

3. Is it possible to tell just by looking at someone whether he or she is telling the truth? Do a little Internet research and then take a position on the issue and defend it in a two-page essay. This assignment will help prepare you for Chapter 4.
4. Find an interesting issue broached in one of the essays in Appendix 1. Take a position on that issue and defend it in a two-page essay. Identify each argument you used as either inductive or deductive.

3

Clear Thinking, Critical Thinking, and Clear Writing



From August 1987 until January 2007, Alan Greenspan was chairman of the Federal Reserve Board ("the Fed"). Because any remark he made about U.S. monetary policy could cause markets all over the world to fluctuate wildly, he developed a complicated way of speaking that came to be known as "Fedspeak."

Here's an example:

It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums.*

Greenspan has admitted that such remarks were not really intended to be understood.

Asked to give an example by commenting on the weather, Greenspan replied,

Students will learn to . . .

1. Determine acceptable and unacceptable degrees of vagueness in language
2. Understand and identify types of ambiguity
3. Identify the problems generality causes in language
4. Use definitions to increase precision and clarity and to influence attitudes
5. Understand the types of definitions
6. Acquire skills for writing an effective argumentative essay

highly uncertain. But we are monitoring the data in such a manner that we will be able to update people on changes that are important.*

This tells us nothing about the weather, of course, and was not intended to. Many times, though, we run across similarly complicated examples of speech or writing that do seem to be intended to inform us.

For example, Allan Bloom, the famous American educator who authored *The Closing of the American Mind*, which was read (or at least purchased) by millions, wrote in that book:

If openness means to “go with the flow,” it is necessarily an accommodation to the present. That present is so closed to doubt about so many things impeding the progress of its principles that unqualified openness to it would mean forgetting the despised alternative to it, knowledge of which makes us aware of what is doubtful in it.

Is this true? Well—that’s really hard to say. The problem is, you don’t know exactly what Professor Bloom is asserting in this passage.

Any number of problems may make a statement unclear. Not infrequently, people just don’t say what they mean. Consider this statement made by President George W. Bush:

You know, when you give a man more money in his pocket—in this case, a woman more money in her pocket to expand a business, it—they build new buildings. And when somebody builds a new building somebody has got to come and build the building. And when the building expanded it prevented additional opportunities for people to work. (Lancaster, PA, October 3, 2007)**

We think he meant “presented” rather than “prevented,” but even then, the point can surely be made more clearly. Here’s an example from former Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien, when asked in Parliament about old versus new money in the health care program:

They say that the money we had promised three years ago to be new money this year is not new money. We have not paid it yet and it is old money versus new money. For me new money is new money if paying in \$5 or \$10, it’s the same money.†

We have no clue what he had in mind.

One of your authors noticed this as a tease on the front page of a newspaper: “49ers are upset.” This probably means that somebody who was not supposed to beat the San Francisco football team did manage to beat them. On the other hand, it *could* mean that the team is dismayed about something.

*Broadcast on BBC World Service Interview, October 25, 2007.

**From *The Complete Bushisms*, by Jacob Weisberg, <www.slate.com/id/76886/>.

†Reported in the *Globe and Mail*, February 7, 2003.

Those who survived the San Francisco earthquake said, “Thank God, I’m still alive.” But, of course, those who died—their lives will never be the same again.

—U.S. SENATOR BARBARA BOXER (D), California

If I said anything which implies that I think that we didn’t do what we should have done given the choices we faced at the time, I shouldn’t have said that.

—BILL CLINTON (reported by Larry Engelmann)

In the Media

Say What?? . . .

You don’t have to be a national political figure to put your foot in your mouth. Ordinary folks can do it, too!

The president’s energy tax won’t even be noticed. Besides, it will discourage consumption.

[Hey, if it won’t be noticed, it won’t discourage consumption.]

