Argument

**Essays That Define**
Comparison/Contrast Essays
Personal Narratives
Research Reports
Fictional Narratives

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CONTENTS

Preface v

Why Teach Students to Write Essays That Define? 1

CHAPTER 1
What Are Essays That Define? 7

CHAPTER 2
How to Write Essays That Define 39

CHAPTER 3
Using Essays That Define to Analyze and Write About Literature 53

CHAPTER 4
What Makes This a Structured Process Approach? 74

References 86
Preface

Despite all the attention that writing instruction received during the final decades of the twentieth century, the teaching of writing in middle and high schools remains, at best, uneven. National Writing Project sites have conducted countless summer institutes, and new books about teaching writing appear routinely in publishers’ catalogues. Yet assessments continue to find that students’ writing is less accomplished than teachers might hope. Undoubtedly, the assessments themselves are not what they ought to be (Hillocks 2002). But even those with relatively good reputations, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, find that students in the United States are not writing as well as many people expect them to. What’s going on here? And will yet another book about teaching writing make a difference?

We have written this series of small books in the hope that they will provide alternatives for teachers who are dissatisfied with teaching five-paragraph themes, traditional grammar lessons, and other form-driven writing approaches. This book employs what we call structured process, an approach developed by George Hillocks during his years as a middle school English teacher in Euclid, Ohio, during the 1960s. Hillocks and his students have researched this method and found it highly effective (Hillocks, Kahn, and Johannessen 1983; Smith 1989; Smagorinsky 1991a; Lee 1993). In a comprehensive research review, Hillocks (1986a) found that over a twenty-year period, structured process writing instruction provided greater gains for student writers than did any other method of teaching writing.

We have spent a collective 120-plus years using structured process instruction in our high school English classes. We do not claim to have discovered the one best way to teach writing; rather, our goal is to explain in detail a method that we all found successful.
in our teaching. We hope you find this book useful and that your teaching benefits from reading and using the entire series.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book and This Series

The six books in this series help middle and high school teachers teach writing using a structured process approach, a method based on sound theory and research. Each book follows a similar format, focusing on a different type of writing: essays that define (the focus of this volume), personal narrative, fictional narrative, comparison/contrast essays, argument, and research reports. Although there are some general writing processes that apply to all types of writing, different kinds of writing require unique strategies. Therefore, the instructional activities in each book are tailored to that specific kind of writing.

The books show you how to design and orchestrate activities within an interactive and collaborative environment in which your students themselves experiment with ideas, debate these ideas with their peers, decide what and how to write, determine how to assess the quality of their writing, and discuss their work as a group. They include classroom-tested activities, detailed lesson sequences, and supporting handouts. The instruction is detailed enough to use as a daily lesson plan but general enough that you can modify it to accommodate your own curriculum and the specific needs of your students.

Most writing instruction emphasizes form. With a structured process approach, students first learn the thinking processes and strategies at the heart of a specific kind of writing, then consider form. This approach also recognizes that students write best when they want to communicate something that matters to them. The books show you how to introduce issues, dilemmas, and scenarios that capture students’ interest and invoke the critical and creative thinking necessary to write powerfully and effectively. Samples of student writing are included; they illustrate students’ learning and can also be used as instructional material for students to critique.
You may incorporate these books into a multiyear English language arts program, perhaps starting with personal narratives and fictional narratives in the earlier grades and moving to arguments, comparison/contrast essays, essays that define, and research reports in later grades. Alternatively, all six books in the series could constitute a yearlong writing course. Another option is to repeat modified sequences from one book at sequential grade levels, so students deal with that particular form at increasing degrees of complexity.

Although many of the activities and teaching strategies in these books can be used in isolation, they are most effective when included within a sequence of instruction in which students participate in increasingly challenging activities designed to help them become independent writers.

What’s in This Book

A brief introduction explains what we mean by “essays that define” and also why we believe it’s important to teach students to do this kind of thinking and writing. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 show you how to teach students to write extended definition essays using structured process instruction; in them we describe classroom teaching strategies, provide a sequence of activities and handouts, and show examples of student work. Chapter 4 explains the structured process approach to teaching writing and its two main tenets, environmental teaching and inquiry instruction. This will help you understand why we designed the instruction modeled in this book the way we did; it will also help you design your own units of instruction in the future.
Why Teach Students to Write Essays That Define?

