

reading in order to look up a word? It is easier to hope that if you keep going, the context will make the word clear. Indeed, reading study guides often say that. But what happens when the context does not illuminate? Yes, that is when you nod off. As an experiment, the next time your head begins to drop while reading, try returning to consciousness sufficiently to reach for a dictionary. Once you fully clear up the meaning of the word, you might be surprised to find your mind will feel more alert.

As you may have already noticed, every chapter of this text begins with definitions of its key concepts; they are intended to emphasize the importance of clearly understanding the words we use to describe thinking. Yet you will also come across many unfamiliar words while studying this textbook. It will remain your responsibility to use the dictionary to understand any unfamiliar words that you may find while reading through the text. This practice will help you continually reinforce this important critical thinking habit. Your instructor might even require that you keep a vocabulary notebook for this purpose.

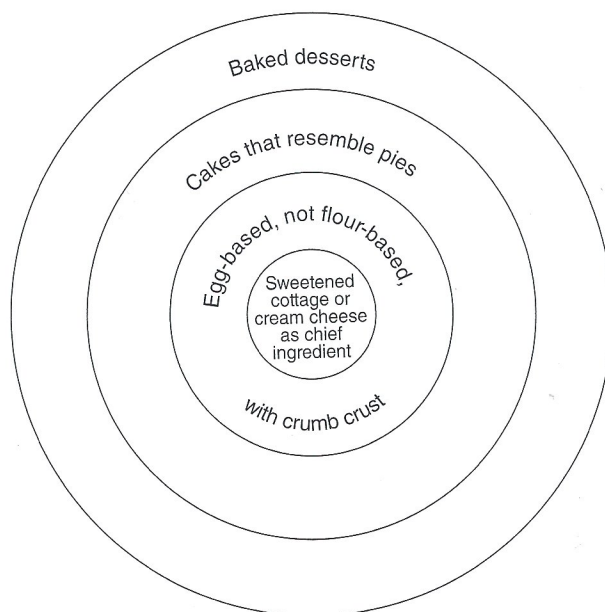
What Makes a Definition?

Definitions clarify words through boundaries.

The etymology, or history, of the word **definition** shows us something interesting. It comes from the Latin roots *de*, meaning off or away from, and *finis*, meaning end or boundary; the Latin word *definire* means to set bounds to. So when we *define* something, we discover or establish its boundaries. When we learn a new word, the definition shows us what boundaries separate it from every other word. For example, let's take the word *cheesecake*. If we only go for its meaning as a dessert, we see (Figure 2.1) how it can be defined through four boundaries that classify the word:

- Baked desserts
- Cakes that resemble pies
- Egg-based, not flour-based, with crumb crust
- Sweetened cottage or cream cheese as chief ingredient

In a definition, the word to be defined is called a **term**. Every term can be included in a **class**, or the largest family to which it is related within this particular boundary. Thus the term *cake* belongs in the class of baked desserts whose boundaries also include baked custard or baked Alaska. In addition, cheesecake has three other distinguishing



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FIGURE 2.1 Definition Boundaries

characteristics, which create smaller boundaries that gradually separate it from every other kind of baked dessert. Thus, when we define a thing, we methodically set it apart from everything else.

EXERCISE

Word Boundaries

Set up a piece of paper with three columns headed **Term**, **Class**, and **Characteristics**. Look up each of the words, list the class and characteristics, and diagram the boundaries as we did for *cheesecake*.

Example

Term	Class	Characteristics
Scissors	A cutting tool	Consists of two blades, each with a loop handle, joined by a swivel pin
Pear		
Moppet		
Pneumonia		
Cat		

People can also take familiar concepts and give them **personal definitions**. The artist Andy Warhol defined art as “what you can get away with.” The poet Robert Frost defined love as “an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.”

Personal definitions may also be philosophical, like “Happiness is equal to one’s capacity to love” (Lester Levenson).