Females score lower on the SAT than males, which right there proves the tests don’t show anything. They also demonstrate that teachers do a better job of teaching male students, which is just what you’d expect given the sexual bias that exists in the classroom.

[If the SATs don’t show anything, then they don’t show that teachers do a better job teaching males.]

We have to liberate discussion on this campus and not be so restrained by the First Amendment.

[Right. And we can make people free by sticking them in jail.]

Once your body gets cold, the rest of you will get cold, too.

[On the other hand, if you can keep your body warm, the rest of you will stay warm, too.]

It’s hard to support the president’s invasion of Haiti when the American public is so strongly against it. And besides, he’s just doing it to raise his standings in the polls.

[Hmmm. How’s it going to raise his standings if the public is so strongly against it?]

Has anyone put anything in your baggage without your knowledge?

[Asked of our colleague Becky White by an airport security employee.]

Although obscurity can issue from various causes, four sources of confusion stand out as paramount: excessive vagueness, ambiguity, excessive generality, and undefined terms. In this chapter, we shall consider vagueness, ambiguity, and generality in some detail and then talk about definitions.

Also, from time to time situations arise in which we need to think critically about what we write, especially when we are trying to produce an argumentative essay. In this type of writing enterprise, one takes a position on an issue and supports it with argument. A good argumentative essay usually consists of four parts: a statement of the issue, a statement of one’s position on that issue, arguments that support one’s position, and rebuttals of arguments that support contrary positions. Obviously, an argumentative essay is weakened by statements that are obscure, and what we say in this chapter has direct application to writing clear argumentative essays. We shall return to this subject after we discuss vagueness, ambiguity, generality, and definitions.

VAGUENESS

Perhaps the most common form of unclear thinking or writing is excessive vagueness. Pursued to its depths, the concept of vagueness can be a knotty one, and it has been the focus of much philosophical attention in the past

Wabash College student newspaper headline: Carter Swears in Church

As it turned out, a Judge Carter gave the oath of office to a deputy attorney general whose last name is Church.

Was this an accident, or was a headline writer at Wabash College having a bit of fun?

Real Life

Vagueness at the Border

As the text explains, vagueness results when the scope of a concept is not clear—that is, when there are borderline cases. “Bald” is a typical example. Here, Ms. Hilton is clearly *not* bald, and Mr. Stewart clearly *is* bald. But whether Bruce Willis is bald or not is a good question. He has hair—although it seems to be on the wane—but

these days, he keeps his head shaved and thus appears bald. How much hair would he have to lose to be bald whether or not he shaved his head? The fact that there is no good answer demonstrates that “baldness” is a vague concept.



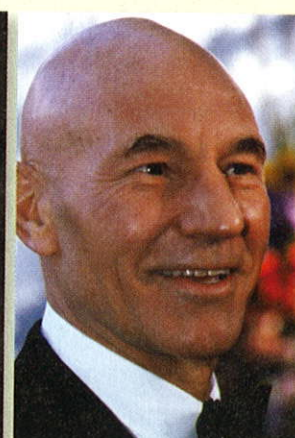
■ Hilton



■ Willis, with ...



■ ... and without



■ Stewart

Man is ready to die for an idea, provided that idea is not quite clear to him.

—PAUL ELDRIDGE

few decades.* Fortunately, at a practical level, the idea is not difficult to grasp. A word or phrase is **vague** if the group of things to which it applies has borderline cases. Consider the word “bald.” It’s clear that Paris Hilton is *not* bald. It’s equally clear that Patrick Stewart *is* bald. But there are lots of people in between (including both your authors). Many of those between the two extremes are borderline cases: It is not at all clear whether the word “bald” should apply to them—it’s the sort of thing about which reasonable people could disagree. For this reason, it is correct to say that baldness is a vague concept.

