CRITICAL THINKING

A STUDENT'S INTRODUCTION

SECOND EDITION

Gregory Bassham

William Irwin

Henry Nardone

James M. Wallace

King's College

Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York San Francisco St. Louis
Bangkok Bogotá Caracas Kuala Lumpur Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
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CHAPTER 4

LANGUAGE

We take our language for granted. Seldom do we think about our dependence on the ability to use words and put them together in phrases and sentences. With language we plan the day's events, curse the television, exclaim our surprise or frustration ("Damn!"), express pain ("Ouch!"), scribble reminders on scraps of paper, record our thoughts and feelings in diaries and journals, recall past conversations and events, talk to ourselves in anxious moments, pray, wonder, and worry. We could, perhaps, think in other ways—with images, for example—but that would be very limiting.

Only where there is language is there world.
—Adrienne Rich

Thought and language create our world, and so to think critically about the world we must pay careful attention to words—the words we choose and the words others use. In this chapter we focus on the skills of choosing the right word, defining words, and identifying the emotive and slanted messages some words carry.

FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS: THE NEED FOR PRECISION

The slovenliness of our language makes it easier to have foolish thoughts.
—George Orwell

Failure to be precise in communicating can result in confusion and misunderstanding. What makes perfectly good sense to one person might be confusing to someone else. "My father is a painter," you tell a friend, but does your father paint houses or canvases? A professor writes "vague" in the margins of what you consider your best paper. Whose fault is it that your professor didn't "get it"? (*Hint:* not your professor's.) To communicate clearly, to defend our claims without confusing or misleading anyone, and to assess the truth of premises presented to us in the arguments of others, we must insist that language in the context of argumentation be clear and precise.

Say, for example, that as support for the claim that college bookstores should stop selling clothes manufactured in foreign sweatshops, the following were offered as premises:

Sweatshop laborers earn minimal pay working in suffocating conditions in factories owned by American corporations. They claim that economic realities force them to participate in this practice.

To the writer this may be clear, but the reader will question what is meant by "sweatshop" and "minimal pay" and may wonder if "suffocating" is a literal description of the factory (limited fresh air to breathe) or a metaphorical description of the oppressive working conditions. The reader might also wonder if "they" in the second sentence refers to the corporations or to the laborers, both of which could conceivably feel "forced" into such practices. Thinking critically and arguing effectively often depends on recognizing imprecise language—that is, language that is vague, overgeneral, or ambiguous.

Vagueness

One kind of imprecision in language is vagueness. A word (or group of words) is **vague** when its meaning is fuzzy, blurry, or inexact. The phrase *minimal pay* in our example is vague because it does not indicate precisely how much money is paid to laborers. Or consider the word *rich*. It is clear that Bill Gates is rich. It is equally clear that most welfare recipients are not rich. But what about an NBA benchwarmer who earns $400,000 a year? Or a plastic surgeon who earns $1 million a year but has large gambling debts? Are such people rich? It is hard to say because the word *rich* isn't precise enough to provide a clear answer. The term *middle-aged* is also vague. Everyone would agree that President Bush is middle-aged. Everyone would also agree that Leonardo DiCaprio and former President Carter are not middle-aged. But what about Barry Bonds or Mick Jagger? No definite answer can be given because the word *middle-aged* has no clear and distinct meaning.

I like sharp outlines. I hate misty vagueness.
—Bertrand Russell

As these examples suggest, a vague word divides things into three classes: those things to which the word clearly applies, those things to which it clearly does not apply, and those things to which it may or may not apply. In such borderline cases, it is hard to say whether the word refers to those things or not.

Nearly all words are vague to some degree. Some words, such as *indecent* and *obscene,* are extremely vague: they create lots of difficult borderline cases. Other words, like *vehicle,* are moderately vague. Ordinary cars and trucks are clearly vehicles, but what about roller skates, baby carriages, snow sleds, and motorized wheelchairs? Still other words, such as *triangle* and *prime number,* have very precise meanings, with little or no vagueness.

Vague language is useful and appropriate in many contexts. It lets us speak with suitable caution when we lack precise information. ("I think I did pretty well on the exam.") It frequently adds richness, subtlety, and complexity to poetry and other literary forms ("a slumber did my spirit seal"). In diplomacy a certain deliberate vagueness may be needed to avoid disclosing important information. ("If you invade, there will be severe consequences.") And vague language is useful—indeed probably indispensable—in formulating suitably

broad legal standards ("freedom of speech") in contexts in which it would be unwise to attempt to enact a detailed code of laws.

Generally speaking, however, vagueness should be avoided because it frustrates clear thinking and communication. Imagine, for example, living in a police state in which the following laws were enacted:

> Anyone behaving *immorally* will be severely punished.
>
> Anyone speaking *disloyally* will be shot.

Would you have any clear idea what kinds of conduct were prohibited by such vague laws?

Overgenerality

Vagueness is often confused with overgenerality. There is, however, an important distinction between the two. Words are vague if they have fuzzy or inexact boundaries and hence give rise to unclear borderline cases. By contrast, words are **overgeneral** if the information they provide is too broad and unspecific in a given context.

Consider the following brief dialogues:

> *Teacher:* Johnny, what is 7 + 5?
>
> *Johnny:* More than 2.

> *Dean of students:* What were you drinking at this keg party?
>
> *Freshman:* A beverage.

> *Mother:* Where are you going?
>
> *Teenager:* Out.
>
> *Mother:* When will you be back?
>
> *Teenager:* Later.

