

Definitions and Descriptions

What is a definition?

“The action of defining, or stating exactly what a thing is, or what a word means” (“definition”).

- That’s a definition of definition!

Defines an item or concept

- How it works
- Its purpose

Can be brief (usually 1-2 sentences) or expanded (several pages)

Precise

Detailed

Types of definitions

Definitions commonly fall into three categories:

- Parenthetical
 - Interjected into a sentence
 - Set off with parentheses or commas
 - Often used to establish the use of an acronym in a document
- Sentence definitions
 - Independent sentence
 - Use the formula
 - Item + category + specifics
 - Specifics are what set the item apart from other items in the category
 - Be thoughtful when defining the category

Additional Types of definitions

- Expanded definitions
 - More detailed
 - Usually for more complex items
 - Types
 - Graphics
 - Examples
 - Operations
 - Partitioning
 - Comparison and contrast
 - Analogy
 - Negation
 - Etymology

Writing a definition

Plan

- Identify your audience
 - Choose your language level
 - Specialist?
 - Novice?
- Decide if graphics are appropriate
 - For novice readers, graphics may be helpful
 - Consider the context of the definition

Draft

- Choose words carefully
 - Precise
 - Audience appropriate
 - Context appropriate

Writing a definition - Revision

Revise

- Read the definition
- Find proofreaders
- Look for points of confusion
 - Where would they ask you questions?
 - Where might they not understand your words or ideas?
- Revise!

What is a description

Through thoughtful and precise word choice, builds a picture of an object, mechanism, or process

- What it looks like or how it occurs
- Its components
- Its impact

Often begins with a definition

Longer than a definition (3 sentences to several pages)

Precise

Common examples:

- Product descriptions on Amazon
- Course descriptions in the catalogue

Types of descriptions

Descriptions can vary in both topic and level of detail

- Topic
 - Product descriptions
 - Often found in online stores or at the beginning of a user's manual
 - Creates a complete and detailed image of the item, detailing each individual element
 - Process descriptions
 - Often found in embedded in other documents such as textbooks or technical documents
 - Creates a complete and precise list of each individual step in a well-defined process
- Detail
 - Simple descriptions contain surface-level details for readers who only need a basic understanding of the topic.
 - Complex descriptions contain much more detail and graphics organized logically.

Planning a complex description

Plan

- Identify your audience
 - Choose your language level
 - Specialist?
 - Novice?
- Explore your subject
 - Look at each side or space
 - Disassemble and reassemble the item
 - Walk through the whole process
- Decide if graphics are appropriate
 - Detailed
 - Specific
 - Useful

Drafting a complex description

Introduction

- Define the topic clearly and completely
- Provide a brief overview of the topic
- Provide any necessary details

Organize the details or steps

- Group details for logical flow
- Descriptions of physical appearance should be grouped and arranged spatially
- Descriptions of how something works should be grouped and arranged functionally
- Processes should be grouped and arranged chronologically

Conclusion

- Summary
- The final product
 - Appearance and serving suggestions
 - Appearance and final touches

Writing a description

Revise

- Read the description
- Find proofreaders
- Look for points of confusion
 - Where will the audience ask questions?
 - Where will the audience ask misunderstand?
 - Where have you assumed that something is obvious?
- Choose words carefully
 - Thoughtful
 - Precise
 - Audience appropriate
 - Context appropriate

References

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