Writing to define is fairly common in magazines, newspapers, and blogs, as well as in academic settings. A recent example appeared in the Chicago Tribune after a man set his home on fire and intentionally crashed a single-engine plane into a building in Austin, Texas, where Internal Revenue Service (IRS) offices were located. His lengthy suicide note complained about the U.S. government, the IRS, and government taxation.

After the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said that the man’s actions did not constitute a terrorist act, Thomas F. Schaller wrote “A Double Standard in What We Define as ‘Terrorism’” (2010; see box). In his commentary, Schaller presents the definition of terrorism provided by the USA Patriot Act and argues that the man’s actions meet all the criteria. He compares the Austin incident to other acts that have and have not been labeled terrorist, analyzing their similarities and differences. The essay discusses a number of examples to clarify the defining criteria and set their limits. Without a working definition of what terrorism is—and is not—Schaller’s argument would have been impossible to make.

A double standard in what we define as “terrorism”

by Thomas F. Schaller

Last week, a man named Joseph Stack set his Texas home on fire, stole a single-engine plane and intentionally crashed it midday into Austin’s Echelon Building, where the local Internal Revenue Service offices are located.
What Do We Mean by *Essays That Define*?

Definition writing, which we find an essential part of the English language arts curriculum, doesn’t always get the attention we believe it should. By *essays that define* we mean the kind of composition, such as the essay on terrorism (see boxed text on pp. 1–2), that defines a complex term or concept and uses examples to clarify what the term or concept’s definition does and does not include. Usually when people talk about “writing definitions,” what comes to mind is a brief dictionary definition. Teaching students to define or write definitions is often seen as a vocabulary lesson or a method of paragraph development. This is not what we mean here. Defining complex *concepts* usually requires much more explanation and clarification than a simple one-sentence or even a one-paragraph definition provides.

A chapter on definition writing is sometimes included in college composition texts and in a few secondary-level textbooks. At the high school and middle school level, however, definition is often treated simply as a method of paragraph development. Although teaching essays that define is not always emphasized at the middle and high school level, we believe it is vital to do so, because much of the writing secondary students are asked to do has definition at its foundation. This kind of thinking and writing is also an excellent way to develop and hone students’ critical thinking skills.

How Are Essays That Define Essential to Academic Inquiry and Students’ Learning?

Consider some common thematic units in English language arts, humanities, and social studies classes: the tragic hero, the American Dream, equality and civil rights, Impressionism, coming-of-age, courage, industrialization and urbanization, feminism and human rights, the antihero, and so forth. These kinds of units are intended to help students build, illustrate, explain, and clarify definitions:

- What is a *tragic hero*?
- What is the *American Dream*?
- What are one’s *civil rights*?
• What are human rights?
• What does it mean to be free?
• What does it mean to have equal rights?
• What is Impressionism?
• What does it mean to come of age?
• What is industrialization, what is urbanization, and how are they related?
• What is maturity?

For students to be successful in much of the writing and thinking they are asked to do in school, they need to know how to develop effective definitions. If we ask students to write an essay about how Macbeth is a tragic hero, they will have to provide a definition of a tragic hero—a complex concept—and analyze the extent to which the character fulfills the defining criteria. If students do not know how to do this, their essays will be weak at best.

Definition is key even in cases in which it may not be as directly evident. If students are asked to write about whether Jay Gatsby in The Great Gatsby is a success, they will need to develop a definition of success. They will need to address issues such as whether going from rags to riches makes a person a success, whether wealth is necessary or sufficient for success, whether attaining one’s goals makes someone a success, whether the nature of the goals one attains makes a difference, whether personal happiness is necessary for success, and so on. Then they will need to analyze Gatsby’s character and actions in light of the definition.

If students are writing a composition arguing whether Atticus Finch is an ideal father, they will need to determine the criteria for defining what it means to be an ideal father. Their writing will not be effective if they do not provide a definition of the concept and then analyze whether the character fulfills the defining criteria.

In social studies classes, students frequently encounter essay test questions or writing prompts that ask them to define concepts: What is an absolute monarchy as opposed to a constitutional monarchy? Which country had a successful mercantile economy, England or
Spain? What is a *filibuster* and should it be eliminated? In science classes, students are asked to define more concrete concepts such as *photosynthesis*, *natural selection*, and *respiration*.

Students need to be able to write essays that define—and do the critical thinking this requires—to succeed in school and in life. We have found that using a structured process approach to writing extended definitions is a particularly effective way to teach them how.
How to Write Essays That Define

The instruction in this chapter helps students move beyond the scaffolds in Chapter 1 and apply the procedures they have learned to create their own extended definition of a concept.

