



# E 303: TECHNICAL WRITING

School of Literature and Languages

Louisiana Tech University



## Interoffice Memo

**To:** Mr. Merchant's English 303 students  
**From:** Mr. David M. Merchant, English Instructor  
**Subject:** Lecture 10: Why Definition?  
**Date:** April 6, 2020

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The purpose of this memo is to give an overview of the importance of definitions in the context of professional or technical writing.

### What is a Definition?

A definition delineates the boundaries of the meaning of a thing or idea. It answers the questions “What is it?” and “What is it not?” As Socrates stated over 2,500 years ago, “the beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.” Using the wrong word (wrong meaning or not specific enough) can cause confusion and arguments that can disrupt or distract from your discussion. Defining, however, is often not easy, at least with abstract, complex, or new concepts or ideas. This is because the problems with words are many:

- Words usually do not have precise literal meanings (its denotation or “dictionary definition”).
- A word can have more than one denotation.
- Denotations can change with time, by region/culture, by context, or by discipline (field of study, for example).
- Words also have connotations—implications and emotional overtones associated with the word, from symbolic associations to emotional associations. These connotations can also change with time, by region/culture, by context, or from person to person.
- Some words represent complex or abstract ideas, issues, subjects, or topics that often defy easy definition. Scientists, for example, still debate what the definitive definition of “life” is. Astronomers still debate the definition of the word “planet.”
- Related to the above, some terms have competing definitions. For example, different nations have different definitions of “Organic” as applied to produce. Sometimes laws or treaties are required to settle on one definition.
- A language will contain words that most people know—your reader may not know the word you are using, especially if they are nonspecialists.
- Languages evolve as societies evolve and as new concepts and technologies come into existence, requiring new vocabulary.

## Why Definition?

Because of the difficulties with words, before scientists discuss an object, an observation, a problem, or a theory, they need to have shared agreements on definitions. Even then, there can be difficulties in coming up with a definition, especially for abstract terms. Scientists still have not nailed down a definition for "life": are viruses, for example, alive? And many of us have heard the contentious redefining Pluto as a dwarf planet.

Lawyers establish definitions of keywords before writing contracts to help prevent misunderstanding or to protect their clients from lawsuits. For example, those End User License Agreements that we all read so carefully before clicking "accept" always begin with a section on definitions. Some will even define the word "you."

Marketers often play with definitions. For example, "fragrance-free" is not the same thing as "unscented" even though at first glance they seem to be synonyms. "Unscented" products often contain small amounts of fragrance to counter the odors of the product's active ingredients. Another example is the word "organic." "Organic" to many means 100% naturally grown food with no synthetic or artificial treatments. However, in the U.S., produce can be labeled as organic even if it is not 100% natural: organic produce in the U.S. requires at least 95% organic ingredients, but still can be processed using artificial conditions, materials, or methods. Besides, different countries have different definitions of what is organic produce.

Keep in mind that definitions are not restricted to words or phrases: describing a process step-by-step is one way of defining that process; taking the time to discuss in some detail the who, what, when, how, and why of a project before starting it is one way of defining the project (which can help project members to be more organized, effective, and efficient).

The above is why definitions are used in persuasive arguments: if you can get your reader to accept your definitions, you have increased your chances of convincing them to accept your position, whether it is to see something in a new way or to change their mind about their position about a thing or idea. For instance, prosecutors and defense lawyers argue before judges and juries whether the actions of the accused meet the legal definition of a crime or if the accused is insane or not. The success of their arguments often depends in good part upon how well they can persuade the judge or jury to accept their definitions.

But even outside of overtly persuasive writing, where you are writing "merely" to inform, definitions are important for clarity. A definition helps a reader interpret a term correctly or to understand the term as your discipline is using the term. Therefore, it is important to not treat definitions in technical writing casually. You must keep in mind your audiences, especially your primary audiences(s) as you write your definitions.

Thus, definitions are needed when

- you need to establish a shared understanding of key concepts to prevent misunderstanding,

- you want to help an audience understand a difficult or new concept, or
- you want to change an audience's thinking about a thing or idea.

Important terms should be defined, especially if your primary readers are not likely to be familiar with the terms. For some terms, a simple sentence definition will be enough, but for more complex ideas or terms, or those which many of your readers may have a lot of confusion about, extended definitions (you may need more than one) requiring more development and discussion will be needed.

Sometimes defining the problem is critical for the reader to understand your argument or recommendation: your audience may include people who do not realize there is a problem, or that it is a critical problem. They need to be convinced first, and sometimes one method to help convince them is to use a definition argument.

Often, defining the innovative opportunity, policy, or solution will be also critical for the reader to be able to understand your argument since non-innovative policies, opportunities, or solutions are usually already known or discussed or promoted. Defining or describing the new ones will help your reader understand your persuasive discussion recommending them.

## Closing

If you have questions, please contact me via email or the course Moodle page (forum or messaging service). Do not forget to do your assigned readings. Again, *Merchant's Style Guide* and *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* are located at [davidmmerchant.com/](http://davidmmerchant.com/).