None of these replies is particularly vague in the sense of having blurry boundaries. The phrase "More than 2," for example, gives rise to no troublesome borderline cases. The problem with these answers is not vagueness but overgenerality. The answers are not specific enough to count as satisfactory answers in the context indicated.

Whether an expression is overly general usually depends on the context. "He's human" may be a perfectly adequate response to the question "Is your chess opponent human or a computer?" But it is a poor response to the question "What's your new boyfriend like?"

Sometimes, of course, words may be both vague and overgeneral. Thus, if I describe my lost luggage simply as "a large black bag," my description is too vague ("large," "black," and "bag" all have fuzzy, inexact meanings) and too general (the phrase "large black bag" isn't specific enough to distinguish my bag from many others).

Walking Naked–As Promised

He wasn't nude but the mayor of North Platte, Neb., did keep his promise to walk naked down the street.

Mayor Jim Whitaker said he'd "walk naked" if the Paws-itive Partners Humane Society raised $5,000. When the scheme drew national attention—and angry calls—Whitaker revealed that he actually planned to walk a dog named Naked instead of walking in the buff himself.[1]

Ambiguity

Ambiguity refers to a doubtful sense of a word or phrase. Many words have more than one meaning. The word *star,* for example, can mean, among other things, a Hollywood celebrity or a twinkling celestial object. A word or expression is *ambiguous* if it has two or more distinct meanings and the context does not make clear which meaning is intended. Ambiguity is what makes puns and many jokes funny, but used unintentionally it can destroy the effectiveness of an argument.

If a man is capable of thinking anything at all, he is also always able to express it in clear, intelligible, unambiguous terms.
—Arthur Schopenhauer

Ambiguity, like overgenerality, is often confused with vagueness. The basic difference between ambiguity and vagueness is this: A vague word is imprecise because it has blurry boundaries and unclear borderline applications. An ambiguous word is imprecise because it is unclear which of two or more *distinct* meanings (each of which may be quite precise) is the one intended by the author. A handy way to remember the distinction is to keep in mind that *ambi* means "both," as in *ambidextrous:* "able to use both hands with equal skill."

Some expressions are ambiguous because it is not clear to what a single word or phrase in the expression refers:

Sometimes words have two meanings.
—Led Zeppelin

Joe went to the bank. ["Bank" in the sense of a financial institution or "bank" in the sense of a slope bordering on a river? Or could it be a sperm bank?]

John called. [John Smith or John Brown?]

Margie sold out. [Did Margie sell her inventory or did she surrender her ideals?]

Ambiguities that result from uncertainty about the meaning of an individual word or phrase are called **semantic ambiguities.**

Other expressions are ambiguous because of a faulty sentence structure:

Words have a meaning, whether we mean that meaning or not.
—John Henry Newman

As a young girl, her grandfather often told her stories about the Wild West. [Her grandfather was never a young girl.][2]

One morning he shot an elephant in his pajamas. (Groucho Marx) [Those must have been big pajamas!]

On Monday, Professor Kraus will give a lecture on safe-sex in the college auditorium.

Newspaper ad: Dog for sale. Eats anything and is especially fond of children.

Billboard for Planned Parenthood: Come to us for unwanted pregnancies.[3]

Church sign: What is hell? Come to church next Sunday and listen to our new minister.[4]

Newspaper headline: Prostitutes Appeal to Pope.

Headline: Two Sisters Reunited after 18 Years in Checkout Line.

Sign in Laundromat: Customers are required to remove their clothes when the machine stops.[5]

Ambiguities that result from faulty grammar or word order are called **syntactical ambiguities.**

Some phrases that on their own may be ambiguous are clarified in the context of an argument. For instance, "Joe went to the bank" creates no confusion in the sentence "Joe went to the bank to complain to the manager about the increase in ATM fees."

But miscommunication can result when a word has more than one meaning and the intended meaning is not clarified by definition or by context. In some cases, this failure results in what is known as a **verbal dispute,** which occurs when people appear to disagree on an issue but in actuality have simply not resolved the ambiguity of a key term. Suppose two people were asked the same question: "Is the suspect arrested last night *guilty* of the crime?" The first person answers, "No, a person is innocent until proved guilty." The second person disagrees: "I say he is guilty; he confessed when he was picked up." There is really no disagreement here on whether the suspect *committed* the crime; the first person is defining *guilt* in a legal sense (the suspect hasn't been convicted yet), and the second is defining it to mean that the suspect did the crime of which he or she is accused.

How many a dispute could have been deflated into a single paragraph if the disputants had dared to define their terms.
—Aristotle

A **factual dispute,** on the other hand, occurs when opponents disagree not over the meanings of words but over the relevant facts. Person A might say, "That man did not commit the crime; he has an alibi." Person B might respond, "He did commit the crime; I saw him do it."

In other cases, though, assessing the truth of a claim that hinges on an ambiguous term can be nearly impossible. If someone claims, without further elaboration, that on average "men are more powerful than women," we would have no way of assessing the claim because *powerful* has several meanings; and whereas one of those meanings (physical strength) may be defensible, the others may not be.

EXERCISE 4.1

I. Identify problems of vagueness, overgenerality, and ambiguity in the following passages. You'll notice that many of the examples are comical, whether or not the writer intended them to be so. See if you can determine which of the comical

passages contain some clever and deliberate use of imprecision and which are unintentionally funny.