Vagueness plays a very important role in much that we do. In the law, for example, how we deal with vagueness is crucial. Whether the word “torture” applies to various types of interrogation techniques, especially including “waterboarding,” for example, has been a serious issue for several years. Many former officials have claimed that these techniques did not count as torture, but many others have disagreed. (Some, who subjected themselves to the procedure, have disagreed rather violently.) Possibly more relevant to us and to you personally, whether a bit of driving is “reckless” or not may determine

*See, for example, *Vagueness: A Reader*, by R. Keefe and P. Smith, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), and *Vagueness*, by T. Williamson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

whether you pay a small fine or a large one—or even go to jail. Consider, too, the speed limits we are asked to observe on the highways. Ideally, the offense in question would be something like “driving too fast for the circumstances” rather than driving faster than a particular speed. This is because what is safe at 80 miles per hour in one set of circumstances (midday, no traffic, clear weather, and dry roads) might be dangerously unsafe at 40 miles per hour in another (dark, heavy traffic, rain or fog, slick roads). But we have opted for set speed limits because “driving too fast” is a vague term, and we do not want to put our fate in the hands of patrol officers and judges who are in a position to make arbitrary decisions about whether it applies in our case. So, because we are afraid of the consequences of the vague concept, we sometimes get away with driving dangerously fast under bad circumstances, and we are sometimes ticketed for driving over the posted limit when it is quite safe to do so.

Sometimes vagueness is just annoying. Suppose that it’s late and you’re looking for someone’s house and you’re given the following directions: “Go on down this street a ways ‘til you get to the first major intersection, make a sharp right, then, when the street starts to curve to the left, you’ll be there.” The vagueness in these directions is as likely to get your blood pressure up as it is to help you find your destination. (How do you decide that a particular intersection is “major,” for example?)

Vagueness is often intentional, used as a means to avoid giving a clear, precise answer. Politicians often resort to vague statements if they don’t want their audience to know exactly where they stand. A vague answer to the question “Do you love me?” may mean there’s trouble ahead in the relationship.

Vagueness occurs to varying degrees, and it is difficult to the point of impossibility to get rid of it entirely. Fortunately, there is no need to get rid of it entirely. We live very comfortably with a certain amount of vagueness in most of what we say. “Butte City is a very small town” presents us with no problems under ordinary circumstances, despite the vagueness of “very small town.” “Darren has no school loans because his parents are rich” doesn’t tell us how much money the parents have, but it tells us enough to be useful. “Rich” and “small,” like “bald,” are vague concepts; there is no accepted clear line between the things to which they apply and those to which they don’t. Nonetheless, they are valuable notions; we get a lot of good use out of them.

Problems arise with vagueness when there is too much of it, as in our direction-giving example above. Similarly, if a politician claims he will “raise taxes on the wealthy,” what should we take that to mean? Unlike with the earlier example of Darren’s rich parents, in this case it would be worthwhile to spend some effort trying to pin down just what our speaker means by “wealthy,” since where the borders fall here really *do* make a difference.

So, when is a level of vagueness acceptable and when is it not? It’s difficult to give a general rule, aside from urging due care and common sense, but we might say this: When a claim is not too vague to convey appropriately useful information, its level of vagueness is acceptable. For example, if the directions we’re given are not too vague to help us find our destination, they pass the test. If the politician specifies enough about his tax plan to assure us that we understand how it would apply, then we should not complain of vagueness. But when a speaker or writer does indulge in excessive vagueness, thereby making it difficult or impossible for us to fairly assess his or her claim, it is our job to hold that person accountable.

Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize until you have tried to make it precise.

—BERTRAND RUSSELL

Ask a man which way he is going to vote, and he will probably tell you. Ask him, however, why, and vagueness is all.

—BARNARD LEVIN

Asked why the desertion rate in the army had risen so much, director of plans and resources for Army personnel Roy Wallace replied, "We're asking a lot of soldiers these days."

You might at first want to know *what* they're asking the soldiers, until you see the ambiguity in Wallace's remark.

