

## Writing Assignment #1 Rhetorical Patterns: Description/Definition

### The Writing Assignment

For this assignment, you will be writing an essay defining and describing a misconception. Please narrow the general topic of misconceptions to a specific misconception. You can choose to write about people, certain groups of people, objects, or professions, etc. Perceptions change over time, so misconceptions can arise when people still are grounded in outdated characterizations. Your task is to define/describe your topic choice with the purpose of re-educating your audience about this particular misconception.

The rhetorical patterns we will use for the first writing assignment are an integration of both description and definition.

- For an explanation of the description rhetorical pattern, please read from the textbook, *The Longman Reader*, p. 78-85
- For an explanation of the definition rhetorical pattern, please read from the textbook, *The Longman Reader*, p. 401-407.

As you read, please take note of the following concepts as you will need to be familiar with them in order to apply them to your writing assignment.

### What is Description?

Description depends upon sensory perception and can be defined as the expression in vivid language of what the five senses experience. A richly rendered description freeze-frames a subject in time evoking sights, smells, sounds, textures, and tastes in such a way that readers of the description experience what the writer is describing.

- **Objective Description:** When you write an objective description, you describe the subject in a straightforward and literal manner without revealing your attitude or feelings about the subject. Reporters, technical and scientific writers, law enforcement personnel and professional tradesmen use objective description routinely as part of their job in reporting observations. A reporter will objectively describe a school board meeting; a marine biologist will write a report on the number of mammal deaths resulting from plastic refuse; a policeman will detail the particulars of a traffic accident; a renovation specialist will describe the changes he hopes to make to your home.
- **Subjective Description:** A subjective description, on the other hand, requires more than just an objective observation. Instead, a subjective description will convey a highly opinionated view of a subject, seeking to elicit from readers a strong emotional response. The intent of a subjective description is to provoke some kind of response from the reader. This emotional response can range from admiration to horror - any of the emotions human beings are capable of can be addressed by a subjective description.

### Characteristics of a Descriptive Essay

When writing your description, please pay particular attention to the following characteristics:

1. Focus your description around a dominant impression and establish this impression early. In a subjective description, the dominant impression serves to establish the predominant emotional response you wish to elicit from readers.
2. Select the relevant details to include and use only those details which support the dominant impression. Don't bury the reader under an avalanche of adjectives and adverbs - there must be a purpose for the descriptive details you provide so make sure the details are relevant for your purpose.
3. You will need to make a decision about how you wish to organize the paper. A reader will expect a logical progression of development as he/she reads your essay so that the events and impressions make sense. A descriptive/definition essay has four organizational patterns to choose from - once

you have chosen an approach, provide enough signal devices (transitions) to move the reader from one element to the next.

- Chronological - (as the event/subject is experienced in time)
  - Spatial - (from top to bottom, interior to exterior, near to far)
  - Emphatic - (least to most striking element)
  - Sensory Impression (based upon the five senses)
4. Use vivid sensory language and varied sentence structures to write effective description. Figurative language - imaginative comparisons between two basically dissimilar objects and/or concepts - is useful for enlivening descriptive writing.

### **What is Definition?**

In order for language to communicate, words must have accepted definitions. However, language, and the meaning we associate with language, changes over time, so the meanings of certain words can and do change. As individuals and as a society, we allow our experiences, attitudes, and values influence the way we use words and the way we interpret the words of others. We have a tendency to invent new words as the need arises.

Because you are creating your own impression of a misconception, you should rely upon your own observations and thoughts when constructing this essay. Do not use the dictionary as what you are defining is a perception that only you can change by using persuasive methods to re-educate readers about a particular misconception.

### **Characteristics of a Definition Essay**

The following characteristics of a definition essay will help you decide how to approach the definition portion of your essay.

