

In nearly every community, centripetal forces that trend toward sameness and centrifugal forces that trend toward difference remain in dynamic tension. They are crosscurrents in which we can drown or through which we can swim.

Using Direct Observations

When de Tocqueville wanted to discover the nature of the American national community, he couldn't do so by relying on books or the opinions of others. In order to arrive at fresh and insightful analysis, he took a tour of the United States to observe it first hand—see the towns and cities, listen to the people, attend events, take notes.

The essay assignment for this chapter asks you to adopt a similar stance, one that anthropologists call the *participant-observer*. Being a participant-observer means that personal experience will clearly inform and influence how you see and what you write; but you must also engage in systematic observation of a particular community. Such observations, recorded in field notes, will supply much of the data that will both shape and support the claims advanced in your analysis.

You may draw on memories of past events when writing the essay, but you should also do at least one direct observation of the chosen community. If you are writing about a fraternity, for example, you could select several key occasions—a dinner, a meeting, an ordinary day in the lounge—and record in textured detail what you see and hear. If you are writing about a neighborhood—even one with which you are intimately familiar—take the time to go there, sit down, observe, and take notes. Only through this kind of observation, through distancing yourself from the subject, will you recognize details that would be overlooked if you tried to rely solely on memory.

Field notes demand a system, even if a simple one. Because memory is notoriously unreliable, you should take notes while you observe or immediately afterward. You should record what you actually hear—not just summarize conversations. You should describe events in vivid detail—not just summarize what happens in a sentence or two. Notice, for example, that when Kirp describes Sproul Plaza at Berkeley, he doesn't just say, "There were lots of different student groups and it was busy." Instead, he names the specific groups and describes the particular people, sounds, sights, and happenings. Likewise, Kidder describes Northampton, Massachusetts, in detail, allowing readers to actually see it, meanwhile weaving in direct quotations and dialogue, allowing readers to hear voices.

The following template offers a simple but effective format for taking field notes. One column is for recording direct observations; another is for reflections on those observations. Some sample notes have been filled in by a student who is writing about the group of people he works with at a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity, which he considers an informal but significant community for him.

Date, Time, & Place	Observations	Reflections/Commentary/Analysis
Sat, 10/18, 8:30am, Habitat for Humanity work site	Jim, site supervisor and a local contractor who knows what he's doing in construction, was there when I arrived—he's always there first. I was next, followed soon after by Marla, Carl and Bill and two new people—local high school students. Then Edda showed up with the big thermos of coffee and we all had a cup, small talking about our Friday-night activities. (I don't really even like coffee, but I usually have a cup anyway.) Bill told a sexually explicit joke, and as usual, Edda (who is very religious) told him to hush and that (in a half-joking, half-serious tone), "You had better get yourself to church Sunday." The 2 new-kids just kind of hung out on the edges, quiet, not getting our inside jokes.	The coffee is our morning ritual. Signals that we need to get going, but not right away. Without some of the banter and joking and catching up, it would just be a cold, early morning of work. The small talk gets people laughing and makes us feel like we are not just co-workers but friends, too. I wonder—why does Jim do this on weekends after doing the same thing all week?
	We've been working on this site for four Saturdays now, and today we do the framing. As we start to lift the first wall around 10am, Ana, who will get this house, shows up. She apologized for being late—said something about a daycare mix-up with her kids' sitter. She's excited to get involved, even though she doesn't know much about construction, so she mostly does small stuff like cleaning up the site. The core group of us who are here nearly every week go right to our usual tasks, almost automatically.	Having a frame up by the end of the day gives us a sense of concrete accomplishment. We can see the skeleton of a home and are reminded why we're doing this with a weekend day instead of sitting around watching sports like most of my friends.

Save your field notes. Some instructors will ask you to hand them in with your essays.

Like field notes, interviews can also provide evidence for your analysis. If you opt to conduct an interview, first see the detailed interviewing advice outlined in Chapter 4. Especially if circumstances do not allow for direct observation of your chosen community (if, for example, writing about your home community when you are at college away from home), testimony gleaned from interviewing other members or observers of that community (whether in person, over the phone, or via email) can be particularly valuable.

Sharpening Definitions

We often think of definitions as being short and compact, as is the case with dictionary definitions. Such definitions are also termed *denotations*—attempts to nail down the exact meaning of a word. Of course, words also have *connotations*—associations that color a given word. For example, the denotation of the word *cuddle* is “to hug closely,” but it carries connotations of warmth and intimacy. Conversely, the word *cheap* may literally mean “inexpensive,” but it can also connote shoddiness. Such short uses of definition are certainly useful, particularly when you are deliberating about word choice in a sentence; but other ways of defining also merit our attention. This section addresses two modes useful in writing essays: *stipulative* and *extended* definitions.

Stipulative Definitions. Have you ever argued with a friend, reached a dead end, and then realized that you were working from different assumptions about the meanings of key terms? Have you ever said, “Well, yes, but it depends on what you mean by . . .”?

Such breakdowns reveal a failure to *stipulate* in advance the meaning of a key term. If I were to start an essay by claiming that half of the adults in a particular community are illiterate, I should define what I mean by “illiterate” and how I arrived at the percentage. It is the writer’s job to anticipate which terms need to be defined, and this requires careful audience analysis. (However, if a writer were to play it too safe and define every word, readers would be bored or distracted.) You need to define words or concepts that might cause misunderstanding or that you use in a special way.