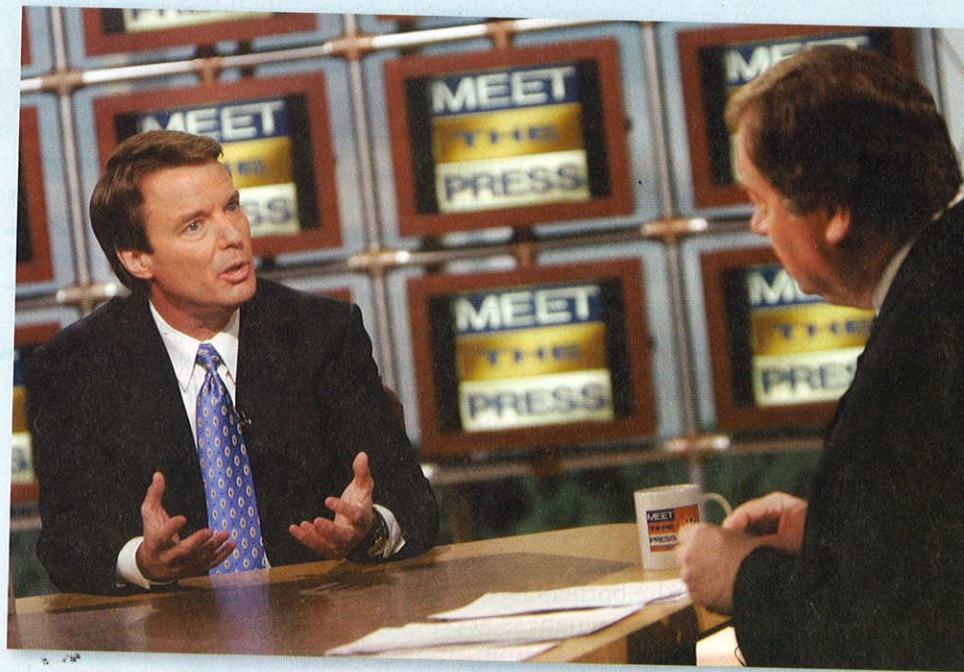
AMBIGUITY

A word, phrase, or sentence is said to be **ambiguous** when it has more than one meaning. Does "Paul cashed a check" mean that Paul gave somebody cash, or that somebody gave cash to him? It could mean either. "Jessica is renting her house" could mean that she's renting it to someone or from someone. Jennifer gets up from her desk on Friday afternoon and says, "My work here is finished." She might mean that she has finished the account she was working on, or that her whole week's work is done and she's leaving for the weekend, or that she's fed up with her job and is leaving the company. If you look online, you can find several collections of amusing headlines that are funny because of their ambiguity: "Kids make nutritious snacks," for example, or "Miners refuse to work after death."

Most of the time the interpretation that a speaker or writer intends for a claim is obvious, as in the case of these headlines. But ambiguity can have

In the Media

A Subtle Ambiguity



A while back, when John Edwards was still a viable presidential candidate, he was asked the following question on *Meet the Press*:

TIM RUSSERT: Why don't you support gay marriage?

JOHN EDWARDS: Well, I guess it was the way I was brought up.

Do you see the ambiguity here, and how it works to Edwards's advantage? You'll find an explanation in the text.

consequences beyond making us smile. Take a look at the box "A Subtle Ambiguity." The question Russert asks is ambiguous, although you might not notice it at first. It could be a question about the cause—that is, the *explanation*—for one's not supporting gay marriage, or it might be about his reasons—that is, his *argument*—for not supporting it. Presidential candidate Edwards took advantage of the ambiguity to duck the question Russert really wanted him to answer, which was the second version. The way Edwards was brought up is something he is not responsible for and which he does not have to defend. On the other hand if he were asked to give arguments for his side of the issue, he could then be asked to defend those arguments.

