

Definitional Techniques

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In the course of developing a report, essay, memo, etc. writers are often called upon to define their terms.

Ten of the more common definitional techniques used in professional and academic writing are described below.

1. An **Aristotelian** or **formal** definition assigns a thing to a genus or class and then indicates the differences between the thing and other members of the class. Example: Craps is a gambling game played with two dice in which a first throw of 7 or 11 wins the bet; a first throw of 2, 3, or 12 loses; and a first throw of any other number (a point) must be repeated to win before a 7 is thrown—otherwise, the player loses both the bet and the dice.
2. An **explication** defines the meaning of key words in an Aristotelian or formal definition. An example that might follow the above definition: Dice are small cubes marked on each side with a number of small dots, varying from 1 to 6. The number of dots on opposite sides always add up to 7.
3. An **operational** definition refers individuals to a location or situation where they might observe a phenomenon. Example: If you are driving south along a highway, you will experience the Doppler effect if you listen to the sound of a car heading north that approaches and then passes you.

4. An **analysis** separates a whole into its component parts. Example: Air is a colorless, odorless, tasteless, gaseous mixture containing nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, neon, and helium.
5. An **example** suggests one member of a class of objects to convey an accurate impression of the entire class. Example: The maple is an example of a deciduous tree.
6. **Graphics** provide a pictorial representation where lines, dots, arrows, etc. are configured into representational patterns.
7. **Comparisons and contrasts** suggest ways in which objects or concepts are similar to or different from one another. Example: Both the maple and the pine are trees; but the former is deciduous, the latter coniferous.
8. An **elimination** indicates what something is not to clarify what it is. Example: Clear-cutting is not the removal of only a few trees in a forest area.
9. An **etymology** explores the origin and historical development of a word. Example: Synchronism can be better understood if we realize that the original meaning of *syn* was together, and that of *chronism* was time.
10. **History** records the events in the development of something. Example: It will be easier to understand what is meant by the discipline of technical communication if we explore how it evolved.