Sample Lesson for First Year Writing: The Definition Argument

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Goal Statement for ENC1101: Week 6: Arguments of Definition

Arguments of Definition will teach freshman writers how to think critically about people, places, and things in the world and the definitions or categories we unthinkingly ascribe to them. The resulting assessment will demonstrate that the student has identified a word that, upon inspection, needs a better or more useful definition or category. The student will provide evidence to support the new definition or category, and he or she will write an argument that, through sound argument and formal and mechanical competence, persuades an audience to think more critically about the word.

Task Analysis: Understanding and Writing Arguments of Definition

1. Understand why a definition argument is made

    a. Accepted definitions are often inadequate and based on uncritical acceptance of formal dictionary definitions or operational definitions.

    b. Society can outgrow a definition

        i. Definitions can be harmful to people (in the case of stereotypes or racial slurs that hurt people)

        ii. Definitions can have outlived their use (as in "primetime" in the age of Internet broadcasting on demand)

        iii. Definitions can mislead (as when "intellectual property" is given the same rights as real property; when corporations are given the status of "individuals" without being beholden to the assumption that individuals have ethical obligations.)

2. Understand how a definition argument is made: formal definition, operational definition, definition by example.

    a. Formal Definitions

        i. The best definition of x is ...

            1. Example: Dictionary definition (a definition "argument" that is no longer arguable to most people)

            2. Example: Parks hold a much more important role in the American mind than just as a place to have fun. Parks allow recreation, which builds community, they help us appreciate our country and landscape, and they help us mourn injustices of the past.

    b. Operational Definitions

      i.   X must satisfy Y requirements in order to be considered useful, safe, effective, etc.;

          1.   Example: Laundry is not complete unless it is folded and put away

          2.   Example: [The insurance industry does not consider water](#) damage to houses caused by hurricane storm surges as insurable under hurricane insurance policies; instead the homeowners need flood coverage.

     ii.   X is in category Y or X is defined by a), b), and c).

          1.   Example: cheerleading is a sport

          2.   Example: the legal corporate individual is a psychopath

          3.   Example: graffiti isn't always art; sometimes it's just plain vandalism.

c.   Definition by Example

      i.   X is defined by examples A, B, C that we all accept as being part of that category. So is D also in that category?

          1.   Good when the category itself doesn't have a standard definition but is a "know it when you see it" type category.

3.   Choose a topic

a.   Topic is a question about a definition of a term or its category

b.   The question must be arguable

c.   Avoid poor topics: topics that are too extensive or aren't arguable

      i.   questions that can be answered by looking at a dictionary or other reference make poor topics. No one is going to argue that an elephant is a pachyderm.

     ii.   papers about the definition of love or friendship tend to be weak because people are used to thinking of their characteristics a matter of personal rather than public preference.

    iii.   "Abortion is murder" is a definition argument, but you can't address the definition of life and the definition of murder in the page length you have available to you. Stay away from these clichéd topics. Stick with arguments that people are likely to disagree about or have never thought of but still can be persuaded by.

    iv.   Avoid defining something only as "good" or "bad." That is an evaluation argument and not necessarily a definition

argument. Whether the category is good or bad can be what's at stake, but it shouldn't be the only argument.

      1. Example: "Sweatshop labor is bad" is a poor topic, but "Sweatshop labor is slavery" is a good topic choice. Whether you define sweatshop labor as slavery or not will certainly matter. People already feel that is bad, so if you can convince people that sweatshop labor is slavery, you've won your definition argument and people will hopefully disapprove of sweatshop labor as they disapprove of slavery.

4. Identify the ways in which the accepted definition or category ascribed to a term is lacking or doesn't hold up to critical inquiry.

    a. Identify what's at stake. Why should people care about the definition at all?

    b. What are the consequences of people's misunderstanding?