In discussions of gay rights, we've seen an ambiguity in the term "rights" that often stymies rational debate. The issue is whether laws should be passed to prevent discrimination against gays in housing, in the workplace, and so forth. One side claims that such laws would themselves be discriminatory because they would specifically grant to gay people rights that are not specifically guaranteed to others—they would be "special" rights. The other side claims that the laws are only to guarantee for gays the right to be treated the same as others under the law. When the two sides fail to sort out just what they mean by their key terms, the result is at best a great waste of breath and at worst angry misunderstanding.

Semantic Ambiguity

A claim can be ambiguous in any of several ways. The most obvious way is probably by containing an ambiguous word or phrase, which produces a case of **semantic ambiguity**. See if you can explain the ambiguity in each of the following claims:

1. Wingo, the running back, always lines up on the right side.
2. Jessica is cold.
3. Aunt Delia never used glasses.



■ Brad and Angelina are not pleased with this book. Of course, they aren't displeased, either, since it's almost certain they've never heard of it. Note the ambiguity in the original statement.

The story goes that a burglar and his 16-year-old accomplice tripped a silent alarm while breaking into a building. The accomplice was carrying a pistol, and when police arrived and tried to talk him out of the weapon, the older burglar said, "Give it to him!" whereupon the youngster shot the policeman.

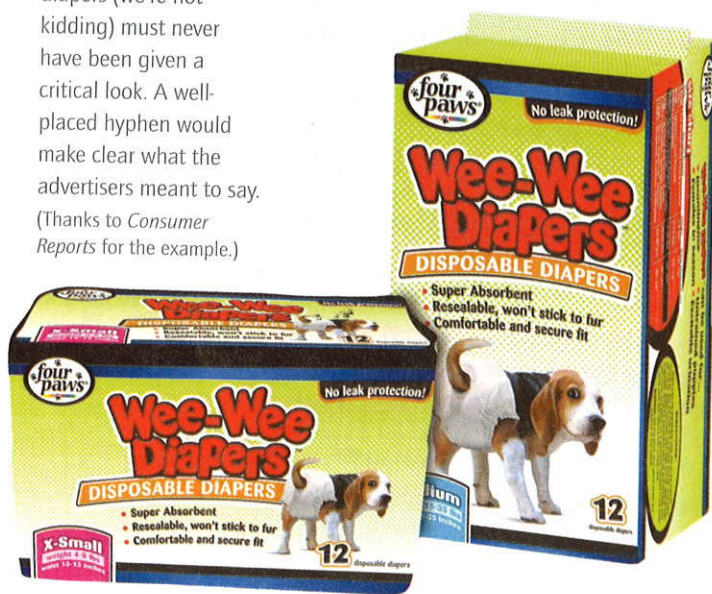
—Courtesy of COLLEN JOHNSON, currently of the California State Prison, Tehachapi

Ambiguity can be dangerous!

"I asked my mother if I were a gifted child. She said they certainly would not have paid for me."

—ANONYMOUS

■ This package of doggie diapers (we're not kidding) must never have been given a critical look. A well-placed hyphen would make clear what the advertisers meant to say. (Thanks to *Consumer Reports* for the example.)



In the first case, it may be that it's the right and not the left side where Wingo lines up, or it may be that he always lines up on the correct side. The second example may be saying something about Jessica's temperature or something about her personality. In the third case, it may be that Aunt Delia always had good eyes, but it also might mean that she drank her beer directly from the bottle (which was true of one of your authors' Aunt Delia). Semantically ambiguous claims can be made unambiguous ("disambiguated") by substituting a word or phrase that is not ambiguous for the one making the trouble. "Correct" for "right," for example, in #1; "eyeglasses" for "glasses" in #3.

Grouping Ambiguity

There is a special kind of semantic ambiguity, called **grouping ambiguity**, that results when it is not clear whether a word is being used to refer to a group collectively or to members of the group individually. Consider:

Secretaries make more money than physicians do.

