

Using Definitions

When you are writing a technical message and you come across a technical term, ask yourself this question:

Will my audience understand this term?

If the answer is no, you have two options

1. Avoid the term (if you can)

You may be able to use common terms instead. For example, instead of saying, “We will arrive at *Cal Poly time*,” you would say “We will arrive at 10 minutes after the hour.”

Instead of saying, “We will go with *design-build*,” you would say, “Before we begin the project, we will meet with the architect, engineer, construction manager, and owner.”

However, you may not always be able to avoid the term. For example, how do you talk about installing *Pergo*® (a type of flooring), without using that term? After all, you don’t want just any old linoleum or vinyl flooring. Therefore you need to employ your other option:

2. Define the term

You can define a term informally or formally. You can also use an expanded definition if your reader needs it.

An **informal definition**, defines the term in passing, often parenthetically.

Imagine for example you are explaining the game of baseball to a novice. You might give an informal definition like this: “The batter hopes for a grand slam (four runs from one swing of the bat).” It may also look like this: “The batter hopes for a grand slam, or four runs from one swing of the bat.”

A **formal definition** on the other hand has a specific formula:

term + class + distinguishing characteristics

The *term* is the technical word itself. The *class* is the larger overall category the term falls into. And the *distinguishing characteristics* are the aspects of the term that set it apart, make it unique, in its class.

Example: *Zinfandel* [term] is a type of *red wine grape* [class] that *was planted in Paso Robles by the pianist Paderewski in the first half of the 20th century. It has a strong, fruity flavor and grows well in hot climates* [(distinguishing characteristics)].

No other wine grape was planted by Paderewski in Paso Robles, so that characteristic makes Zinfandel unique in its class.

Another example: A minivan is a type of vehicle that has between six and nine seats, a hatchback, and sliding side doors. It is often driven by soccer moms.

(Hint: There is usually a quiz question about this formula and an example to go with it.)

Note, formal definitions in technical writing differ from the type you see in dictionaries.

If your reader still needs more explanation, you may wish to use an **expanded definition**. An expanded definition starts out with a formal definition then adds to it. You can expand a definition by adding the following:

Etymology—reporting the history of a word. For example *smog* comes from the words *smoke* + *fog*.

Background—recounting the history or explaining where the object comes from. For example the term *smog* was coined around the end of the 19th century when London and other large cities were experiencing “smoky fog”.

Comparison—telling the reader about a similar item. For example a *dromedary* is a camel with one hump. Or a *bumblebee* is like a honey bee, but twice the size.

Conditions—describing what the object needs to exist. For example smog requires a mass of still air, sunlight, and pollutants.

Examples—listing occurrences of the object. For example, smog can be seen as brown air in large cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago.

Visuals—providing photos, drawings, charts, and so on.

Placing Definitions

Once you have determined what type of definition to use, you need to decide where to place it. If the reader will need the definition to understand the entire report, it goes in the introduction. If the reader only needs the definition to understand a small part of the report, it goes near that part.

If a writer must define more than 4 or 5 terms, the document will need a glossary at the end. The glossary consists of a listing of the terms plus their formal definitions. To best employ a glossary, highlight the glossary terms in the text with bold,

capitals, or italics (not underlining). Then let the reader know why the terms are highlighted. The terms then go into the glossary in alphabetical order.

Writing Formal Descriptions

A formal description consists of the following parts:

Informative Title (key words + organizational markers)

Example: *A Description of Musty the Mustang*

I. Introduction: General Description

a. Formal definition (with function and background as needed)

Musty is a horse who serves as a college mascot at the California Polytechnic State University.

b. Purpose

He (or she) encourages school spirit by attending sporting events.

c. Overall description (with general visuals)

She (or he) consists of a human being inside a horse suit. The horse suit is made of synthetic fur and . . .

d. Principle of operation (if applicable)

The designated human puts on the horse suit prior to each sporting event.

e. List of major parts

Musty consists of

- *The human*
- *The head of the horse suit*
- *The body of the horse suit*

II. Description and Function of Parts

a. Part one from list of major parts above

The human

1. formal definition

A human is a mammal that walks on two legs and uses higher level thinking skills (except at 3am).

2. shape, dimensions, materials (with specific visuals)

A human is approximately 5 to 6 feet tall by 1.5 to 2 feet wide. It is made of flesh, bone, and in some cases Cheetos or French fries. It consists of the following parts:

- *A head*
- *A body*
- *Two arms*

- Two legs

3. subparts (if applicable—treat like part one)

A head is the part of the body that is round . . .

You may or may not wish to go into detail about the subparts. The choice depends on how much information your reader needs. Also note that you can continue to nest subparts and subparts of subparts.

4. function

The human is needed to fill out and animate the horse suit.

5. relation to adjoining parts

The human goes inside the horse suit.

6. mode of attachment (if applicable)

The horse suit has a tie in the back to keep it on the human.

b. part two from the list of major parts—repeat for all parts

The head of the horse suit is the part of the costume that goes on top. Etc.

III. Summary and Operating Description (Optional)

a. Summary (for a long, complex description)

b. Interrelation of parts

c. One complete operating cycle (if applicable)

d. How to use the item