics: size, shape, texture, color, noise, and other telling traits.
- *Exemplification:* Giving examples and illustrations of a concept to enable your reader to understand it better. Because such examples are rather specific, they should only help supplement a definition rather than be used by themselves.
- *Negation:* Explaining what something is *not* in order to help limit the definition and eliminate misconceptions.

The Purpose of Defining

You may be asked to write a “definition essay”—a paper that develops with the primary intention of increasing the reader’s understanding of a term—in a psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, or English course. Usually, however, your goal will be something else. You may be attempting to convince your reader to consider the explained term in a positive light, or to compare it—even to prefer it—to something else. Sometimes the persuasive aspect of the essay relies on the reader’s willingness to reconsider the definition of a word, as occurs in the next essay.

EXAMPLE: AN ESSAY BASED ON DEFINITION

The following essay was written by Jon Winokur, a freelance writer and author of twenty reference books and anthologies, including *Zen to Go* (1988), *True Confessions* (1992), *The Rich Are Different* (1996), and *How to Win at Golf Without Actually Playing Well* (2000). In "You Call That Irony?," published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2007, Winokur defines irony and shows how this word is often incorrectly used.

● You Call That Irony? ●

Jon Winokur

- 1 When it was revealed in 2003 that William J. Bennett, author of "The Book of Virtues," had a secret gambling habit, more than one commentator termed it a delicious irony, and it was indeed a pleasure to see a sanctimonious scold get his comeuppance. But it wasn't irony, just hypocrisy.
- 2 It was ironic when, on "The Daily Show," Jon Stewart commended Bennett for his indignation, and for "standing up to the William Bennetts of the world."
- 3 Here's another example of irony: the 1959 episode of "The Twilight Zone" titled "Time Enough at Last," in which Burgess Meredith plays Henry Bemis, a bookish bank teller with thick glasses and an insatiable appetite for reading. One day, knocked unconscious by a giant explosion, he awakens to find that he's the last man on Earth.
- 4 Wandering the desolate city, overwhelmed with loneliness, he is about to kill himself when he notices the ruins of . . . a library! Cut to: stacks of books piled high on the library's steps and Henry, giddy with joy. But as he settles down on the curb with the first book, his glasses fall off and shatter on the ground, trapping him forever in a blurry world.
- 5 Now that's irony.
- 6 Irony is one of the most misused words in the English language. Much of the confusion comes from the existence of several distinct forms of irony. Verbal irony is the act of saying one thing but meaning the opposite with the intent of being understood as meaning the opposite, as in, "Nice weather we're having" on a rainy day.
- 7 Cosmic irony involves quirks of fate, as when a UPS driver on his way to deliver parts to a hospital has a serious accident, is taken to the same hospital by ambulance, but the hospital can't perform necessary tests because one of its machines is down and the parts to fix it are in the driver's wrecked van.

- 8 Socratic irony is a strategy for refuting dogma. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates assumes the role of the *ieron*, a sly dissembler who feigns naivete by asking seemingly foolish questions that gradually hang his opponents by their own admissions. A modern practitioner is Sacha Baron Cohen, whose characters Borat and Ali G expose pomposity by pretending to be stupid.
- 9 Irony is about the interplay of opposites, not the random proximity of events. It's ironic that Beethoven was deaf, but merely coincidental that Brad Pitt tore his Achilles tendon while playing Achilles in Troy. People miss the distinction and say "ironic" when they mean "coincidental," an abuse encouraged by Alanis Morissette's 1996 hit single, "Ironic," in which situations purporting to be ironic are merely annoying ("a traffic jam when you're already late, a no-smoking sign on your cigarette break").
- 10 It is ironic that "Ironic" is an unironic song about irony. Is that perfectly clear?
- 11 In case you're confused, here are some more examples of irony:
- 12 • Brewing heir Adolph Coors III was allergic to beer.
 - 13 • County supervisors in Pima County, Ariz., held a closed meeting to discuss Arizona's open meeting law.
 - 14 • U.S. Border Patrol uniforms are manufactured in Mexico.
 - 15 • When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, so many visitors were taking souvenir pieces that a protective fence was installed, so that, yes, the Berlin Wall was guarded by a wall.
 - 16 • Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's 2005 state of the nation address, in which he promised to remedy his country's chronic electricity shortages, was blacked out by a power failure.
 - 17 • A 17-year-old Amish boy was electrocuted by a downed power line that became tangled in the wheels of his horse-drawn buggy.
 - 18 • The "Marlboro Man" died of lung cancer.
 - 19 • A 2001 Father's Day tribute on ESPN featured "How Sweet It Is (to be Loved by You)," sung by Marvin Gaye, who was shot and killed by his father in 1984.
 - 20 • Entries for the Florida Press Club's 2005 Excellence in Journalism Award for hurricane coverage were lost in Hurricane Katrina.