1. No cruising on this street.
2. As a member of Parliament, Anglo-Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816) had been asked to apologize for insulting a fellow member of Parliament. "Mr. Speaker," replied Sheridan, "I said the honorable member was a liar it is true and I am sorry for it. The honorable member may place the punctuation where he pleases."[6]
3. *Headline:* Need Plain Clothes Security: Must Have Shoplifting Experience.[7]
4. *Weather forecast:* Cloudy with a chance of rain.
5. *Headline:* Advice to Teachers and Parents on Drugs.
6. He ate his cheesecake with relish.
7. With her enormous bottom exposed to the sky, Ellen watched *Titanic* slowly sink.
8. On returning from church one day, President Coolidge was asked on what topic the minister had preached. After a moment's thought, he replied, "Sin." "And what did he say about the sin?" his interlocutor asked. "He was against it," Coolidge replied.[8]
9. *Sign on escalator:* Dogs must be carried.
10. Bob told Devlin he was hot.
11. *Headline:* Former Concentration Camp Guard Helps Burn Victims.
12. $3 + 5 \times 3 = ?$
13. *Politician:* We need a tax code that is fair to working families. I intend to introduce appropriate legislation that achieves this end.
14. She cannot bear children.
15. *Headline:* British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands.
16. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had a standard acknowledgment for people who sent him unsolicited manuscripts for his opinion: "Thank you for the manuscript; I shall lose no time in reading it."[9]
17. Lost: Small brown dog with black collar. Generous reward for return.
18. *Headline:* Teacher Strikes Idle Kids.
19. Jana told her sister she was envious.
20. Never withhold herpes infection from a loved one.
21. *Thurio:* What seem I that I am not?
    Valentine: Wise.
    Thurio: What instance of the contrary?
    Valentine: Your folly.[10]
22. *From a student paper:* The German Emperor's lower passage was blocked by the French for years and years.[11]
23. *From the U.S. Bill of Rights:* Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.
24. *Headline:* Astronaut Apologizes for Gas in Spacecraft.
25. *Headline:* Panda Mating Fails; Veterinarian Takes Over.

II. Determine whether the following disputes are verbal or factual.

1. *Tracy:* Sue is really religious. She reads her Bible and prays every day.
   Mark: Sue isn't religious. She never goes to church.

2. *Paul:* This is a maple tree. I know because it's just like the maple tree in my backyard.
   Amy: Maple tree, my foot! Maple trees don't have acorns!
3. *Mitch:* Professor Tomkins is a great professor. She tells funny stories, gives easy exams, and never assigns any homework.
   David: On the contrary, a good professor challenges his or her students and motivates them to do their best.
4. *Mike:* We better leave now. Coach said the game starts at 1:00.
   Lindo: We have plenty of time. He said it starts at 4:00.
5. *Hal:* Let's take Highway 6. It's shorter. We can save at least 10 miles.
   Yavonna: It's not shorter. Highway 6 is always backed up this time of day. It will take us at least 10 minutes longer.
6. *Prosecutor:* The defendant was neither legally insane nor coerced when he shot Frank Smith, mistaking him for a porcupine. Thus, the defendant acted freely.
   Defense attorney: Your honor, my client shot Frank Smith accidentally, not intentionally. So, my client did not act freely.
7. *Belinda:* Ty Cobb has the highest single-season batting average—.420.
   Ned: Wrong as usual, sportsfan. Rogers Hornsby hit .424 one year.
8. *Professor:* John, it's clear you didn't study hard for this test. This was a very straightforward exam, and you failed every section.
   John: But, I did study hard! I spent over an hour last night studying for this exam!

The difference between the almost right word and the right is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning and the lightning bug.
—Mark Twain

Definitions are the foundation of reason. You can't reason without them.
—Robert M. Pirsig

That depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is.
—Bill Clinton

The Importance of Precise Definitions

A convincing argument often depends on the clear and accurate definition of language. The failure to define terms carefully can result in a messy battle, with some participants struggling to find the truth and others fighting to avoid it. Former president Clinton's entire political career nearly came to a crashing halt because he and investigators looking into an alleged affair disagreed on the definition of the term *sexual relations*. Prosecutors provided a legal definition of the phrase, a definition Clinton believed excluded the specific behavior he had engaged in. He denied the affair on the grounds that the term was inaccurate. While many observers might argue that Clinton, knowing full well the meaning of *sexual relations,* played games with the meaning of the phrase, others might claim that, like any good lawyer, Clinton held the prosecutor's language to the highest standard: it wasn't as precise as it should have been. In some respects Clinton's looking for an escape hatch is understandable. You would be very aware of the need for clarity if, for example, you were arrested and charged with an offense. Our radar for undefined terms seems to kick in quickest when we are on the defensive: "What, exactly," you might ask, "is 'reckless driving'?"

In many discussions, terms may need to be defined before a position can be advanced. Take, for example, the issue of whether Congress should propose an amendment outlawing desecration of the American flag. Such an amendment would make it a crime to deliberately deface or destroy the flag in certain circumstances. Of course, if such an amendment passes, individual cases of "desecration" will be decided on the basis of courts' definition of the term. Clearly, *desecration* would require defining: Would tying the flag to your bumper and dragging it through the streets be considered desecration? How about sewing an old flag into a T-shirt or a bathing suit? Using it as a tablecloth? Flying it upside down? But the word *flag* would also need defining. What is a "flag"? Is it only the cloth banner that flies or hangs from a pole? What if, after a law against desecration has been passed, someone using a slide projector projects the image of a flag onto a white wall, throws paint or blood against the wall, and shouts obscenities at the "flag"? What if the same person projected the image, not against a white wall, but against a wall with anti-government slogans spray-painted on it?

