

A person is shown from a high-angle perspective, sitting at a desk and writing in a notebook. The person's right hand holds a pen, and their left hand holds a pencil. The notebook is open, and the person is writing on the right page. The background is a solid purple color.

Lesson 8

Definition Paragraphs

Source: Great Paragraphs 2

Like all forms of writing, paragraphs are written for a specific purpose. The purpose determines what information you include in the paragraph and how you write it. In this session, we will look at one kind of paragraph—the definition paragraph.

What is a Definition paragraph?

A definition paragraph defines something. The word definition comes from the verb to define, which means “to state the meaning of a word or to describe the basic qualities of something”. In a definition paragraph, the writer’s main purpose is to tell you what something is. For example, a definition paragraph might define the word *gossip* and give examples.

If you were writing a whole essay, you might need to include one paragraph early in your essay that defines a specific term. For example, in an essay entitled “Human Progress in my Generation,” you might talk about what the word *progress* means to you. Does progress mean making money? Does progress mean change? Does progress mean lack of disease? Can progress be measured, and if so, how?

A definition paragraph

- Explain what something is.
- Gives facts, details, and examples to make the definition clear to the reader.

Guidelines in writing a definition paragraph

- Choose a topic.
- Brainstorm some information about the topic. What do you want to include? What do your readers know about the topic? What do they want or need to know?
- Write a topic sentence with controlling ideas.
- Write a few supporting sentences that relate to the topic.
- End with a concluding sentence that restates the topic or make a prediction about it.
- If you use words from another source, put quotation marks around them.

The best way to learn what a definition paragraph looks like is to read and study several examples. Even though the following samples are about different topics, each one is an example of a definition paragraph.

Sample 1:

Gumbo

The dictionary definition of *gumbo* does not make it sound as delicious as gumbo really is. The Dictionary defines gumbo as a “thick soup made in South Louisiana”. However, anyone who has tasted this delicious dish knows that this definition is too bland to describe gumbo. It is true that gumbo is a thick soup, but it is much more than that. Gumbo, one of the most popular of all Cajun dishes, is made with different kinds of seafood or meat mixed with vegetables, such as green peppers and onions. For example, seafood gumbo contains shrimp and crab. Other kinds of gumbo include chicken, sausage, or turkey. Regardless of the ingredients in gumbo, this regional delicacy is a tasty dish.



Sample 2:

Gossip

According to *the American Heritage Dictionary*, gossip is a “trivial rumor of a personal nature,” but this definition makes gossip sound harmless when it is really not. At first, gossip might not seem so bad. One person tells a second person something about someone, and that second person tells a third, and so on. The information passes from person to person. However, gossip is much more than just information and rumors. As a rumor continues, it grows and changes. People do not know all the facts. They add information.



As the gossip goes from one person to the next person, the damage continues, and the person who is the subject of the gossip cannot do anything to answer or protect himself or herself. Because the potential damage may range from hurt feelings to a lost career, gossip is much worse than simply a trivial “rumor.”

Classroom Writing

What is *Ghorme Sabzi*? Why do Iranian love it? Have you ever cooked it?



قورمه سبزی

[قُزْم / م س] (**ا مرکب**) نوعی قورمه و طرز تهیه آن بدین گونه است که قورمه سبزی را چند نوع می پزند از جمله یک طریقه این است که گوشت را قلیه کرده در پیاز و روغن سرخ می کنند و آب میریزند، نیم پز که شد تره و شبت و اسفناج خرد کرده را در روغن و پیاز سرخ کرده داخل می کنند و قبل از آنکه سبزی پخته شود و به روغن آید آبغوره میریزند و پس از اینکه به روغن آمد بردارند و کمی شنبلیله را هم به قورمه سبزی اضافه کنند. (فرهنگ فارسی معین).

مرجع: دهخدا، علی اکبر: لغت نامه دهخدا (نسخه دیجیتال، <http://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir>) براساس نسخه فیزیکی ۱۵ جلدی انتشار سال ۱۳۷۷.
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Misplaced Modifiers

Misplaced modifiers are words that, because of awkward placement, do not describe the words the writer intended them to describe. Misplaced modifiers often confuse the meaning of a sentence. To avoid them, place words as close as possible to what they describe.

Misplaced words

They could see the Goodyear blimp *sitting on the front lawn*.
(The *Goodyear blimp* was sitting on the front lawn?)

Correctly placed words

Sitting on the front lawn, they could see the Goodyear blimp.
(The intended meaning—that the Goodyear blimp was visible from the front lawn—is now clear.)

Misplaced words

Our phone *almost rang* fifteen times last night.

(The phone *almost rang* fifteen times, but in fact did not ring at all?)

Correctly placed words

Our phone rang almost fifteen times last night.

(The intended meaning—that the phone rang a little under fifteen times—is now clear.)

Other single-word modifiers to watch out for include *only*, *even*, *hardly*, *nearly*, and *often*. Such words should be placed immediately before the word they modify.



Dangling Modifiers

A modifier that opens a sentence must be followed immediately by the word it is meant to describe. Otherwise, the modifier is said to be *dangling*, and the sentence takes on an unintended meaning. For example, look at this sentence:

While sleeping in his backyard, a Frisbee hit Bill on the head.

The unintended meaning is that the *Frisbee* was sleeping in his backyard. What the writer meant, of course, was that *Bill* was sleeping in his backyard. The writer should have placed *Bill* right after the modifier, revising the rest of the sentence as necessary:

While sleeping in his backyard, *Bill* was hit on the head by a Frisbee.

The sentence could also be corrected by adding the missing subject and verb to the opening word group:

While *Bill* was sleeping in his backyard, a Frisbee hit him on the head.

Dangling

Having almost no money, my survival depended on my parents.

(*Who* has almost no money?

The answer is not *survival* but *I*.

The subject *I* must be added.)

Riding his bike, a German shepherd bit Tony on the ankle.

(*Who* is riding the bike? The answer is not *German shepherd*, as it unintentionally seems to be, but *Tony*. The subject *Tony* must be added.)

When trying to lose weight, all snacks are best avoided.

(*Who* is trying to lose weight? The answer is not *snacks* but *you*. The subject *you* must be added.)

Correct

Having almost no money, *I* depended on my parents for survival.

Or: Since I had almost no money, I depended on my parents for survival.

Riding his bike, *Tony* was bitten on the ankle by a German shepherd.

Or: While *Tony* was riding his bike, a German shepherd bit him on the ankle.

When trying to lose weight, *you* should avoid all snacks.

Or: When *you* are trying to lose weight, avoid all snacks.

How to correct dangling modifiers?

These examples make clear two ways of correcting a dangling modifier. Decide on a logical subject and do one of the following:

1. Place the subject *within* the opening word group:

Since *I* had almost no money, I depended on my parents for survival.

2. Place the subject right *after* the opening word group:

Having almost no money, *I* depended on my parents for survival.

Sometimes even more rewriting is necessary to correct a dangling modifier. What is important to remember is that a modifier must be placed as close as possible to the word that it modifies.

Your Mission for the Next Session

1 Review the Lesson

2 Complete the activities

3 Visit your peers web pages

4 Write your essays in groups