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Writing

## Definitions: How to Say What You Mean

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**Y**ou can use words to convey meaning only if your audience understands what you intend those words to mean. You can baffle your readers by using words that mean nothing to them. You can also mislead them by using words that seem to mean something other than what you meant to say. One way to avoid those problems is to use common words whose meaning would be obvious to anyone. For example, you would write “itching” instead of “pruritus” in a piece for a lay audience.

Of course, we medical communicators must often discuss concepts that are unfamiliar to most people. Thus, we must often use words that are new to some members of our intended audience. Sometimes we must even use familiar words that take on an unusual meaning in a particular context. In those circumstances, a good writer would give those words a proper introduction by defining them at first mention. Lazy writers often fail to give these definitions. Bad writers give bad definitions.

### Types of Definitions

To give good definitions, you need to understand that there is more than one kind of definition. Each kind of definition serves a particular purpose.

- **Lexical definition**—the kind of definition you find in a dictionary. It explains what people generally mean when they use that word.
- **Reportive definition**—an explanation of the meaning that the word carries for a particular group of language users, if that meaning differs from the definition given in a standard dictionary.

Lexical definitions are the most common kind of definition that writers and copyeditors encounter. Whenever you use a technical term that would be unfamiliar to your readers,

consider giving them the dictionary definition of that word, to save them the trouble of looking the word up. If the dictionary definition of a word differs from how that word is commonly used, you may need to give the reportive definition and explain how it differs from the lexical definition. For example, a word may mean something different to medical doctors than it means to members of the general public.

When you are editing someone else’s work, look to see whether the lexical definitions that the author gave match the dictionary definitions. If they don’t match, query the author. Sometimes there are good reasons for a mismatch, such as in cases of stipulative definition.

- **Stipulative definition**—a definition that gives a term a specific meaning in the context of a particular discussion or argument.

Some stipulative definitions are arbitrary, such as when a scientist must coin a new word for a new concept (eg, when Murray Gell-Mann coined the word *quark* to refer to a new type of subatomic particle). Often writers give an arbitrary definition to a familiar word. When taken to a ridiculous extreme, this practice results in Humpty-Dumpty words, which are words whose stipulative definition seems to be deliberately misleading. (“‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’”<sup>1</sup>) Other stipulative definitions are restrictive, such as when medical writers specify that an elderly person is someone who is at least 65 years old.

Many legal definitions are a form of restrictive stipulative definition called a precisising definition:

- **Precising definition**—a definition that extends a lexical definition by adding criteria that narrow down the members of the set being described.

# Good writers and good editors think carefully about the definitions being presented in a piece of writing.

A precisising definition clarifies precisely what a term denotes. We often see precisising definitions in medicine, such as when drug labels specify that the dosage recommendations for children should be followed for those 12 years of age or younger.

When you start thinking about definitions, you inevitably have to deal with a branch of logic and mathematics called set theory. Many definitions, including precisising definitions, clarify whether someone or something should be included in the set described by the term in question. There are several ways in which definitions relate to sets.

- **Intensive definition**—a definition that specifies the rules for including members (and excluding nonmembers) of a given set.
- **Extensive definition**—a definition that defines a set by listing all of the set's members.

Consider the term *starting lineup*. A lexical definition of *starting lineup* is “the set of players who will actively participate in a game when the game begins.” The intensive definition of *starting lineup* would be a set of criteria, such as whether a person is present at the time and place where the game will be played and whether the person is eligible to participate (eg, not listed in injured reserve). The extensive definition of a particular starting lineup is the list of all of the players who make up that starting lineup.

Medical communicators must often deal with theoretical and operational definitions:

- **Theoretical definition**—a description of an abstract concept (eg, intelligence).
- **Operational definition**—a definition based on 1 or more tests of some observable trait (eg, an intelligence quotient [IQ] 120 or higher).

Theoretical definitions pose some serious philosophical problems. For example, intelligence has something to do with the ability to solve problems. But does it make sense to say that learning to solve a particular kind of problem makes one more intelligent? Operational definitions also pose some serious philosophical problems. What does a person's score on an IQ test really mean? Is someone who scored 121 on a given test on a particular day really “superior” to someone who scored 119?

Theoretical definitions are similar to Socratic definitions, which are named after the Greek philosopher Socrates:

- **Socratic definition**—an answer to a question in the form “What is F-ness?” (eg, What is piety? What is justice? What is virtue?).

It can be surprisingly hard to come up with a good theoretical or Socratic definition. For example, what is health? What is mental health? Those are important questions, even if they are not always answerable.

Sometimes, definitions are used for poetic or rhetorical purposes:

- **Metaphorical definition**—a definition used for artistic effect rather than for conveying literal meaning (eg, happiness is a warm puppy).
- **Loaded definition**—a definition that expresses a value judgment rather than a description of conventional meaning (eg, an embryo is a preborn child).

## Good and Bad Definitions

Good writers and good editors think carefully about the definitions being presented in a piece of writing. Do the lexical definitions reflect the definitions in a standard dictionary? Do the reportive definitions reflect actual usage? Are the stipulative definitions psychologically acceptable?

Definitions should not be circular. In other words, you should not repeat the word in its own definition (eg, a *dog* is an animal whose parents are *dogs*). Nor should a set of definitions be circular (eg, a *cause* is something that produces an *effect*, but an *effect* is something that results from a *cause*).

Definitions should be neither too broad nor too narrow. An overly broad definition would apply to too many things. An overly narrow definition would exclude too many things.

Medical communicators should also avoid metaphorical definitions (eg, happiness is a warm puppy), especially in works intended for an international audience. A metaphorical definition is a form of poetic discourse, not a means of technical communication. Medical communicators should also avoid using loaded definitions, especially if the purpose of the piece is to convey scientific information rather than to express a political opinion.

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## References

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