Assignment #3: Defining a Term, Concept, or Issue

We rely on definition for successful, efficient communication. Not only do we need to know what others mean when they speak or write to us, but we also want them to know exactly what we mean. *You know what I mean?* When words have more than one meaning, we need to make sure that the meaning we intend is clear. When a word or term may be unfamiliar to our audience, we need to take the time to define it. But definition is especially important when we use words that signify controversial or contested ideas. Terms such as “fairness,” “family,” “feminism,” “evolution,” “terrorism,” “human rights,” “political correctness,” and “sustainability” have many meanings and provide the foundation for a thoughtful argument. Whenever we use such terms, we need to let listeners and readers know exactly how *we* are using them. Although we can make words mean different things, we can do so only if our *language community*—the people with whom we speak most frequently—agrees to share the meaning with us.

The purpose of your definition essay will be to inform or argue by classifying a term in a broad category (class) and then differentiating that term from other terms in the same category by stating its distinguishing characteristics. Your one-sentence *formal* definition will serve as the basis of your thesis statement. As you focus on your subject for defining, you’ll have to decide if yours will be an *operational definition* or a *definition by example* (or perhaps a *hybrid* of the two)—as well as whether the definition will be objective or subjective. You may also need to decide how much to *historicize* your definition. Ultimately, you can develop your definition only by considering who your audience is, what they already know, what they need to know, and how they feel about your topic. So when choosing a topic for definition, think carefully about a specific group of people who would be interested in or benefit from your definition—and then tailor your definition to that group.

Whatever your topic, audience, and purpose, your essay must include definitions of important terms in the controversy, historical and background information, and a thorough exploration of different points of view on the issue. This will require you to do research to supplement and verify your existing knowledge. Therefore, *your essay must include at least four outside sources*.

How might you deliver your essay? It could be a letter or a talk that includes the points of view of the audience. It could be an article for a magazine or newspaper that presents the issue to its readers. Or imagine it as a lengthy memo to a legislator or members of an interest group who require information before taking a stand. In any case, your essay must have exigence—the situation must call for a rhetorical response (in this case, your definition). Whatever form of delivery you choose, try to avoid writing an encyclopedic article for the “general reader.”
Library Research for Defining a Term, Concept, or Issue

To gather evidence in support of your investigation, it is necessary to explore a broad range of positions and opinions and research about the issue. This evidence can be found in a variety of sources: in current sources such as periodicals and newspapers, in quantitative form such as statistical sources, and in books that may provide valuable background information. And of course, you will want to peruse the Internets. Regardless, you must evaluate the credibility of your sources.

For this assignment, you will indicate to me that you have surveyed the availability and usefulness of potential literature to support your investigation. The sources you identify now may be useful for later assignments as well and may lead you to even more appropriate additional sources.

You should begin by familiarizing yourself with the resources available on the Penn State University Libraries website and perhaps paying a visit to the Pattee/Paterno Library. You will likely need to consult more sources than you actually use. But that’s okay: it’s better to do too much research than not enough. Please note: while it’s okay to consult general reference texts (such as encyclopedias and dictionaries), general reference texts will not count toward your four required sources. Rather, you should employ general reference texts as catalysts to further investigation.

To supplement this assignment, you will be composing and submitting a Discursive Bibliographic Essay. This essay—which evaluates your sources and analyzes your use of them—will be explained in detail on its corresponding assignment sheet.

Finally, to uphold the high academic standards expected of Penn State students, you will document your sources in accordance with MLA style.