Clearly, the interpretation of such documents as the Constitution can depend heavily on our definitions of key terms; and whereas an amendment might be deliberately left vague, it is up to the courts to decide on a case-by-case basis whether individual actions fall under the amendment.

In almost any argument, the definition of words can be at the heart of the debate. In fact, whereas some arguments take place over the truth or falseness of a claim ("The death penalty should be abolished"), other arguments center on the meaning of the words used to express the claim. Suppose that your former high school proposes to begin testing students for drug use. Even if you agree that this is a good idea, you need to know what school officials mean by "drug." What specific drugs do they intend to test for? Or suppose that a local PTA petitions the school board to ban violent movies from classrooms. Because many of us disagree on the definition of *violence,* those parents making the suggestion must clearly define what they mean by "violent movie." If the PTA's proposition were accepted without a clear definition, teachers would never know whether a film they intended to show fit the category "violent movie." Driver-education teachers could be charged with violating the rule if, in an effort to encourage safer driving, they were to show driving students films depicting the aftermath of traffic accidents.

If you wish to converse with me, define your terms.
—Voltaire

He who defines the terms wins the argument.
—Chinese proverb

Types of Definitions

To use language correctly in an argument, it is important to remain aware that not everyone reading or listening to your claims has the same background, experience, and values that you do. Your audience, therefore, might not understand completely what you mean by certain terms. In fact, your audience may have very different definitions of the terms you are using. Therefore, you need to present definitions of words that might be misunderstood. There are several types of definitions you can use.

Critical Thinking Lapse

How would a mouse define the term *animal*?

"The Agriculture Department, interpreting the Animal Welfare Act, decreed that rats, mice and birds are not animals. As such, they are exempt from strict rules governing the treatment of laboratory creatures. The Humane Society of the United States and the Animal Defense Fund objected to their exclusion and sued. They won, but the department appealed.

"The U.S. Court of Appeals decided in favor of the Agriculture Department on a technicality: Only those directly injured by the Animal Welfare Act can sue to change it. Martin Stephens, HSUS vice president, said further appeals would be hard, 'unless we can teach these animals to represent themselves.'" [12]

Stipulative Definitions If you've ever created a new word or used an old word in an entirely new way, you have provided a **stipulative definition,** that is, you tell your readers or listeners what it is *you* mean by the term. Here are two examples:

"Buddy-dumped" means dropped from a person's Internet Buddy List.

"Lottoholic" means someone who is obsessed with playing the lottery.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

—Lewis Carroll

A stipulative definition is among the most subjective of definitions because the definition is one you have determined. In other words, a stipulative definition cannot be true or false, though it can, of course, be more or less fitting or appropriate. Writers frequently stipulate definitions when they give labels to cultural trends, political movements, schools of thought, and so forth. Similarly, scientists and technologists often stipulate definitions when they make new discoveries or invent new products. Stipulative definitions rarely create problems unless a writer fails to explain clearly that he or she is coining a new word or using an old word with a new meaning.

Persuasive Definitions Another kind of subjective definition is a **persuasive definition,** in which an arguer defines a term in an effort to persuade a reader or listener to agree with the arguer's point of view regarding the thing being defined. Persuasive definitions usually contain emotional appeals and slanted terms and are often given in arguments over highly charged political and social topics on which people have firm views. Here are two examples:

Capital punishment means the state-sanctioned, vengeful murder of helpless prisoners.

Capital punishment means the infliction of appropriate punishment on vicious cowards who have no regard for life.

Each of these is a slanted, "loaded" definition, whose point is not to provide an objective, neutral definition of *capital punishment* but to persuade the audience to adopt the speaker's particular attitude toward the death penalty.

Although persuasive definitions are often presented as objective and authentic, they are convincing only if they are very well defended. For example, someone claiming that capital punishment is "vengeful murder" would have to provide strong support for that statement.

Lexical Definitions Less personal definitions include lexical definitions and precising definitions. In a *lexical definition,* a word is defined in the way it is standardly used in the language. In other words, the purpose of a **lexical definition** is to state the conventional, dictionary meaning of a word. Here are two examples:

> *Pastel* means a color having a soft, subdued shade.
>
> *Rug* means a heavy fabric used to cover a floor.

The second definition accurately states how most people in the United States define *rug*. In England, however, *rug* can also mean a type of blanket used to cover the legs while a passenger sits in a car or train. Notice that the definition of *rug* reflects its general usage, not one person's use of the word.

Precising Definitions A **precising definition** is intended to make a vague word more precise so that the word's meaning is not left to the interpretation of the reader or listener. Here are two examples:

> *From a class syllabus:* "Class participation" means attending class, listening attentively, answering and asking questions, and participating in class discussions.
>
> A "heavy smoker," for purposes of this clinical trial, is anyone who smokes more than twenty-four cigarettes per day.

In general usage terms like *class participation* and *heavy smoker* are vague. In these examples, they are given comparatively precise meanings to permit clearer understanding and more accurate assessment.

In giving a precising definition, we should be careful to avoid attaching fanciful, biased, or purely personal qualities to the definition. A professor could not, for example, claim that bringing gifts is part of class "participation." Moreover, a precising definition must be appropriate for the particular context. Whereas belting out a rowsing rendition of "YMCA" might be appropriate behavior for participating in a talent show, it would not fit the definition of participation in a classroom.

Strategies for Defining

Writers rely on a number of strategies that, though not strictly definitions, may be helpful in clarifying the meanings of certain words. Each of these strategies, while useful in particular contexts, has limitations of which we should be aware.