Another category is **persuasive definitions**: definitions that advocate an opinion. Examples of these would be: “Social Security is a Ponzi scheme.” “Social Security saves millions from poverty.” “Abortion is murder.” “Abortion gives women the right to choose.” All these equations are opinions offered as though they were given truths in order to win others over to the same opinion. Again, persuasive definitions are far removed from dictionary definitions.

Short Break Study Question

Individually, or in groups, write down your own examples of definitions that are scientific, stipulative, inventive, and persuasive.

The Denotation and Connotations of Words

Word denotations give things names; word connotations are the positive or negative feelings they evoke.

Word **connotations** are the associations, feeling reactions, images, or thoughts that words awaken in us. These can be personal, collective, or cultural. For instance, let’s take the word *bat*, whose **denotation** is the name we give in English for a small nocturnal flying mammal with wings. Although its denotation is a neutral term, the sound or sight of the word may arouse feelings of fear, revulsion, or affection depending upon our memories and associations. We may have only seen bats in horror movies. Or we may have grown up in a village where bats were befriended. However, since the word can arouse intense feelings, you may find The Batman in movies or comics, but baseball teams would not be named “The Black Bats” or restaurants “The Bat’s Cave.”

Some English words have synonyms that carry a range of different connotations. If you want to call your friend *famous* but instead choose the synonym *notorious*, you might get into trouble. Or consider how careful we are in our use of such words as *overweight*, *stout*, *heavy set*, *plump*, *pudgy*, *flabby*, and *fat*. Again our social interactions teach us what word is appropriate to use. Some, but not all, dictionaries discuss their connotative differences.

Words that Hide Meaning: Vague, Ambiguous, and Abstract Words; Jargon, Euphemisms, and Buzzwords

Sometimes words hide meaning. Their vagueness can be intentional or unintentional. We get confused when we assume that we already know what they mean.

Vague words: Words or phrases that convey a generalized, unclear, and unfelt experience instead of one that is concrete, specific, clear, and sensory.

Ambiguous words: Words or phrases that have more than one meaning. They can be confusing when no explanation or context is offered.

Abstract words: Words that have no physical reference can appear vague when not clarified by context, definition, or explanation.

Jargon: We can be confused by words, sometimes technical, that are familiar to a group of people but unfamiliar to outsiders.

Buzzwords: These are trendy clichés or phrases invented to impress rather than clarify.

Euphemisms: The invention of words that mask meaning, making the less acceptable appear innocuous and respectable.

Vague Words

Vague words convey a generalized, unclear, and unfelt experience instead of one that is concrete, specific, clear, and sensory.

DISCOVERY EXERCISE

I bought this potato at the grocery store for this description assignment. It is elongated and brown except in some parts that are green. It must have a thin skin because the skin is worn off in some spots. Using my knife, I peel off all the skin; it comes off in little pieces. Now it smells more like a potato. Since it is raw, I would rather not taste it. I cut the potato into pieces and put them in a pot of boiling water to eat for dinner. This is a boring assignment.

1. What questions would you want to ask as you read this description?
2. Where did the author miss opportunities to convey concrete, specific, sensory, and interesting details?
3. Where did the author neglect to perceive, explore, and think?
4. Where did the author neglect to expand her vocabulary?

If you completed the fruit or vegetable description in the last chapter, you might have realized that **vague language** results from vague perceptions, vague thought, and reliance on a limited vocabulary.

Yet there are times when vague words stem from deliberate choice. When one wants to win over as many people as possible, it can seem easier to use vague terms into which everyone can insert their own meaning. This strategy can save a lot of questioning and debate. Consider the following claims or slogans. Underline the vague words in each one.

- The American way of life is non-negotiable.
- This candidate stands for family values.
- The system is to blame.
- You should be willing to do anything for love.
- Our corporation drives growth. The economy depends on us.
- What we need is common sense leadership and common sense solutions.

Ambiguous Words

Ambiguous words have more than one meaning. Explanation or context is needed to clarify which meaning is intended.

