

6 Tips on How to Write a Definition

from the desk of Doug Lemov

1

LAY THE GROUND WORK. Start by giving students a specific definition. Then ask them to apply their knowledge of the definition in increasingly challenging ways.

2

PLAN AHEAD. When you provide students a definition, it's first crucial to plan them in advance. Definitions that are provided spontaneously are often inaccurate or fail to capture a word's precise meaning. A teacher might commonly define the word "heed" as "to listen," but to "heed" implies that one follows the guidance or request of some authority. A more appropriate definition would be "to listen and obey".

3

KEEP IT BRIEF. Definitions should be student-friendly, written in language accessible to students. A tidy and efficient definition gives students the best possible chance of understanding and recalling the definition of a new word. For example, the dictionary definition for "privilege" is "a right, immunity, or benefit only enjoyed by a person beyond the advantages of most." Better to define it as "a benefit given to a person or group of people" – simpler, yet still accurate. We suggest 5-7 words generally, though there will be some vocabulary words you can capture in a three-word definition and some you can't capture in seven.

4

BE CONSISTENT. The definition should also utilize the same part of speech and tense as the word is used in the text. Definitions that inadvertently imply a word is a verb when it's shown as a noun can be confusing and sabotage students' application of the word. For example, a teacher defines "sporadic" as "occasionally." The word is an adjective, but the definition is for the adverb form of the word. Better to define it as "something done infrequently."

5

REMEMBER NUANCE. The definition should also capture the word's common use and its nuance. For example, it might be tempting to define a word like respite as "a short break." However, when you take a respite you are taking a break from something difficult and it's almost always used with a preposition (Respite from...). A strong definition would be something like, "A rest from difficulty" with the note that it often appears with "from."

6

CHECK FOR ACCURACY. Finally, the definition should be double-checked for accuracy. Unfortunately, inaccurate definitions are surprisingly common. It's useful to ask a colleague for a "peer review" to ensure your definition is correct and precise.

For more on the topic of teaching vocabulary, please visit Doug Lemov's blog at teachlikeachampion.com/blog.

And be sure to check out his forthcoming book, Reading Reconsidered.