5. Identify modifications to the definition that will help the readers define or categorize the term in a way that is more useful.

    a. List the accepted characteristics or definition of the terms and categories you are exploring

        i. Explore accepted dictionary definitions

        ii. Explore people's assumptions about the definitions—ask your friends and family members their definition. Are the definitions the same as yours or each others'?

        iii. Look in books about the topic to see how people are using the word or category

    b. Identify what's missing from the definitions

        i. What does the accepted definition exclude?

        ii. Use logic and evidence to explain why what is excluded should be included.

            1. Example: Cheerleading isn't often thought of as a sport, but similar activities such as rhythm gymnastics have Olympic events, so cheerleading should be considered a sport.

            2. Provide evidence: If you are making a comparison, explain how your comparison is sound.

6. Write the first draft of the essay

    a. Draw upon planning and drafting skills from previous lessons

7. Revise according to revision procedures

a. Revise using revision strategies introduced in the beginning of the course.

b. Pay special attention to the grammatical concepts introduced in the previous lesson.

c. Ensure that the argument meets the rhetorical situation by considering what the audience will need to read to be persuaded.

Instructional Objectives

After completing this lesson, students should:

1. Choose a topic that is suitable for a definition argument

   a. Explain why definition arguments are made

   b. Identify whether a definition argument fits the pattern of formal definition, operational definition, definition by example

   c. Identify the ways in which the accepted definition or category ascribed to a term is lacking or doesn't hold up to critical inquiry.

2. Propose a definition argument structure that provides reasons and evidence to support the argument for the new definition or category

3. Argue for the proposed definition in a draft essay that is able to, through sound argument, persuade an audience to think more critically about the word or category being defined

4. Revise the draft essay into a polished final draft that demonstrates mechanical competence using previously acquired revision procedures.

Instructional Sequence and Strategies

The instructional sequence emphasizes part-whole learning by using an iterative pattern that presents material and allows for practice and feedback. Faded prompts support learning metacognitive processes that will help students apply their understanding of minor objectives to understanding the major objectives (Nuckles, Hubner, Dumer, & Renkl, 2010).

Instructional Event	Activity
Objective 1. Choose a topic that is suitable for a definition argument	
1. Gain attention and stimulate recall of prior learning	Audio introduction that welcomes the learner to the lesson and prepares the learner for the content and the structure of the lesson.
	Discuss the definition argument as a mode of argument, just like the rebuttal and rhetorical analysis that we have already covered. Explain that just like those other types of arguments, arguments must be arguable and something must be at stake.

2. Inform learners of objectives	List objectives. *I may decide to list tasks instead.*
3. Present the content, part 1	**Previewing Definition Arguments** A video introduces the importance of definition arguments for terms such as "welfare" and "Hispanic." Michael Moore and Rush Limbaugh each presents his own definition of welfare and then explains the effect his definition has on the way society responds to the word.
4. Provide learning guidance, part 1	**How Do I Make a Definition Argument?** This video segment summarizes *The Corporation*, a film that uses a definition argument to show the role of corporations in America. Throughout the video, students see questions guiding them through the filmmakers' process of making this particular definition argument. They are prompted to pause the video when necessary so that they can answer the questions asked of them before proceeding. The familiar Toulmin formatted argument outline is presented below the video and the student is prompted in the introduction to download the outline and follow the argument based on that graphical organizer.
5. Elicit performance, part 1	After watching the video, the student is asked several questions about the topic choice of the argument presented in *The Corporation* and the effectiveness of the argument structure.
6. Provide feedback, part 1	The student is then prompted to click a link to see a prepared answer that explains why the topic was suitable and how the argument was structured.
7. Provide learning guidance, part 2	The student is introduced to the three patterns of definition arguments: formal definitions, operational definitions, and definition by example. Each pattern has some examples of suitable topics, and a graphic organizer is provided. Students are told that the organizer will help them plan their argument and track arguments that they will be presented to on the next page.
8. Provide learning guidance, part 3	**Topic Ideas** This section introduces students to some topic ideas that explore how identity is defined and the

	effects of definition on identities. An example of defining a word that doesn't exist at the time of definition (i.e., cyberspace) is introduced. Students are prompted to answer questions about the purpose and structure of the arguments, though no sample response is given.

