

## Guide to Writing Arguments of Definition

### Finding a topic:

You're entering an argument of definition when you:

- formulate a controversial or provocative definition. The American Dream which once meant a McMansion in a gated community, now has taken on a new definition.
- challenge a definition: For most Americans today, the American Dream involves not luxury but the secure pensions, cheap energy costs, and health insurance that workers in the 1950s and 1960s supposedly enjoyed.
- try to determine whether something fits an existing definition: Expanding opportunity is (or is not) central to the American Dream.
- seek to broaden an existing definition or create a new definition to accommodate wider or differing perspectives: In a world where information is easily and freely shared, it may be time to explore alternative definitions of plagiarism.

*Think about how jobs are classified at work, key terms are used in academic major, social issues are characterized by politicians.*

### Researching your topic

Research issues using the following sources:

- college dictionaries and encyclopedia
- unabridged dictionaries
- specialized reference works and handbooks, such as legal and medical dictionaries
- your textbooks (check their glossaries)
- newsgroups and blogs that focus on particular topics, particularly political ones, community or advocacy groups that are engaged in legal or social issues

### Formulate a Claim

After exploring your subject, try to formulate a thesis that lets readers know where you stand or what issues are at stake. Begin with the following types of questions:

- questions related to genus: Is assisting in suicide a crime?
- questions related to species: Is marijuana a harmful, addictive drug or a useful medical treatment?
- questions related to conditions: Must the imposition of sexual attentions be *both* unwanted and unsolicited to be considered sexual harassment?
- questions related to fulfillment of conditions: Has our college kept in place traditions or policies that might constitute racial discrimination?
- questions related to membership in a named class: Is any pop artist today in a class with Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Aretha Franklin or the Rolling Stones?

The thesis should be a complete statement that makes a claim of definition and states the reasons supporting it. You may later decide to separate the claim from its supporting reasons. But a working thesis should be a fully articulated thought that spells out all the details and qualification: Who? What? Where? When? How many? How regularly? How completely.

Since arguments of definition are often exploratory and tentative, an initial thesis may simply describe problems in formulating a particular definition.

### **Examples of Definitional Claims**

- Though somewhat addictive, marijuana should not be classified as a dangerous drug because it damages individuals and society less than heroin or cocaine, and because it helps people with life-threatening diseases live more comfortably.
- Giving college admission preference to all racial minorities can be an example of class discrimination because such policies may favor middle and upper-class students who are already advantaged.
- Attempts to define the concept of freedom need to take into account the way the term is historically understood in cultures worldwide, not just to the countries of Western Europe and North America