

How to Write a Personal Definition Paper

In order to write a proper definition, you must first select a term to define which is open to speculation and disagreement. Make the topic something that you feel the need to expand on or define in a slightly different manner than an accepted definition already in existence. Choosing topics that are emotionally charged can be great to explore.

Some examples of the types of topics that would be appropriate are racism, good parenting, justice, intelligence, good self-image, trust, or common sense. These are just examples, and not intended to be a definitive list of topics. Choose something important to you.

1. Write down 3-5 potential topics.

2. Brainstorm by clustering: make a cluster graph of free-associations for your topics. Place the word or phrase in the middle, then write as many words, ideas, and example as you can. Try to fill the page. If you cannot find a large group of associated ideas, you may not have enough evidence or experience to write this paper. Choose the topic you have the most evidence and ideas for. Check it with me before you continue.

3. A complete definition shows the context of the term and explains the class of objects or ideas to which it belongs.

Define: You must first state the term to be defined, then state the class of objects or ideas to which it belongs. Finally, explain the characteristics of the term that differentiate it from other objects or ideas in the same class.

Example: Define a Victorian house.

Answer: A Victorian house is a house built between 1837-1901, during the reign of Queen Victoria, from whom the style took its name. It can be differentiated from other building styles of the same time period, such as Italianate, Arts and Crafts, and Farmhouse, by its architectural details, exterior finishes, and interior decoration.

This essay would go on to give details about each of these stated differences, until it was clear through negation that the Victorian house is a separate house style from all the others. The best evidence in a definition is details, examples and incidents, comparisons to familiar things, and origins or lasting effects.

Choose the larger class of ideas or objects to which your term belongs. If there are several, list them all. (i.e. golf is an activity, but is it also a sport?) Write them down.

4. Now, choose the characteristics of the term that differentiate it from others in the same class. (i.e. golf requires no great physical strength, speed or agility) Write down as many differentiating characteristics as you can generate.

5. Interview Questions: You will gather additional evidence for your paper by interviewing two people: one classmate and one person outside of class. Your interview questions should be designed to get a clear definition as well as some personal experience examples that will help you build a comprehensive definition. You should generate 5-7 open-ended questions about your topic. When you have completed your questions and I have approved them, you are done for the day. We will conduct our classroom interviews next time.