Ostensive Definitions Sometimes the simplest way to explain the meaning of a word is to give an **ostensive definition,** which consists in simply pointing to, or demonstrating, the thing being defined. Here are two examples:

Door means *this.* (as you point to one for the benefit of a foreign visitor)

Wedgie means *THIS!* (as you demonstrate your patented technique on yet another hapless victim)

Ostensive definitions are often useful (indeed indispensable) in various contexts, but they have obvious limitations. For instance, your foreign visitor might conclude that a door must be made of wood or that anything with hinges is a door (lids can have hinges). You could take your visitor on a tour and point to every type of door you come across (elevator doors, sliding glass doors, car doors, and so forth) to provide a more complete ostensive definition, but such an exercise would obviously be time-consuming, and in the end the visitor still might conclude that *door* means "door pointed at by my kind and somewhat obsessive host."

Enumerative Definitions Another simple way to clarify what you mean by a word is to use an **enumerative definition,** that is, to provide specific examples of what the word refers to. For example, to help someone understand the meaning of *baseball player,* you might list some famous baseball players: Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, and Mickey Mantle. To define *river* you could mention the Nile, the Mississippi, the Thames, and so forth. Here are additional examples:

Actor means Tom Cruise, Jack Nicholson, Nicholas Cage, and so on.

Bible-belt state means Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, and the like.

The trouble with enumerative definitions is that they tend to be incomplete, and hence may give rise to misunderstandings or convey only a very limited understanding of what the word means. For example, your list of baseball players might give the impression that *baseball player* is synonymous with *Yankee.* Sometimes it is possible to provide a complete list of a word's referents (*Low Countries* means Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands), but even these may not be very useful if the reader or listener is unfamiliar with the things being enumerated (*Diencephalon* means thalamus, hypothalamus, epithalamus, and ventral thalamus).

Definitions by Subclass A **definition by subclass** assigns a meaning to a word by listing subclasses of the general class to which the word refers. Two examples:

Mammal means gorilla, horse, lion, whale, and so forth.

Poem means sonnet, limerick, haiku, epic, ode, and the like.

Definitions by subclass are similar to definitions by enumeration in that both attempt to clarify the meaning of a word by illustrating what the word

refers to; however, whereas definitions by enumeration list *individual things* signified by a word, definitions by subclass list entire *classes or categories*.

Although often helpful, definitions by subclass suffer from the same shortcomings as definitions by enumeration. They can give rise to misunderstandings (our list of mammals might lead someone to think all mammals are large), and they are helpful only if one is broadly familiar with the classes that are named.

Etymological Definitions A good dictionary tells what part of speech a word is, how it is commonly pronounced, and whence it came—its ancestry or **etymology**. Because the meanings of words can change over time, knowing a word's etymology is not always useful, but it will often help us define the word correctly and use it properly.

Automobile, for example, comes from the Greek *autos,* meaning "self" and the French *mobile* (from the Latin *mobilis*), meaning "move." An automobile is self-moving or self-propelled. Some people say "ambivalent" when they really mean to say "apathetic" (unconcerned). *Ambivalent* comes from the Latin word for "both" (*ambi-*) and "vigor" (*valentia*); so to be ambivalent is to feel strongly both ways. *Apathy* comes from the Latin prefix *a,* meaning "not," and from the Greek *pathos,* meaning "suffering" or, more common, "feeling." So to be apathetic is to lack feeling. You might feel ambivalent about abortion, but you are probably not apathetic about it.

Besides pronunciation and etymology, dictionaries also, obviously, provide definitions. But because they are written in a particular time and place, dictionaries cannot contain all of the meanings for each word in our language. Meanings change over time, and new words are added as they become popular. *Gay,* for example, means something different from what it meant fifty years ago, and *CD burner* is difficult to find in even the most recent dictionaries, including those published for access on a computer. Dictionaries are best considered history books that describe the way words were used when the dictionary was written, rather than prescribe how we should define a word. Furthermore, because dictionaries are written by people, they can show the bias of a particular person or group. A dictionary can also be incomplete, limited in the number of definitions it gives for a word, or just plain incorrect. Considered the best dictionary in English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) overcomes many of the deficiencies inherent in dictionaries by providing extensive definitions, etymologies, and examples of a word's use throughout history.

Synonymous Definitions A **synonymous definition** assigns a meaning to a word by offering a synonym—that is, another word that has approximately the same meaning as the word being defined. Two examples:

Loquacious means talkative.

Deleterious means harmful.

Those Who Control the Definitions

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld sparred with reporters over his use of the word "slog" in an internal memo that questioned whether the United States is winning the war on terrorism. Alluding to a line in which he said that U.S. forces were in for a "long, hard slog" in Iraq, Rumsfeld asked reporters, "How many people looked up 'slog' in the dictionary?" A reporter shot back: "Quagmire." Rumsfeld insisted on a definition of "to strike hard" rather than to struggle. A reporter said the preferred definition was, "To walk or progress with a slow, heavy pace; plod as in slog across the swamp." Rumsfeld said he's seen that one but "I read the one I liked." (*USA Today*, October 24, 2003)

Synonymous definitions can be helpful in many contexts. The confusion caused by technical jargon, for example, can be lessened if the jargon is accompanied by a synonymous definition. An apprentice carpenter might be puzzled to hear about a chisel's "bezel" until he or she discovers that the bezel is more commonly known as the "bevel" or even more commonly as the "edge," or imprecisely as the "point." Speaking among themselves, teachers might use words like "assessment" or "inventory." When speaking to parents, teachers might refer instead to "tests." It should be noted, however, that there are few true synonyms in the English language, and the subtle differences between words like *rob* and *steal* or *excuse* and *justification* prevent us from substituting one for the other without regard to our real intentions. Robbers threaten or use violence to get what they want; someone could steal from you without your knowing it. And while poverty might be an excuse for robbing someone, it is certainly no justification.

