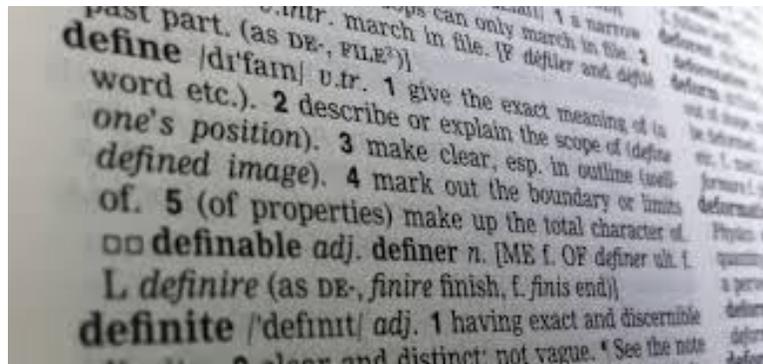


Critical Strategies Part 1: Defining

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There are various approaches that use themes you may be familiar with to help you, as a writer, to think and write responsively and flexibly, such as Bloom's Taxonomy, the Intellectual Standards, the Elements of Reasoning, and so on. Rose and Kiniry offer additional critical strategies and/or themes to be more thoughtful and confidently aware of the many ways we can reconstruct what we have learned *and* to articulate how we think in the academic sphere (1998). Their set of themes include defining, summarizing, serializing, classifying, comparing, and analyzing. All are central to academic thinking and writing (Rose & Kiniry, 1998).

The choices you encounter as a writer in academic situations are many and require a different strategy for a particular purpose. No matter your academic field of study, these strategies can be used to drive your investigation and think about the results of your study's data or literature review. You are already using these mental operations! For example, this quick review includes the first strategy of *defining* as explained by Rose and Kiniry (1998).

Take a look at the graphic above or any term in a dictionary for that matter. As you can see, there are various ways to use a word. The author's view of the term often encompasses (or fails to acknowledge) insights, such as a) the cultural or historical implications, b) various fields or disciplines such as economic, social, psychological and so on of the word's utility, c) the value of a particular term as compare to other types, d) opposing definitions and so on (Rose & Kiniry, 1998).

Rose and Kiniry wrote that these and other alternative interpretations can redefine an issue that you are writing about. For the reader, being unclear about what the author truly means can be frustrating. As a scholar, unclear or poor articulation of a term can create contradiction and reduce the validity of your claim(s). As a writer, you must be able to negotiate and think about how you are thinking (higher order cognition) (Rose

& Kiniry, 1998). The more you practice and are consistent in defining and understanding the meaning of a term in your writing, the stronger your scholarly voice becomes!

Here are some tips offered by Rose and Kiniry (1998). Think about the term “intelligence” and apply to the following list.

- There are various ways of thinking about and defining a term or subject matter amongst the populace, as opposed to a scholar.
- Looking up a definition in the dictionary or providing a passive or mechanical answer from a textbook is not productive. This behavior is a fundamental practice and as scholars, our thinking must go beyond this act or practice.
- Defining a word is a “continuous process that is crucial to receptive reading and persuasive writing” (p. 12).
- Definitions do not occur in isolation; they are used in coordination with the other strategies listed above.
- Organizing various thoughts by classifying with a definition by commonalities and differences is a means of coordination in an essay.
- Definitions can expand, contract or shift in emphasis according to how you are using the term. Definitions are flexible and powerful.
- Seek to write fuller and clearer definitions, instead of simply settling for a one-sentence statement. Then illustrate and explain what you mean. This alone plays a huge role in performing a literature review.
- Authority in how an author writes the meaning of a word comes from how they accurately categorize and describe how the word has been used. If you are reading an essay that appears ambiguous, it’s likely due to a lack of clarity in how the author is thinking about a term; hence minimizing their authority at best.
- Descriptions are generally incomplete because the meaning of words constantly shift as they are used in new or sharper prominence in your writing. Using clear examples and being clear on what you mean improves understanding for the reader.
- “Dictionaries can’t be trusted” (p. 16).
- Start with a formal definition, then rethink the sentence or paragraph to make it more precise. If there is something missing... modify, modify, modify!
- Always consider the limitations of a commonsense understanding of a word.
- If we settle for what we think a word means, then we are apt to “read imprecisely, never getting a good grip on what we’re reading” (p. 21) or

writing (Rose & Kiniry, 1998). I am constantly stopping to look up a term when I am unclear on meaning.

Essentially, our task as scholarly writers is to push ourselves to either directly or implicitly propose various ways to think about a word or subject matter. Some of these new ways of thinking about an issue may be familiar and others may push us to think and define an issue in new ways. These and other ways to negotiate meaning, by better defining a term or subject, creates value by adding insight to our analyses and writing. The next time you need to make a case using academic discourse, think about how you can better communicate with others with authority by speaking their language using the critical strategy of defining. Are you enhancing or hindering the effort?

Reference

Rose, M., & Kiniry, M. (1998). *Critical Strategies for academic thinking and writing* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford Books.