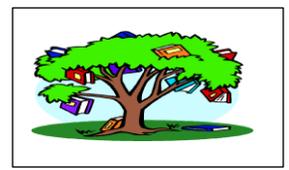


Toward Better Literacy: Reference Outlines



The Definition Essay

This type of essay is used to explain the meaning of a term in a certain context or from a particular perspective. The writer must go beyond the term's dictionary entry and use more in-depth methods of definition such as providing **examples**, making **comparisons**, showing **contrasts**, tracing the term's **history**, or illustrating through **narration**.

Purpose: to inform readers about a certain term or lead them to a particular view of it

Perspective: third-person (*he, she, it, one, they...*)

Organization: with each point leading logically into the next

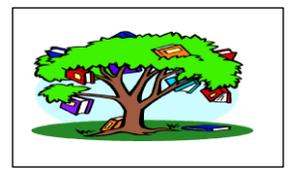
Common Structure:

1. **Introduction:**
 - a. Attention-getter highlighting the importance of a given term
 - b. Necessary background information
 - c. **Thesis:** broad definition of this term from a particular perspective
2. **Body (each paragraph):**
 - a. **Topic sentence:** definition using one particular method of definition
 - b. Supporting details with examples
 - c. Transition to the next method of definition
3. **Conclusion:**
 - a. Concise summary of the main point emphasized
 - b. Overall significance of the term and its definition
 - c. Prediction or advice for readers?

Notes:

- The term to be defined may be a concept or quality, the name of an object, a type of person or place, a practice or phenomenon, or basically anything that requires in-depth explanation.
- A good definition uses simple words to illuminate the meaning of a more complex term.
- Effective methods of definition include:
 - Giving examples of its meaning and usage
 - Comparing it to another term with a similar meaning
 - Contrasting it with easily confusable terms
 - Tracing the term's **etymology** (its origins and historical development) to put its modern usage into context
 - Contrasting a list of qualities that characterize the term with a list of those that do not
 - Using illustrative anecdotes as examples
 - Breaking the term into parts or discussing its effects

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Sample Essay

“Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” This sound fairly serious, and many societies and leaders have neglected history to their own demise. So what is history? Some may think of defining history as a series of past events. Others think in terms of people, documents, movements or ideas that have shaped humanity. History is all this, as well as the interactions among these components and the questions that arise from them that can cast a light on the present and the future.

Details about people, places or efforts provide the raw material of history. Every period has its own characters, institutions, actions and writings that fill up textbooks. Most people know something of the Declaration of Independence, especially the day it was proclaimed. Yet, there was a lot that went into that document, and the “list of abuses” gave rise to preventive provisions in the Constitution. So the “painting” of history includes many components.

How do all of the details of a particular period relate? Interactions form the dynamics of history. Who did what and with whom? What did someone write in response to an event or idea? How did institutions cope with one another? Humanity exists in an open system, and relationships provide the stuff of movies and media.

Why? The realm of understanding goes deeper than memorizing facts or getting wrapped up in drama. History seeks to know the reasons behind events, movements and trends. The important thing is to ask good questions and open up dialogue to get other points of view. Doing history always involves particular presuppositions in the historian’s analysis and evaluation of what went right, what went wrong, and why. Yet, openness and honesty can make this a pathway to understanding each other and safeguarding the future.

History is defined in levels. Facts, dynamics and reasons make human history the most interesting story ever to behold. Perhaps if history is treated well, then it can help us make sound decisions with a brighter hope.