I may decide to provide sample responses if the responses fade too quickly and students are not able to answer the questions when they discuss their evaluation of the course with me. |
| 9. Present an example | **Exercise: Preparing a Proposal Based on an Example Student Argument**

The student is provided a sample student model definition argument. |
| 9. Elicit performance | The student is asked to fill out the graphic organizer based on the student's argument. |
| 10. Provide feedback | The student is provided a link to download a completed graphic organizer that shows the structure of the model argument.

Offer feedback on the proposed topic. Address whether the topic is arguable or not and whether the student is likely to be able to structure an argument based on the topic. |
Objective 2. Propose a definition argument structure that provides reasons and evidence to support the argument for the new definition or category	
11. Elicit performance	The student is asked to complete a proposal that consists of a graphic organizer and some questions that guide the learner to thinking about the feasibility of the definition argument topic.
12. Provide feedback	I will respond to the student's proposal to make sure that the topic is feasible and is of the correct argument type.
Objective 3. Argue for the proposed definition in a draft essay that is able to, through sound argument, persuade an audience to think more critically about the word or category being defined	
Objective 4. Revise the draft essay into a polished final draft that demonstrates mechanical competence using previously acquired revision procedures.	
13. Elicit performance	I will provide an assignment prompt that reiterates the requirements of the written assignment and reminds students of the revision process that they

	learned in a previous lesson.
14. Assess performance	Ask that the student turn in a definition argument for grading.
15. Enhance retention and transfer to the job	Provide feedback that gives an example of how the student's definition argument might be used to build part of the evaluation argument that is due next.

Assessment

Students will be assessed for mastery of the major objective (#4) by turning in a definition argument proposal and then a definition argument essay that satisfies the rubrics below.

The proposal will be graded pass/fail, and students whose proposals do not demonstrate understanding of concepts key to their success in the major task will be asked to revise until they demonstrate mastery.

The post-assessment will be graded holistically, with the framework provided below as the basis. Holistic grading, though less precise, has been shown to work better at expressing the degree to which a piece of writing succeeds or fails in achieving its purpose, given the extent of "latent" criteria involved in assessing writing (with some lists of such criteria expanding to over 50 items) (Sadler, 2009). The framework and rationale will be explained to the student in a grading section of the course and linked in each assignment section.

Since holistic grading has weaknesses when it comes to offering feedback (Sadler, 2009, p. 163), I will continue to offer evaluative feedback that points students toward improvement and de-emphasizes the assigned grade as a *fait accompli* by encouraging students who perform in the C+ to D- range to revise.

Because the definition argument is such a specialized concept, one that very few students would have any experience with, I don't feel that it would be practical or wise to assign a pre-assessment to measure pre-knowledge about the content of instruction. Because a demonstration of mastery of the objectives can only be shown when students write a definition argument, a valid pre-assessment would also ask them to write a definition argument. However, without instruction, this task would prove too onerous to students and would likely deteriorate self-confidence (Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2001, 294), a factor that I surfaced as important in the learner assessment.

Diagnostics that test competency with grammar and route students to particular resources (and sometimes bar them from taking a particular course) have been found to be effective (Brocato, Furr, Henderson, & Horton, 2005), and the course itself will begin with a diagnostic essay. The diagnostic will be assessed analytically because analytic scales have been shown to provide the most effective base for prescriptive action (Knoch, 2009). However, this grade will not be reported to the student to prevent negative feelings.

Specifications

- **Value:** 25 points for proposal, 100 for final draft (Course total: 1000)
- **Length:** 3-4 pages, and a Works Cited page, for final draft
- **Formatting:** MLA format: View the formatting tutorial in Lesson 0 for details.
- **Submission:** Upload Assignment 6 using the Sakai assignment uploader

Definition arguments require you to make an argument about something that needs to be defined better (formal definition) or something that is usually thought of as a member of one category but that would better fit into another category (operational definition). You may decide to make a definition by example, but it's more likely that you'll use examples to help you support either a formal or operational argument.