Definition by Genus and Difference One of the most useful strategies for defining terms is to define by genus and difference, a method that lexicographers (dictionary writers) often use to create definitions. A **definition by genus and difference** assigns a meaning to a word by identifying a general class (genus) to which things named by the word belong and then specifying a differentiating quality (difference) that distinguishes those things from all other things in the class. Two examples:

Buck means male deer.

Calf means young cow.

In the first example, *deer* names the general class (genus) to which bucks belong, and *male* names the differentiating characteristic that distinguishes bucks from all other deer.

The first step in defining by genus and difference is to place the term into an appropriate general class or genus. For example, *automobile* belongs not in

the classes of furniture, clothes, or trees, but in the class of vehicles. Now we are left with the much tougher task of listing characteristics—the differences—that distinguish an automobile from other objects in the class of vehicles—trucks, golf carts, motorcycles, and so forth. To distinguish an automobile from a truck, you might say that an automobile is intended for the transportation of passengers. Unlike a motorcycle, an automobile usually has four wheels. An internal-combustion engine separates an automobile from a golf cart. Your definition now looks like this: *An automobile is a passenger vehicle that usually has four wheels and an internal-combustion engine.*

Next, ask if your definition could apply to anything that is not an automobile. In other words, is there anything that *is* a passenger vehicle with four wheels and an internal-combustion engine but is *not* an automobile? You might argue that a gas-powered, four-wheeled car used to transport coal miners (passengers) satisfies the definition, but it is certainly not an automobile. To separate automobiles from coal cars, you could add a distinguishing characteristic to your definition: *An automobile is a passenger vehicle that usually has four wheels and an internal-combustion engine and is used for transportation on streets, roads, and highways.*

Defining by Genus and Difference

Term	*Genus*	*Difference*
Automobile	Vehicle [and so are buses, trucks, bicycles, motorcycles, airplanes, golf carts, the space shuttle, and so on]	To transport passengers [distinguishes an automobile from a truck]
		Usually has four wheels [distinguishes an automobile from a bicycle, a bus, and a motorcycle]
		With an internal-combustion engine [further distinguishes an automobile from bicycles and from other four-wheeled vehicles, such as golf carts]
		Used for transportation on streets, roadways, and highways [distinguishes an automobile from such things as cars that run on rails]

It should be noted that one limitation of the genus and difference method is that it can be used to define a word without capturing the true essence of the thing that is defined. One famous example involves Plato's definition of a human being: a human being is an *animal* (excludes all inanimate objects and plants) that *walks on two legs* (excludes all four-legged animals, but birds, such as chickens, walk on two legs) and that *has no feathers*. That definition is a good definition by genus and difference: a human being is in fact the only featherless animal that walks on two legs. But the definition isn't fully adequate because it doesn't really capture the essence of being human—as an ancient wiseacre once proved by plucking a chicken and throwing it over the wall of Plato's

school with a sign that read "Plato's man." Besides our upright stature and lack of feathers, what essential attributes separate us from all other animals? The capacity for language? The ability to laugh? Critical thinking skills? How would you define *human being*?

Smart readers are starting to notice how difficult it is to come up with good, accurate definitions. Here are a few simple rules that will help you to construct sound definitions and evaluate those of others.

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Don't make the definition too broad or too narrow.** A definition is too broad if it includes too much and is too narrow if it includes too little. A good definition applies to *all and only* the things being defined. A definition of *automobile* as "a vehicle with four wheels" would be too broad because it would include golf carts and lawnmowers. A definition of *sibling* as "brother" would be too narrow because it fails to include sisters.
- **Convey the essential meaning of the word being defined.** A good definition should do more than just pick out some uniquely identifying properties of the thing being defined. Defining *horse,* for example, as "the animal ridden by Napoleon during the battle of Waterloo" is clearly a poor definition, even though the defining expression does apply uniquely to horses. The problem with the definition is that it fails to capture the really important and necessary properties that make horses *horses,* rather than, say, cows or sheep. Expressing the essential meaning of a word can be very difficult and often requires specialized knowledge.
- **Provide a context for ambiguous words.** Many words are ambiguous; that is, they have two or more distinct meanings. For example, a "walk" in baseball is different from a "walk" in the park. To prevent confusion, therefore, a good definition should indicate the context in which an ambiguous word is being used. Thus, we might say: "'Walk' means (in baseball) an award of first base to a batter who receives four pitched balls that are outside the strike zone and are not struck at by the batter."
- **Avoid slanted definitions.** Don't let personal preferences or attitudes interfere with your definition. Avoid slanted definitions—that is, biased or emotionally charged definitions that improperly play on the emotions or attitudes of an audience. Slanted definitions may be OK for a laugh, as in Woodrow Wilson's famous definition of a conservative as "a man who sits and thinks, mostly sits." But don't try to win a debate by a definition that can rightly be won only by an argument.

We had better not follow Humpty Dumpty in making words mean what we please.
—C. S. Lewis

- **Avoid figurative definitions.** A good definition should express clearly the conventional meaning of a word, not be couched in figurative or metaphorical language. Consider these examples:

  Slot machine means one-armed bandit.

  Advertising means legalized lying.