Recognizing ambiguities can make us laugh. The comedian Mae West was famous for her sexual *double entendres*. The same may be said of the lyrics to many blues and rap songs. Sometimes ambiguous words make funny headlines:

- Miners refuse to work after death.
- Red tape holds up new bridge.
- Iraqi head seeks arms.
- Man executed after long speech.
- Stocks slide into bear territory.

Then there is the intentional use of ambiguous phrases. We find familiar examples, letters of recommendation, written from ambivalent obligation:

- I can't recommend this person enough.
- I can't say enough good things about this person.
- You will be very fortunate to get this person to work for you.

Hundreds of ordinary words in English are ambiguous, having multiple different meanings. These include words like *break*, *make*, *drop*, *cut*, *pitch*, *give*, *feel*, *reduce*, and *close*. Without an example or context explanation, the results can be confusing or hilarious.

Abstract Words

Abstract words are familiar concepts that are vague when not clarified by context, definition, explanation, or their concrete equivalents. They can also be vague because their meaning is personal. Imagine this conversation.

John: All I want is freedom.

Mary: What do you mean by that?

John: All I want is to move out of my parents' place.

Now if Mary hadn't asked John what he meant, she might have imagined any number of scenarios, such as his hopping on a plane to Bali. Yet, of course, the use of abstract words is not wrong. As Frederick Douglass' story illustrates, a grasp of new concepts can be liberating. But when we use familiar concepts like success, freedom, rights, and love, we can't assume they don't need definitions. Moreover, their meanings can shift for each of us personally. For you, the meaning of the word *success* at age 18 could be a career as a jazz band trumpet player; at age 48, it might mean doing nothing at all. Meanings also change collectively; in the U.S., for instance, we continue to re-experience and re-define the meaning of the word *democracy*.

Short Break Study Questions

Assume that the following sentences are your own. What illustrative examples might explain these abstract concepts? Underline the abstract words. The first one is done for you.

1. Feminism has taken a new turn in the U.S. today. Some women are now claiming their right *not* to work outside the home.
2. In spite of the Civil Rights movement, racism still prevails.
3. Sexual harassment in the workplace remains a problem.
4. Drugs are harmful.

Buzzwords

Buzzwords are trendy clichés or phrases invented more to impress rather than clarify. They are close cousins of jargon and euphemisms.

Our company is known for the excellence of its coordination of departmental output, customer relationship management, enterprise resource planning, and proactive system-based solutions. We are known for our ability to think outside the box, push the envelope, and explain what we do in an elevator pitch.

This example is a parody of buzzword language sometimes favored by business, sales, governments, political parties, and academics. Its novelty can be effective in gaining attention, but annoying when the phrases become tired clichés. When you hear or read these words, notice if they leave you impressed but somewhat confused at the same time.

Euphemisms

Euphemisms are words invented to mask meaning, making the less acceptable appear innocuous and respectable. Euphemism comes from the Greek word meaning “good voice.” Euphemisms enable us to be sensitive to the feelings of others and maintain a level of social formality. All of us use the expressions “passed away” or “bathroom.” But euphemisms can also be used to hide meaning. In times of war, they grow like mushrooms.

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|-------------------------------|---|
| • Shock and Awe | Fire bombing raid |
| • The Surge | A troop increase |
| • Surgical strikes | Accurate bombing |
| • Winning of hearts and minds | Using persuasion and money instead of force |

Political parties also invent euphemisms as persuaders. Frank Lutz is known for creating such terms as “death tax” for inheritance tax and “climate change” for global warming.

What Is Critical Reading?

Critical reading begins with a neutral and accurate comprehension of the material.

When we read a detective story, we enjoy getting lost in another world; when we read a training manual, we follow and memorize. In both cases, we rarely question what we read. Such reading is like boarding a bus; we get on and we get off. However, if we were to apply this attitude to newspaper or online reading, or to watching TV news, we would always believe—or doubt—the last thing we read or heard. A critical reader does not soak up information like a sponge but interacts and asks questions based on clear standards that assess information reliability.