The example is true if the speaker refers to secretaries and physicians collectively, since there are many more secretaries than there are physicians. But it is obviously false if the two words refer to individual secretaries and physicians.

"Lawn mowers create more air pollution than dirt bikes do" is something a dirt biker might say in defense of his hobby. And, because it is ambiguous, there is an interpretation under which his claim is probably true as well as one under which it is probably false. Taken collectively, lawn mowers doubtless create more pollution because there are so many more of them. Individually, we'd bet it's the dirt bike that does more damage.

Like other types of ambiguity, grouping ambiguity can be used intentionally to interfere with clear thinking. A few years ago, federal taxes were increased, and opponents of the change referred to it as "the biggest tax increase in history." If true, that makes the increase sound pretty radical, doesn't it? And it was true, if you looked at the total tax revenue that was brought in by the increase. But this result was largely due to the numbers of people and the

circumstances to which the increase applied. If we look at the percentage increase paid by individual taxpayers, this was *not* the biggest increase in history. Since most of us are mainly interested in how much more we as individuals have to pay, it is the latter interpretation that is usually more important. But the grouping ambiguity underlying the phrase "the biggest tax increase in history" allows one to give another interpretation under which the claim is true; although the individual tax increases were not the biggest, the collective tax increase was.

There are two venerable fallacies based on the grouping type of ambiguity. Each involves taking the ambiguity one step further than we've done so far.

In Depth

Composition and the First Cause Argument

Here is a brief version of an old and famous argument for the existence of God. It is known as the first cause argument.

Premise: Everything had to have been caused.

Therefore: The universe, too, had to have been caused.

And therefore: God, the cause of the universe, exists.

This argument, at least this version of it, can be analyzed as an example of the fallacy of composition. Do you see how to analyze it this way?

A person commits the **fallacy of division** when he or she reasons from the fact that a claim about a group taken collectively is true to the conclusion that the same claim about members of the group taken individually is also true. In 1973, the Miami Dolphins were undefeated for the entire NFL football season and went on to win the Super Bowl in early 1974. Nobody disputes the fact that the team was the best in the league that year. Does it follow that the individual players on that team were the best players in the league? That is, that Bob Griese was the best quarterback, Larry Csonka the best running back, Mercury Morris the best receiver? No, of course not. What is true of the whole may not be true of each individual part. A round building, remember, does not have to be built of round bricks.

Going the other direction, a person commits the **fallacy of composition** when he or she reasons from the fact that each member of a group has a certain property to the conclusion that the group as a whole must have that property. An example: At the current moment (and it is true most of the time, in fact) in their various states and districts, individual members of Congress receive fairly high marks in opinion polls. One might therefore think that opinion polls would give Congress as a whole fairly high marks. But this would be a mistake, since Congress in general gets very low marks in these same polls. The way people feel about the parts is not necessarily what they feel about the whole. To turn our earlier example around: You can use rectangular bricks to build a building that is not rectangular.

You'll find other examples of these two fallacies in the following "In Depth" box.

Syntactic Ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity occurs when a claim is open to two or more interpretations because of its *structure*—that is, its syntax. Not long ago, one of us received information from the American Automobile Association prior to driving to British Columbia. "To travel in Canada," the brochure stated, "you will need a birth certificate or a driver's license and other photo ID."

Just what is the requirement for crossing the border? Under one interpretation, you have to take a photo ID other than a birth certificate or a driver's

In Depth

More Examples of the Composition and Division Fallacies

Division: "A balanced diet consists of the right proportion of protein, carbohydrates, and fat. Therefore, each meal should consist of the same proportion of protein, carbohydrates, and fat."

—DR. NICHOLAS PERRICONE, author of the best-selling book *The Wrinkle Cure*

Mistake: The balance necessary for a daily intake is not necessary for each *part* of one's daily intake—that is, each meal.