  Religion means the flight of the alone to the Alone.

  "Definitions" such as these may have their place (they may be humorous or clever, for example); but if a straightforward definition is in order, such figurative language should be avoided.

- **Avoid needlessly obscure definitions.** A good definition should clarify the meaning of a word for someone who may be unfamiliar with the term. Thus, a definition should not include a lot of big words or technical jargon that readers aren't likely to understand. For example:

  Mouse means a quadrupedal mammalian of any of the more diminutive species of the genus *Mus* of the order *Rodentia*.

  For people not trained in biology, this definition is likely to be more confusing than helpful.

- **Avoid circular definitions.** A definition is circular if a person would need to know what the defined word means in order to understand the word or words used to define it:

  Entomologist means someone who engages in the science of entomology.

  Gambler means someone who gambles.

  Such definitions are likely to be unhelpful because the defining phrases are just slight variants of the words being defined.

Exercise 4.2

I. In groups define eight words from the list below, using any of the methods we have discussed—or a combination of them. The class will compare definitions. What do your definitions have in common? What makes them unique? Could you come to some agreement on a definition for each of the terms? How important is it that you agree as a group on the definition of some of these terms?

chair	sports star	blues
sofa	fan (sports)	horror novel
pencil	fanatic	drunk
coat	poet	democracy
jacket	rock and roll	advertising
actor	grunge	racism
patriotism	knowledge	
justice		

Types of Definitions and Strategies for Defining

TYPES

Stipulative: A definition that a writer or speaker has assigned to a term or that has been assigned to a term for the first time. *Examples:* "The Wild Bunch" means our intramural football team. I call my little sister "the gnat."

Persuasive: A definition given to a term in an effort to persuade the reader or listener to agree with the writer's or speaker's point of view. *Example:* Advertising is the means by which companies convince unsuspecting consumers to buy defective or unnecessary products.

Lexical: A definition in which terms are defined in the way they are generally used in the language. *Example:* Blue jeans are pants made of blue denim.

Precising: A definition in which the writer or speaker assigns a precise meaning to a vague term so that the word's meaning is not left to the interpretation of the reader or listener. *Example:* The newly elected governor wants to raise taxes on the rich, which he defines as anyone making more than $100,000 a year in take-home pay.

STRATEGIES

Give Illustrations: Define a term by providing examples of what the word refers to. An ostensive definition provides a concrete example of the term. *Example:* The capital letter *a* looks like this: A. In an enumerative definition, you can list members of the class to which the term refers. *Example:* The term *country* refers to France, England, Iraq, Mexico, and so on. Or you can indicate what subclasses the word contains. *Example:* Fiction includes short stories, novellas, and novels.

Use a Dictionary: Dictionaries tell what part of speech a word is, how it is commonly pronounced, and where the word comes from—its etymology. *Example:* A playwright is not one who writes plays, but one who makes a play the way a wheelwright makes a wheel. The term *wright* comes from an Old English word, *wryhta,* meaning "work."

Provide a Synonym: Synonyms are words that have the same meaning or nearly the same meaning as the term being defined. *Example:* A playwright is a dramatist.

Define by Genus and Difference: Place the term in a class that helps narrow its meaning and then provide characteristics that distinguish the term from other terms in the same class. *Example:* A fawn is a young deer.

II. As a group read and respond to each situation given below. Your answer will depend on how you define the key word in the question. Group members might debate the definitions and the application of the definition to the given situation. Use any strategy for defining terms, or use a combination of strategies. You may have to consult outside sources in deciding on your definitions, and you may want to agree on some contextual details that are not provided in the question. Some students, for example, might argue that the first question depends on how long the couple has been dating.

1. You just caught your boyfriend or girlfriend carrying on a sexually explicit dialogue with someone in an electronic chat room. Has your mate "cheated" on you?

2. As a "computer genius," you can access the college's computer files anytime you like. You can review your transcript, check your medical records, read what your high school guidance counselor said about you, and so forth. All of this information would be provided to you if you asked, but you don't. Can you be accused of "stealing"?
3. A sign posted outside the auditorium reads, "No food or drink in the auditorium." During a lecture your neighbor is loudly sucking on a lollipop. You remind him that food is not allowed. He tells you he doesn't have "food." Who is right?
4. Jack knows that the college to which he is applying gives preference to minorities. He argues in his application letter that his being a second-generation Irish immigrant distinguishes him from other people applying to the college. Is he a "minority"?
5. Nancy has a paper due tomorrow morning. She has written a very rough, undeveloped draft. Last semester Nancy's roommate, Sharon, wrote a paper on the very same topic. Sharon gives Nancy the paper and tells her to "take as much of it as you want." With Sharon's permission and help, Nancy uses Sharon's paper to develop her own. Is Nancy guilty of "plagiarizing"?
6. An acquaintance of yours was just seen leaving your room with one of your favorite CDs, which you did not give him permission to take. Can he be charged with "robbery"? With "larceny"?
7. Your professor thinks women are far superior to men in every way—intellectually, morally, emotionally, and so forth. Is your professor a "feminist"?
8. The cheerleaders at your school have petitioned to have cheerleading listed as one of the school's sports teams. Is cheerleading a "sport"?
9. One day, out of frustration, your roommate throws a full plate of mashed potatoes against the wall of the room, where, amazingly, it sticks. You get up to remove the plate and potatoes from the wall. "Leave it," your roommate insists. "It says something. It's art." "It's garbage," you reply. Who is right?
10. One day Professor Smith tells the class a joke he heard on a popular late-night talk show. The joke involves a sexual situation, and the punch line is quite offensive. Several students in the room, including a number of women, are clearly shocked by the joke. Could Smith be accused of "sexual harassment"? Does it make a difference if Smith is male or female?
11. Recently, a third-grader (age eight) told several off-color jokes to a female classmate. Is this an example of "sexual harassment"?
12. A high school football coach in Florida, upset at the behavior of one of his black players, warned the student not to "act like a street nigger." Many of the coaches, players, parents, and community members have accepted the coach's apology and pointed out that the incident is not typical of the coach, but others insist that the coach's remark indicates that he is "racist." What do you think? Does it make a difference if the coach is white or black?
13. After meeting Brad at a party, Sarah accompanies him to his apartment. After several minutes of kissing on his bed, Brad asks Sarah if she'd like to have sex. She says no, but as they continue to kiss and touch, Brad is persistent in

