

Steps to a Definition Argument

Step 1 Make a claim

Make a definitional claim on a controversial issue that focuses on a key term.

Formula

- SOMETHING is (or is not) a _____ because it has (or does not have) features A, B, and C (or more).

Examples

- Hate speech (or pornography, literature, films, and so on) is (or is not) free speech protected by the First Amendment because it has (does not have) these features.
- Hunting (or using animals for cosmetics testing, keeping animals in zoos, wearing furs, and so on) is (or is not) cruelty to animals because it has (or does not have) these features.
- Doctors should be (should not be) allowed to assist patients to die if they are terminally ill and suffering.
- Displaying pinup calendars (or jokes, innuendo, rap lyrics, and so on) is (is not) an example of sexual harassment.

Step 2 Think about what's at stake

- Would nearly everyone agree with you? Then your claim probably isn't interesting or important. If you can think of people who would disagree, then something is at stake.
- Who argues the opposite of your claim?
- Why or how do they benefit from a different definition?

Step 3 List the criteria

- Which criteria are necessary for SOMETHING to be a _____?
- Which are not necessary?
- Which are the most important?
- Does your case in point meet all the criteria?

Step 4 Analyze your potential readers

- Who are your readers?
- How does the definitional claim you are making affect them?
- How familiar will they be with the issue, concept, or controversy that you're writing about?
- What are they likely to know and not know?
- Which criteria are they most likely to accept with little explanation, and which will they disagree with?
- Which criteria will you have to argue for?

Step 5 Write a draft

Introduction

- Set out the issue, concept, or controversy.
- Explain why the definition is important.
- Give the background that your intended readers will need.

Body

- Set out your criteria and argue for the appropriateness of the criteria.
- Determine whether the criteria apply to the case in point.
- Anticipate where readers might question either your criteria or how they apply to your subject.
- Address opposing viewpoints by acknowledging how their definitions might differ and by showing why your definition is better.

Conclusion

- Do more than simply summarize. You can, for example, go into more detail about what is at stake or the implications of your definition.

Step 6 Revise, edit, proofread

- For detailed instructions, see Chapter 12.
- For a checklist to use to evaluate your draft, see pages 217–222.

*From Good Reasons
By Lester Faigley & Jack Selzer*