Division: After the 2008 elections, the Democrats took over both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. A number of pundits characterized the election by saying "the voters have overwhelmingly voted for a Democratic Congress."

Mistake: It's true that voters *collectively* voted for a Democratic Congress, but voters *individually* did no such thing. No person *anywhere* voted for a Democratic Congress, since the issue did not appear on any ballot anywhere.

Composition: "The Kings don't have a chance against the Lakers. The Lakers are better at every position except power forward."

—CHARLES BARKLEY

Mistake: Individual players, however talented, may not play that well together.

license, and under another, you don't. If we group by brackets, we can make the two interpretations clear, we hope:

1. [You will need a birth certificate or a driver's license] *and* [other photo ID]
2. [You will need a birth certificate] *or* [a driver's license and other photo ID]

The problem with the original version of the claim is that, because of its poor construction, we don't know whether to associate the driver's license requirement with the birth certificate (as in interpretation 1) or with the "other photo ID" (as in interpretation 2). Rewriting is the key to eliminating syntactic ambiguity. Depending on the intended interpretation, the original could have been written:

1. You will need either a birth certificate or a driver's license *and you will also need* an additional photo ID.
Or
2. You will need either a birth certificate or *both* a driver's license and an additional photo ID.

Neither of these is ambiguous.

In the previous example, the problem was produced by a failure to make clear how the logical words "or" and "and" were to apply.* Here are some

*This particular kind of syntactic ambiguity is analyzed further in Chapter 9, which deals with truth-functional logic.

Neurosis is the inability to tolerate ambiguity.

—SIGMUND FREUD

Okay. But it's still true that we should not have to live with too much of it!

other examples of syntactic ambiguity, along with various possible interpretations, to help you get the idea.

Players with beginners' skills only may use Court 1.

In this case, we don't know what the word "*only*" applies to. This word, as we'll see in later chapters, is both very useful and very easy to use incorrectly. Here, it might mean that beginners may use *only Court 1*. Or it might mean that players with *only beginners' skills* may use Court 1. Finally, it might mean that *only players with beginners' skills* may use Court 1. Obviously, whoever puts up such a sign needs to be more careful. (And so does the person who put up a sign in our university's student union that said, "Cash only this line." Do you see the ambiguity?)

Susan saw the farmer with binoculars.

This ambiguity results from a modifying phrase ("with binoculars") that is not clear in its application. Who had the binoculars in this case? Presumably Susan, but it looks as though it was the farmer. "*Looking through her binoculars, Susan saw the farmer*" clears it up.

People who protest often get arrested.

This is similar to the previous example: Does "*often*" apply to protesting or to getting arrested?

There's somebody in the bed next to me.

Does "next to me" apply to a person or to a bed? One might rewrite this either as "There's somebody next to me in the bed" or as "There's somebody in the bed next to mine."

Ambiguous pronoun references occur when it is not clear to what or whom a pronoun is supposed to refer. "The boys chased the girls and they giggled a lot" does not make clear who did the giggling. "They" could be either the boys or the girls. A similar example: "After their father removed the trash

On Language

Making Ambiguity Work for You

Have you ever been asked to write a letter of recommendation for a friend who was, well, incompetent? To avoid either hurting your friend's feelings or lying, Robert Thornton of Lehigh University has some ambiguous statements you can use. Here are some examples:

I most enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever.

I am pleased to say that this candidate is a former colleague of mine.

I can assure you that no person would be better for the job.

I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment.

All in all, I cannot say enough good things about this candidate or recommend the candidate too highly.

In my opinion, you will be very fortunate to get this person to work for you.

from the pool, the kids played in it." A less amusing and possibly more trouble-making example: "Paul agreed that, once Gary removed the motor from the car, he could have it." What does Gary have permission to take, the motor or the car? (Just imagine a written agreement containing this sentence. We'd predict a lawsuit.) It pays to be careful; a speaker or writer who is thinking critically will make clear exactly what he or she means to say.