Instructions

Fill in the blanks in one of the two main claim patterns below. Then answer the following questions about your topic.

1. **Main claim** (pattern for operational argument): Although __[topic]__ is usually considered to be a__[category]__, it's better categorized as a [different category] .

    OR

    Main claim (pattern for formal argument): Though __[topic]__ is usually defined as [standard, uncritical definition] , a more accurate definition is [your new definition based on inquiry into the "true nature" of the topic] .

2. Remember that questions that can be answered by looking at a dictionary or other reference make poor topics. No one is going to argue that an elephant is a pachyderm. **Is your definition arguable? Who is likely to argue with you?**

3. Remember that you need to be able to address your topic in 3 – 4 pages. "Abortion is murder" is a definition argument, but the argument relies on a warrant of "a fetus is a person," which is another argument in itself. You can't address the definition of human life and the definition of murder in the page length you have available to you. Stay away from these clichéd topics or topics that are so much dependent on personal preference that it doesn't make sense to argue. No one wants to accept your definition for love or friendship. Stick with arguments about topics that are novel and that people

can be persuaded by. **Can you address your topic in 3 – 4 pages? Are your warrants easily accepted by people or will you need to argue those as well? Can you anticipate any complications?**

4. Remember that a definition argument must argue a definition. Avoid defining something only as "good" or "bad." Such an argument is an evaluation argument instead of a definition argument. Defining something in one category or another should have some importance. Defining a corporation as a psychopath means that people are likely to think of corporation's behaviors as bad, but this evaluation happens *after* the definition argument and is what's at stake; it's not a definition argument itself. **What's at stake in your argument? Are people likely to change their opinion about a topic because of your new definition argument?**

Alternate Outline

Main Claim:

At Stake:

1. Reason 1:
   a. Warrant 1 (Reason 1 only matters if…):
   b. Evidence 1:
   c. Authority 1:
2. Reason 2
   a. Warrant 2 (Reason 2 only matters if…):
   b. Evidence 2:
   c. Authority 2:
3. Reason 3:
   a. Warrant 3 (Reason 3 only matters if…):
   b. Evidence 3:
   c. Authority 3:

Outline: You can use the Toulmin graphic organizer below, **or** you can use the outline on the next page if the formatting of the graphic organizer gets unwieldy or you prefer linear outlines.

Main Claim:

At stake:

Reason (criteria) 1:	**Reason (criteria) 2:**	**Reason (criteria) 3:**
Warrant: Only matters if…	**Warrant:** Only matters if…	**Warrant:** Only matters if…
If not, stop here and find a new reason.	*If not, stop here and find a new reason.*	*If not, stop here and find a new reason.*
Evidence: **Authority:**	**Evidence:** **Authority:**	**Evidence:** **Authority:**

Assignment: Definition Argument Essay

Value: 100 points (course total 1000)

Length: 3 – 4 pages and a works cited page

Formatting: Essay in MLA format: view the formatting tutorial in Lesson 0 for details

Submission: Upload this assignment using the Sakai assignment uploader

Approval: You can only submit your assignment once I've returned your proposal and approved your topic and main claim.

Rubrics: Please review the standard course rubrics page.

Instructions. Definition arguments require you to make an argument about something that needs to be defined better. You can make a definition argument in one of three ways:

- Operational Definition Argument

- Formal Definition Argument

- Definition Argument by Example

Preparation Tips. Review your proposal and the instructions provided on that worksheet. Your approved proposal will act as the blueprint for your argument. Remember that your main claim will reflect the reasons, criteria, or examples you use to support your definition. Convincing definition arguments will use examples and evidence, and the type of evidence you will use depends on the type of argument. Remember that all evidence should be cited.

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