Stage 1: Building Interest and Engagement

It is important to pique students’ interest when you ask them to write an extended definition essay on their own. Begin by helping students identify a concept they are interested in defining.

**EPISODE 1.1.** Start by introducing a situation currently in the news or evident in your school that suggests the need for an extended definition. For example, recently there was a controversy in a Chicago-area high school about whether a student could wear a T-shirt with an antigay message (“Be Happy, Not Gay”). The student in question argued that not allowing her to wear the shirt infringed on her right to free speech. School officials disagreed, arguing that students do not have the right to wear something to school that potentially would negatively affect the learning environment.
In order to discuss this situation, your students need an extended definition of the concept of *freedom of speech*, especially within a school setting. To help them develop one, ask questions such as:

- What is freedom of speech?
- What is and is not allowed in school?
- What criteria should be used to determine what is and is not allowed?
- School attendance is required. Students can turn off a television or radio program if they are offended by it, but they can’t stay home from school. What effect does this situation have on freedom of speech?

**EPISODE 1.2.** Ask the class to brainstorm other situations and concepts that might have potential as the topic of an essay to define. Add your own ideas, especially if students are struggling. Possibilities include:

- friendship
- maturity
- leadership
- loyalty (or misguided or misplaced loyalty)
- integrity
- patriotism
- responsibility
- terrorism
- progress
- cruelty to animals
- success
- sportsmanship
- what equal opportunity means in a school setting
Work with each student until everyone has selected a complex concept to define.

If the essay that defines is part of an instructional unit focusing on a particular concept such as coming-of-age, the American Dream, or integrity, create a “hook” to generate student interest in defining that concept. For instance, give students a list of some well-known people (or characters) and ask who they believe have or have not achieved the American Dream and why. Or provide a situation such as the following in relation to integrity:

A person running for the United States Senate says in a campaign ad that he received an award as Intelligence Officer of the Year. It is later discovered that it was his military unit, not he alone, that won an award for outstanding service. Does running this ad show a lack of integrity by the candidate for office? Why or why not?

Providing a hook helps students see the need for creating an extended definition of the unit concept.

Stage 2: Modeling Processes as Students Generate Ideas for Writing

As students are developing their essays, support them by modeling parts of the process in class.

EPISODE 2.1. Model the process by asking the class as a whole to brainstorm ideas for writing scenarios for a given concept (cruelty to animals is a good one to use). You might begin by piquing student interest in cruelty to animals with something in the news. For example, in 2009, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, was criticized by some animal rights groups for swatting and killing a fly during a television interview. The critics said he should have simply brushed the fly away, not killed it. One group sent the President a Katcha Bug device, which traps bugs and allows their safe release. Ask students whether President Obama was guilty of cruelty to animals.
Concept you are defining: __________________________________

Create a scenario that illustrates the concept you have chosen to define (such as cruelty to animals). To come up with scenarios, think about incidents or situations you have heard about on the news, seen in a movie or television program, read about in a book, or encountered in your daily life. You may explain specific facts you know or create a hypothetical (imaginary but realistic) situation.

Example [for cruelty to animals]: African elephants are an endangered species; therefore, it is illegal to hunt or kill them. In one country, poachers sneak into national preserves and hunt elephants for their ivory tusks. Elephants have been found near death after being shot and left to die with their tusks torn from their heads. Is this cruelty to animals?

Scenario for your concept:

Now think about a similar situation, but one that may not illustrate the concept you are defining. (The example that follows is hypothetical.)

Example [for cruelty to animals]: Max Tracker hunts deer in season in a legal deer hunting woods. After killing a deer, he takes the meat for food and removes the antlers to display in his home. Is this cruelty to animals?

Scenario for your concept:

Think of a situation that you or others find debatable in terms of whether it does or does not qualify as illustrating the concept you are defining.

Example [for cruelty to animals]: In a university research laboratory, rats are fed large quantities of sugar substitutes that are being tested to determine whether they will be safe for humans. Some of the rats develop cancer and other serious health problems. Is this cruelty to animals?

(continues)
EPISODE 2.2. Now have students write their own set of scenarios (similar to the ones in Chapter 1 for dishonesty) related to the concept they have chosen. Give them a scenario planning sheet like the one shown in Figure 2–1 and remind them to include some scenarios that represent borderline, debatable cases. (You could have students who have chosen the same concept work together in small groups.)