1. **Extended Definition:** An extended definition asserts your interpretation of a word or concept or object. In this manner, you are creating a meaning that does not necessarily exist in a dictionary. The assignment specifically asks you to form an opinion, to create an interpretation of a misconception, so based upon your insight and observations, you are sharing your unique view of a misconception through all its varied and extensive permeations.
2. **Definition by Negation:** In order to clarify the misconception, you may want to assert what it is not. This approach tends to identify the specific areas of misunderstanding about your topic. Lynne Sebastian, in "The Awful Truth about Archaeology," uses this method to good effect. She begins by telling people, who confuse archaeology with paleontology, that "it is paleontologist who do dinosaurs; archaeologists study people who lived long ago." Explaining what something is by asserting what it is not can be an effective strategy for composing your essay.
3. **Stipulate Definition:** When you stipulate a particular meaning, you are asserting that "strictly speaking," the definition you provide applies. This is helpful when a word or concept may have multiple meanings or if the meaning has become associated with random, even misused associations. When stipulating, you limit your discussion to one aspect of the word or concept rather than the abundance of meanings normally associated with it.

### **The Writing Task**

The description/definition essay should be composed from your observations, thoughts, and ideas without referencing outside source material. When writing description, avoid just telling readers about the misconception; instead show readers the misconception as the description rhetorical pattern requires. An example of a student going up stairs would be described as follows: "She stumbled up the stairs, loosely connected to a phone in one hand, a backpack slipping down her arm in the other. Papers from her bulging backpack fluttered down the steps as she climbed, the chemistry tables and math equations coming to rest like confetti on church steps. Other students craned their necks to view the homework, half done and unattended, a possible opportunity for striking up an acquaintance." This example "shows" disorder, but

curiosity as well, and provides the descriptive element. Avoid “I see; I hear” in the essay as this sidesteps actual description. Instead, create vignettes of images as description requires sensory input and specific detail.

The essay **should not** be written in 1<sup>st</sup> person singular (i.e. I, me) or 2<sup>nd</sup> person (you, yours). Instead, distance yourself from your personal experience and instead use third person (they, them) or 1<sup>st</sup> person plural (we, us) to convey your impressions. Writers routinely relate their impressions without referring to themselves (“I saw”) or addressing their readers (“You should know”). When considering your audience, focus on showing them the diversity of different motivations, attitudes, behavior of the misconception you have identified; all can be used to create that impression you want to convey.

Incorporating description is necessary, but a complete treatment of the assignment requires you to explain your redefinition of the misconception. Create a definition that serves to inform your readers of a new and fresh perspective of the misconception that they may not have previously considered. For example, a misconception about gamers could be that they are isolated, anti-social creatures, living in a dark, pizza-perfumed bedroom with only the computer screen generating light who relentlessly play their games with a self-absorbed intensity that blocks out any sort of reality. But then, you need to redefine them. What aspects of the misconception do you want to change? Use definition to identify those aspects and redefine gamers by these aspects. In terms of social behavior, are they actually anti-social? In terms of perpetuating violence, are they actually aggressive people? Are they fantasists? Find areas where you can redefine the misconception with a more realistic appraisal.

Once you have identified a misconception, you will need to decide upon a strategy for arranging and organizing the details. Determine whether the material you have collected should be arranged *spatially*, *chronologically*, or *emphatically*. Provide the appropriate signal devices to ensure a smooth reading of the material. Because your intent is not only to identify/describe the misconception, but also to convince readers of an alternative perspective on the misconception, the writing task suggests incorporating persuasive elements that encourage readers to change their minds about the misconception you have described/defined.

**General Requirements:** Please adhere to the following formatting instructions when submitting all major writing assignments.

- Use one-inch margins - left, right, top, bottom
- Double-space the entire document
- Use 10 or 12 CPI
- Use the page numbering function in your word processing programming to insert your last name and the page number in the upper right corner of the essay.
- Beginning at the left margin, on the first page, provide your name, the course and section, the instructor's name, and the date.
- Center the title of the essay.
- Use the tab key to indent the first line of each paragraph.
- 4-6 pages in length
- Please do not use 1st person singular pronouns (I, me, my) or 2nd person pronouns (you, yours). Instead, use 1st person plural (we, us) or 3rd person (he, she, it, they, them, their).
- Do not use personal experience.
- Do not use any outside source material