his efforts to persuade Sarah, and she finally consents, even though she is not entirely sure she is doing the right thing. Has a "rape" occurred?

14. You are standing in a line of about one hundred people of varying ages, waiting to buy movie tickets at a multiscreen cinema. Your attention is drawn to a woman who is speaking very loudly to a child of about six who is pleading with the woman to take him to the bathroom. She tells him to "quiet down" several times before slapping him firmly once on the cheek. The force of the slap is equivalent to what you would use to swat a mosquito on your own skin. Has this child been "abused"?
15. In the last three seconds of a professional hockey game, team A is losing by two goals. A member of team A skates up behind a player from team B and swings his stick at the player, hitting him on the side of the head and knocking him unconscious. The player is removed from the rink on a stretcher and taken to the hospital, where doctors find that he has sustained a concussion. His wound requires twenty stitches to close. He is hospitalized for several days. Should the player from team A be charged with "assault"? (You may wish to consult a dictionary of legal terms.)

III. Determine whether the following are stipulative definitions, persuasive definitions, lexical definitions, or precising definitions.

1. *Funky two-step* means the funny dance Peppermint Patty does in the Charlie Brown Christmas special.
2. *Oar* means a stout pole, widened and flattened at one end into a blade, used as a lever to propel a boat.
3. *Philosopher* means a deluded dreamer who spends his or her life attempting to answer questions that can't be answered.
4. *Beyond a reasonable doubt* means, for purposes of determining a defendant's guilt or innocence in a court of law, a degree of certainty of 95 percent or higher.
5. *Litter-butt* means a person who throws lighted cigarette butts out car windows.
6. *Affluent* means, for purposes of this sociological study, having an annual family income of $250,000 or greater.
7. *Labyrinth* means an intricate structure of intercommunicating passages, through which it is difficult to find one's way without a clue.
8. *Circler* means someone who spends an inordinate amount of time circling parking lots, looking for the closest possible parking place.
9. *Chronically tardy* means being late to class five or more times in any quarter or three or more times in any two-week period.
10. *Faith* means an illogical belief in occurrence of the improbable. (H. L. Mencken)
11. *Tic-tac-toe* means a mindless game for bored children that almost invariably ends in a tie.
12. *Intoxicated,* for purposes of driving a car in this state, means having a blood-alcohol ratio of 0.8 or higher.
13. *Garden* means a plot of ground, usually near a house, where flowers, vegetables, or herbs are cultivated.

14. *Chathead* means a person who stays glued day and night to Internet chat rooms.
15. *Republican Party* means a political organization of patriotic, civic-minded citizens dedicated to preserving the cherished freedoms of all Americans.
16. *Kite* means a toy consisting of a light frame, with paper or other thin material stretched upon it, to be flown in a strong wind by means of a string attached and a tail to balance it.
17. By *full employment* economists mean an unemployment rate of 5 percent or lower.
18. *Democracy* means rule by the ignorant masses.
19. *Indolent* means having or showing a disposition to avoid exertion; lazy; slothful.
20. *Normal speech volume,* according to audio engineers, is approximately 70 to 73 decibels in a quiet environment with the talker and listener 6 feet apart.

IV. Determine whether the following are ostensive definitions, enumerative definitions, definitions by subclass, etymological definitions, synonymous definitions, or definitions by genus and difference.

1. *Poet* means a person such as John Keats, Walt Whitman, or Emily Dickinson.
2. *Halitosis* means bad breath.
3. *Psychic* is a word that derives from the Greek word *psyche,* which means "mind" or "soul."
4. *Bird* means cardinal, sparrow, robin, starling, and the like.
5. *Bull* means a male cow.
6. *Industrious* means hardworking.
7. *Red* means this, and this, and this (as you point successively to a red fire truck, a red apple, and a red crayon).
8. *Metropolis* means a place like New York City, London, or Paris.
9. *Sagacious* means wise.
10. *Gander* means a male goose.
11. *Optometrist* originates from the Greek word *optos,* meaning "seen" or "visible."
12. *Moon* means *that* (as you point to it).
13. *Beverage* means drinkable liquid.
14. *Clement* means merciful or lenient.
15. *Sport* means baseball, basketball, football, hockey, soccer, and the like.
16. *Faith* derives from the Latin verb *fidere,* meaning "to trust."
17. *Yucky* means *that* (as you point to the sticky, congealed residue at the bottom of a trash can).
18. *Question mark* means this →?
19. *Purloin* means steal.
20. Amateur, from the Latin *amator,* or "lover," means a person who plays for the love of the game rather than for compensation.

V. Each of the following definitions is defective in some way. Determine whether the definition is too broad, too narrow, lacking in context, figurative,