Articulating a definition is a way to avoid misunderstanding or to build common ground on which the writer and reader can meet. The rhetorician Kenneth Burke claimed that fundamental to persuasion is identification, and by this he meant that the writer and reader must find some way to connect, to stand on common ground, to identify with each other. Creating a definition shared by

writer and reader is one way to forge such an identification. Such a stipulative definition usually constitutes but one part of a larger argument.

In constructing an effective argument related to community or community action, you might first want to define how you are deploying the term *community*. Otherwise, you could be building a structure on shifting sands.

Extended Definitions Extended definitions, in the form of essays, are longer than either dictionary or stipulative definitions because they require deliberation, development, and detail.

When writing a definition essay on a given topic, one answers a very basic question: What is it? Or, put differently, How would you characterize it? The central purpose is to *explain*.

Some essays adopt as their sole purpose explanation through definition. For example, when faced with the question “What is success?” some might define it as having a well-paying job and a nice home. Some might define it in terms of personal and familial relationships. Some might define it as making a significant contribution to society or to the arts. Some might define it in relationship to religious faith. Your job as an essayist would be to craft an extended definition by marshaling reason, examples, and evidence to explain your perspective on the term in question.

Guiding Questions

The following questions can help in both generating and sharpening ideas for extended-definition essays. Consider, for example, how the questions might apply if you were writing an essay about your participation in a community of people who meet each weekend to build houses with Habitat for Humanity.

- Within what category does the word or topic fit?
Habitat for Humanity is a national voluntary/philanthropic organization with local chapters.
- How is it distinguished from others conventionally associated with that same category?
Unlike many philanthropic organizations, Habitat focuses exclusively on housing. Among the characteristics that make it special and distinctive are . . .
- How does your definition compare to or depart from commonplace understandings? Consider both denotation and connotations.
Many people may understand Habitat as an organization that builds houses for poor and low-income people, but what they don't understand is . . . What I have learned from working with Habitat for three years is . . .

- What are its core characteristics? What are its special characteristics?
The mission of Habitat is . . . Its core values include emphasis on the dignity and self-reliance that come with private ownership of one's own home, the process of cooperative and pragmatic action, the principle of helping people to help themselves. . . . In my experience working with the local chapter, I have found that . . .
- Which examples help support and illustrate the chosen definition?
As an example of helping people to help themselves, Habitat policies require that prospective home owners devote significant time to working on the construction crew. The organization also . . . I recall a time when . . .
- Which respected authorities support all or part of your definition?
Research done by XYZ suggests that Habitat's efforts have proven effective in ABC ways. Former President Jimmy Carter devotes his energies to the organization because . . . Local Habitat chapter leader Ed Lawrence says that he sees Habitat as . . .
- What is not covered by the definition?
Habitat practices differ from federal housing programs in that . . . The bonds that people form while building the houses often result in friendships that . . .
- How is your definition related to, shaped by, or dependant on context and history? Does your definition change if the context or the audience changes?
Habitat was founded in response to particular economic circumstances that include . . .
- Has the meaning of the word or topic changed over time? How?
When it started, Habitat was . . . and now it is . . .
- Who might object to your definition? How can you anticipate and address such objections in advance?
Different people might see Habitat differently. For example, there is a prayer that is standard practice when a house is completed. I've noticed that for some volunteers this is very important, as it complements their spiritual motivations for service—they'd probably define Habitat as at least in part a religious or mission activity. For some others—committed to housing but not themselves religious—the prayer makes them uncomfortable. This difference suggests that . . .
- What are the implications of your definition? What actions or attitudes would follow if your audience accepted your definition? In other words, why does explaining your definition matter?
How people perceive the organization may affect their willingness to join or to donate money . . .

Use these questions to spark thinking and writing, to help develop raw material for the analysis or definition essays. These questions are designed as *heuristics*—that is, as tools for helping you generate and clarify ideas. They are all related to the key question propelling the essay: What is it? However, you still need to organize your material, fill in content gaps that may not be covered by the prompts above, and provide all the connective tissue that makes for a coherent essay.

Peer Review Questions

The following questions can help guide peer workshops:

1. Where would including more detail and description give readers a better understanding of the community or group?
2. Where does the writer identify patterns of sameness (unifying factors) and difference in the community?
3. How does the writer discuss tensions at work in the community?
4. Is there any analysis of the language practices distinctive to the group? If not, where might that be inserted?
5. Does the writer provide specific examples to support claims? Where might more examples be helpful?
6. Has the writer considered how people from various viewpoints perceive the community?
7. How does the writer employ strategies for definition?
8. Does the text use any quotations from or references to the readings to help inform and advance the analysis?

ENDNOTE

Communities are complex organisms. Although many communities will always, to some degree, resist easy categorization, by stepping back to examine them we can more effectively and ethically act within them.

The chapters that follow build on several of the principles outlined in this chapter. For example, the next chapter examines another kind of community—the community formed by an academic discipline—and subsequent chapters prepare and guide writers in conducting community-based writing projects. In order to handle such projects successfully and responsibly, one should understand the characteristics and complexities of community life.