EPISODE 2.3. Have students use the scenarios they have developed to create a set of defining criteria (like those in Chapter 1 for the Carnegie Hero Award and for dishonesty). To remind them of what the task involves, you might have students together generate a couple of clear and effectively worded criterion statements that
define cruelty to animals. For instance, “hunting and killing animals is cruelty when it is done in a way that causes unnecessary suffering to the animal or endangers the survival of a species.” Some students may feel that causing an animal pain by changing its appearance for aesthetic purposes, such as clipping a boxer’s ears, is cruelty; others may not. In this case, their criteria may differ.

Groups of students working on the same concept can share their ideas. Alternatively, after they have drafted their criteria individually they can, in small groups, read one another’s criteria, determine whether they are worded clearly and are understandable, and suggest possible revisions.

Stage 3: Organizing and Drafting an Essay That Defines

Once students have developed scenarios and criteria, they are ready to organize their ideas in preparation for writing a draft of an extended definition essay.

EPISODE 3.1. Students may find the example of a planning sheet in Figure 2–2 useful as a scaffold. The sheet should have space for four criterion statements, but tell students they may have more or fewer criteria, depending on their concept and the way they have framed the criteria. They should probably have at least three criteria in order to produce an effective essay. (Students sometimes combine two or more criteria into a single statement. They may need your help or that of their peers to recognize that they’ve done this.) They can draw their examples and contrasting examples from the scenarios they have created in the previous activity or think of additional or different examples.

Figure 2–3 is a planning sheet for cruelty to animals. It can be amended as necessary to match the consensus your class reaches during its discussions. Or students can suggest revisions that will improve it. After they have examined and discussed this planning sheet, have them develop a planning sheet for their own topic.

EPISODE 3.2. Once students have completed a planning sheet, they are ready to begin drafting their compositions. You may want
Term or concept defined: ________________________________

One criterion for ___________________ is ___________________

An example is:

Warrant:

Contrasting example:

Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line):

Another criterion for ___________________ is ___________________

An example is:

Warrant:

Contrasting example:

(continues)
Figure 2–2. Planning an Essay That Defines (continued)

Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line):

An additional criterion for _______________ is _______________

An example is:

Warrant:

Contrasting example:

Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line):

The final criterion for _______________ is _______________

An example is:

Warrant:

Contrasting example:

Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line):
to collect the planning sheets and check whether students are on the right track. You can return the sheets with brief comments on strengths as well as suggestions for improvement. (Meet individually with students who are struggling to talk through their ideas and help them improve weak spots.)

EPISODE 3.3. At this point, it’s helpful for students to examine an essay that defines and discuss its strengths and weakness as they think about creating their own compositions. Figure 2–4 is an excerpt from an essay on police brutality. Ask students, in small groups, to read the essay and answer the questions in Figure 2–5. Then have each group share its work with the whole class, perhaps projecting some of the students’ answers and discussing them at length. Alternatively, or in addition, use writing that students have produced earlier in the unit.

EPISODE 3.4. When students have completed their drafts, have them, in groups of three, read one another’s work and suggest revisions based on these questions:

1. Does the essay have an introduction that catches the reader’s interest and presents the concept that will be defined? How does it establish the need for or importance of a definition of the concept?

2. Does the introduction present a set of criteria for defining the concept? What are the criteria presented?

3. For each criterion, what example and contrasting example does the writer provide to clarify the criterion?

4. Which criteria and/or examples are difficult to understand or confusing? Explain.

5. What ways can you suggest to improve any of the criteria or examples and contrasting examples?

6. Has the writer employed a warrant to explain how each example and contrasting example does or does not illustrate the criterion? If warrants are missing or unconvincing, how could the writer provide or improve them?

7. How does the writer conclude the essay?
8. What part of the composition is clearest or best explained? Why?

9. What suggestions do you have for the writer?

**Figure 2–3.** Planning an Essay That Defines Cruelty to Animals

Term or concept defined *cruelty to animals*

One *criterion for cruelty to animals* is that the methods used to hunt an animal cause unnecessary suffering or endanger the survival of the species.

An *example* is: In one country in Africa poachers sneak into national preserves and hunt elephants for their ivory tusks. African elephants are an endangered species and it is illegal to hunt or kill them. Elephants have been found near death after being shot and left to die with their tusks torn from their heads.

**Warrant:** Killing the elephants is cruelty to animals because they are endangered and because they are subjected to unnecessary suffering since their tusks are torn from their heads and they are left to die a slow painful death.

**Contrasting example:** Max Tracker hunts deer in season in a legal deer hunting woods. After killing a deer, he takes the meat for food and removes the antlers to display in his home.

**Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line):** In this case Tracker is not being cruel to animals because deer are not endangered. If deer hunting were not allowed, the deer would become overpopulated, which could cause animals to starve and become diseased, and therefore, suffer. He is killing the animals quickly without allowing them to suffer a painful death.

Another *criterion for cruelty to animals* is that animals are subjected to unnecessary pain and suffering. If animals are subjected to pain for a good cause, they should be subjected to the least amount necessary.

*(continues)*
An example is: Animals in laboratories that are kept in poor conditions, such as having filthy cages, are not being given adequate exercise, and are not being properly fed.

Warrant: Unless the specific research has to do with amount of exercise or types of nutrition, it is cruel to keep laboratory animals in poor conditions even if the research being done is for a good cause.

Contrasting example: In a university research laboratory, rats are fed large quantities of sugar substitutes that are being tested to determine whether they will be safe for humans. Some of the rats develop cancer and other serious health problems.

Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line): This research is not cruelty to animals because although the animals are subjected to pain and suffering, it is done for a good cause—to save human lives. This action could save many humans from pain and suffering.

An additional criterion for cruelty to animals is that harmful methods are used in training a pet.

An example is: Using a choke collar to train a dog.

Warrant: Although someone probably would not get arrested for training a dog with a choke collar, I think this is cruelty because choke collars can cause tracheal and esophageal damage and sprained necks.

Contrasting example: Using rewards such as treats or positive reinforcement to train a dog.

Warrant (explaining the difference/drawing the line): If it is possible to train a dog using rewards and praise, then it is cruel to animals to use methods that can cause an animal physical or emotional harm.

[Additional criteria are included in the same manner.]
Police brutality is an act which is vague in its meaning. The generally accepted definition is the use of unneeded force by police in the line of duty. However, there are always times which make it necessary for a more precise definition. A more workable definition which could be used by a judge in deciding a brutality case would be an intentional, unprovoked act of force by an officer in which his life or any innocent bystander’s life is not put in danger by the victim of his unneeded assaults.

In order to clarify this definition, one must look at it in sections. The first word which is key in understanding the definition is *intentional*. This means that the officer is using force with a clear understanding of what he is doing and that his actions are done on purpose. For example, if a police officer’s gun accidentally misfires and injures a person, this act would not be considered police brutality since the officer was not intentionally using force.

Another key word in the definition is *unprovoked*. The act must be unprovoked which simply means that the person the officer is using force upon has not resisted attempts by him to carry out his correct job as an officer. For instance, if an officer is summoned to arrest a shoplifter, and the person complies with the officer, the policeman may not use force upon the shoplifter since no force is needed to carry out his job. However, if the shoplifter resists arrest and begins to make vocal attacks and strikes out at the officer, he is allowed to use force that is needed to carry out his job and he cannot be brought up on charges of brutality since the action was provoked.
Instructions: Read the first three paragraphs of the student essay entitled “Force Beyond the Line of Duty.” After reading this excerpt, answer the questions below.

1. What are the criteria that the writer includes to define police brutality?

2. For each criterion explain whether the writer includes an example, contrasting example, and warrant to explain and clarify the criterion. (Using highlighters in different colors, identify the examples, contrasting examples, and warrants.)

3. Which criteria have not been developed and explained in the body of the essay? Write a paragraph or more that will complete the composition, providing what is missing.

4. Next, examine the introductory paragraph. What suggestions would you make for improving the introduction? Write in the revisions you would make on your copy of the composition.

5. Create a concluding paragraph for the composition.
You might have students, when answering questions 3 and 6 (see list on page 47), underline criteria, examples, contrasting examples, and warrants directly on the drafts with different-color highlighters or pencils; they can write comments to the writer directly on the draft as well.

It is also helpful to give students a rubric such as the one in Chapter 1 (Figure 1–10) as they examine their own and others’ drafts.

**EPISODE 3.5.** Have students work on a final draft of their essays, either in class or on their own (depending on how much support you think they need). Evaluate the essays in terms of the qualities discussed and elaborated on in class: introduction of the concept; definition of the concept in terms of criteria, examples, contrasting examples, and warrants; and a conclusion discussing what the term means in relation to human conduct. Also consider whether the language and mechanics exhibited in the essays communicate ideas clearly and appropriately. The rubric in Chapter 1 (Figure 1–10) will help you give students specific feedback.

**EPISODE 3.6.** Return the essays. Have students make final revisions and post final versions of their essays on a class bulletin board or website so they can read one another’s definitions and perhaps reach a wider audience as well.
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