

ENGL 121 College Composition I, Spring 2011

Project 2: Definition Argument

Professor Ludeker

Project Description

Project 2 asks you to choose an issue, concept, term or theme that you feel needs to be defined (as clearly as possible) in order for some other argument to proceed. You then need to build a definition of that concept/theme that you will use when further discussing your topic. In addition, you need to find other "experts" that agree with your definition or have used a similar definition for that concept/theme. In other words, you need to explain what something means but within the context of what other research says (we will discuss what "research" means in this case). Finally, you'll need to indicate what is at stake (the consequences, the ramifications, the "so what") by understanding the concept in this way.

Author Lester Faigley* explains that, "Definition [arguments] set out criteria and then argue that whatever is being defined meets or does not meet those criteria" (113). You might conceive of a definition argument as following the formula below:

X is (or is not) Y because it does (or does not) have the features of A, B, C (or more).

In this case, A-C are the criteria of Y. Your job is to show how close or far X is in meeting those criteria. For example, in our reading we will look at two articles. One claims that obesity IS a disease, while the other claims it is not. What criteria have the authors established for the term "disease?" How closely does a medical and/or scientific understanding of obesity fit those criteria?

The basic *purpose* for this writing is to define something related to your topic, but your larger purpose for writing might be to change the minds of your readers or to persuade them to fight for what they already believe in by giving them words to talk about it. Obviously, you will need to think about your *audience* for this project. In fact, you should imagine who they are before you decide what to define. Depending on who you are writing to, your definitions and research will change. What do they know already? What might they assume already? What do you want them to know about your definition? Why should they know how you are defining a term/concept/issue? What is at stake if you don't make yourself understood? What will your audience gain by understanding/seeing your topic through your definition?

Examples

1. Part of the difficulty inherent in controversial arguments—particularly ones that end up in a stalemate—is that often the arguing sides aren't starting from the same definitions of the issues being argued. One example is abortion. Neither side can "prove" or even argue persuasively about what defines "life." This battle is further complicated by the fact that one side seems to be arguing from a stance of religion/morals and the other side seems to be arguing from the stance politics/laws. Without common understanding of terms and concepts, arguments like these are doomed for impasse.
2. Another example is the idea that 21 is/is not a good age to allow legal consumption of alcohol. Lawmakers feel that young people are not "adult" or "mature" enough before age 21 to be responsible for alcohol consumption. Part of the trouble with this argument is unclear definitions of "adult," "mature," and "responsible. Opponents of this regulation use the "but you only need to be 18 to draft into the army" argument. Proponents of the law point to studies that brain development is only at a certain stage by 18 and therefore people under 18 are not capable of thinking through larger consequences. However, each side fails to define what "mature" is and what kinds of responsibilities should go with levels of maturity. Again, we have an impasse because neither side is clear about what they mean.
3. Voting in a national election (is/is not) a civic duty because it (has/does not have) these features. (You would need to define what "civic duty" is and show how voting fits/does not fit that

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definition. You then need to show who else says that or who defines "civic duty" and how, in order to support your own ideas. Also included would be an argument for why an audience should view voting that way and what they should do because of it).

4. Playing Video games (is/is not) a waste of time because it (has/does not have) these features. (You would need to define what "waste of time" means. You also would need to define what "playing" means/does not mean. Using other evidence to support what you're saying, you would build your paper around what you think, why you think that, and what you want your audience to do with your definition.)

Parameters

You may write on any topic you wish with the exception of the topics listed below. My reason for eliminating these topics as possibilities is not to censor you. Instead, I believe that these themes have been in the public sphere for so long that they have become cliché and will prove difficult to develop one's own ideas around. In addition, the audiences targeted in all sides of these arguments are so entrenched in their existing viewpoints (I would argue) that they are incapable of hearing *new* viewpoints. Furthermore, some of these topics are so big they will be impossible to cover in short writing assignments. If, however, you feel that you have an as-yet-unheard argument pertaining to one of these issues and you are dead set on arguing for it, we can discuss it.

The topics you are encouraged to **avoid**: abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, legalizing marijuana, lowering the drinking age, prayer in school, recycling, the education system in one country versus another, the "truth" of one religion's beliefs versus the "lies" of another religion's beliefs, or any other topic that has been argued to death.

This project should be written in a traditional academic essay format and must follow MLA guidelines for style and for citations. You will need to cite work in-text and have a works cited page at the end of the document.

- choose an issue, concept, term or theme that you feel needs to be defined (avoid ones from the list above);
- build a definition of that concept/theme using examples, evidence, and outside sources ("experts") that agree with your definition or have used a similar definition for that concept/theme;
- indicate what is at stake (the consequences, the outcomes, the implications, the ramifications, the "so what") by understanding the concept in this way and for whom those consequences/outcomes might apply.

Rules for sources: You will need a minimum of **three** different outside sources to use in this project. Those sources will be your support. Only use a dictionary to establish a denotation of the word/phrase, but be sure to develop your argument well beyond what the dictionary indicates. You should consider the connotations of the word/phrase also. Only one source can be a website source. The rest should be scholarly, credible, print-based (or come from a library database) sources.

Word count for this project should be **no less than 800 words**.

Peer Review: Tuesday 3/15

Draft submitted through Safe Assign: Tuesday 3/15 (by class time)

Final Copy due: Tuesday 3/22. Submit through Safe Assign AND submit folder with printed draft (with comments) and final copy.

*Faigley, Lester. *Good Reasons: Designing and Writing Effective Arguments*, 2ed. New York: Longman, 2003. Print.