Analyzing the Writer's Strategy

The purpose of this essay is to convince readers that there is a wide misuse of the word "irony" and that speakers and writers need to be more definitive in their word choice. Winokur uses the following methods to explain "irony":

- *Dictionary Definition:* Winokur doesn't resort to the predictable "according to Webster's dictionary . . ." to define "irony." But he does provide distinct

definitions of two different types of irony: verbal irony—the act of saying one thing but intentionally meaning the opposite—and cosmic irony—the quirks of fate that afflict all human beings when the opposite of what is deserved or expected occurs. Further, he informs his reader that the word “irony” is derived from the Platonic dialogues of Socrates in which he “assumes the role of the *eiron*, a sly dissembler who feigns naivete by asking seemingly foolish questions that gradually hang his opponents by their own admissions” (400). Winokur needs to clarify the dictionary meanings of “irony” in order to support his view of its misuse.

- *Comparison-contrast*: Winokur shows what irony is and contrasts it with what irony is not: “Irony is about the interplay of opposites, not the random proximity of events” (400). The author notes that it is ironic that the composer Beethoven was deaf because he could not hear his own musical compositions, but it is merely a coincidence, or random proximity of events, that Brad Pitt tore his Achilles tendon while playing the role of Achilles.
- *Description*: In order to show what irony is, Winokur describes in great detail a *Twilight Zone* plot in which a bank teller with “an insatiable appetite for reading” is rendered unconscious by an explosion. He awakes to discover that he is alone on earth and is lonely and depressed until he discovers a pile of books at a library. Just as he is about to start reading, his glasses fall off and shatter, leaving him “forever in a blurry world” (399). Winokur’s description supports his perception that this episode is ironic. The episode’s title, “Time Enough At Last” is itself ironic.
- *Exemplification*: Even though this is a short essay, Winokur packs it with 14 specific illustrations of irony. Some of our favorite examples include: “Brewing heir Adolph Coors III was allergic to beer”; “County supervisors in Pima County, Ariz., held a closed meeting to discuss Arizona’s open meeting law”; “The ‘Marlboro Man’ died of lung cancer” (400). After studying each example, the reader gets a clearer sense of this often-misused term. Although lists are typically avoided in essays, Winokur’s bullets here are effective because they highlight his thorough exemplification.
- *Negation*: Because Winokur believes that the word “irony” is so often misused, he opens his essay with an example of a situation that many would claim is ironic. However, he insists that it isn’t. Winokur contends that William Bennett’s authorship of *The Book of Virtues*—despite Bennett’s own gambling addiction—is an example of hypocrisy, not irony. Further, Winokur claims that the examples from Alanis Morissette’s song “Irony” are wrong: “a traffic jam when you’re already late, a no-smoking sign on your cigarette break” are annoyances, not illustrations of irony. Ultimately, readers who have too often exclaimed, “That’s ironic!” may rethink their word choice because of Winokur’s use of negative illustrations.

PRACTICE WRITING DEFINITION ESSAYS

1. In your college papers, you will frequently use short definitions to clarify terms. In small groups, armed with dictionaries, practice writing one-sentence definitions of the following terms:

a. satire	c. boyfriend
b. environmentalist	d. empathy

2. Although you will use definition most often as a component of your papers, it is useful to practice writing short definition essays. In small groups, collaborate with your classmates to write a short essay that defines one of the following:

a. green movement	d. unconditional love
b. "between worlds"	e. disabled
c. a cheap date	



Final Tips for a Definition Essay

- Is your **purpose** for defining to inform? To analyze? To persuade?
- Identify the needs of your audience; **determine which words** your readers cannot be expected to know or may misunderstand.
- Whenever possible, incorporate into your text the **necessary clarification** of a term. Avoid writing a separate sentence to define the term.
- Remember that **definitions can also be developed** by comparing and contrasting that word with other terms, by describing the characteristics of a term, by presenting examples, and by illustrating what the term is not.

end

Cause and Effect

Throughout your life you have been made aware of the consequences of your behavior: not getting your allowance because you didn't keep your room clean; winning a class election because you ran a vigorous campaign; getting a C on an exam because you didn't review all of the material. In all of these cases, a particular behavior seems to *cause* or result in a certain *effect*. In the