There are other examples of ambiguity that are difficult to classify. For example, one of us was at lunch with the dean of a college at our university, and the dean said to the waiter, "You can bring the sauce separately, and I'll put it on myself." The ambiguity, obviously, is in *how* he'll put the sauce on versus *where* he'll put it. As in all cases of ambiguity, it is important to see that the claim is ambiguous rather than to be able to classify the type of ambiguity. (This one could be called either semantic or syntactic, by our lights.) By improving your ability to notice when claims are ambiguous, you will be less likely to be misled by them and less likely to mislead others by using them—unless, of course, you mean to mislead them!

GENERALITY

We turn now to the notion of generality, which is closely related to both vagueness and ambiguity and which can cause trouble in the same way they do.

From what we learned of vagueness, we realize that the word "child" is vague, since it is not clear where the line is drawn between children and non-children. It can also be ambiguous, because it can refer not only to a person of immature years but also to a person's offspring. As if this weren't enough, it is also general because it applies to both boys and girls. Roughly speaking, the less detail a claim provides, the more general it is. Regarding specific words and phrases, the more different kinds of Xs to which a word applies, the more general the word "X" is. "Moore has a dog" is more general than "Moore has an otterhound." "Moore has a pet" is still more general.

If you learn that Clarence has an arrest record, it may well lower your estimate of him and may prevent you from hiring him to do work around your house, for example. But if some more detail were supplied—for instance, that he had been arrested during a protest against a company that was polluting the local river—it might well make a difference in your opinion of him. The difference between a very general description and one with sufficient detail can be crucial to nearly any decision.

There has been a lot of discussion about whether the War on Terror should really be called a "war" at all. The phrase has continued to be used because "war" is both vague and general. Some believe that the word as traditionally used requires an enemy that is organized and identifiable, such as a country or province, and those are difficult to identify in the War on Terror. Still less clearly a war is the so-called "War on Drugs." This seems to be a purely metaphorical use of the word "war," meant to show that somebody is serious about the issue.

We don't mean to confuse you with these closely related and overlapping pitfalls—vagueness, ambiguity, and generality. In practical fact, it is less important that you classify the problem that infects a claim or idea than that you see what's going on and can explain it. For example, "Just what do you mean by 'war'?" is a good response to someone who is using the word too loosely. In some of the exercises that follow, we'll ask you to identify problems

The traveler must, of course, always be cautious of the overly broad generalization. But I am an American, and a paucity of data does not stop me from making sweeping, vague, conceptual statements, and, if necessary, following these statements up with troops.

—GEORGE SAUNDERS, *The Guardian*, July 22, 2006

in different passages in order to help you become familiar with the ideas. In others, we'll simply ask you to explain what is needed for clarification.

Anyhow, with all these potential pitfalls to clear thinking and clear communication, what is a critically thinking person to do? To start, we can do the best we can to be clear in what our words mean. So after the following exercises we will turn our attention to the definition of terms.

Here are several exercises to give you practice identifying precision (or lack thereof) in sentences.

Exercise 3-1

The lettered words and phrases that follow each of the following fragments vary in their vagueness and/or generality. In each instance, determine which is the most precise and which is the least precise; then rank the remainder in order of precision, to the extent possible. If these exercises are discussed in class, you'll discover that many of them leave room for disagreement. Discussion with input from your instructor will help you and your classmates reach closer agreement about items that prove especially difficult to rank.

Example

Over the past ten years, the median income of wage earners in St. Paul

- nearly doubled
- increased substantially
- increased by 85.5 percent
- increased by more than 85 percent

Answer

Choice (b) is the most general (vague is okay, too) because it provides the least information; (c) is the most precise because it provides the most detailed figure. In between, (d) is the second most precise, followed by (a).

- Eli and Sarah
 - decided to sell their house and move
 - made plans for the future
 - considered moving
 - talked
 - discussed their future
 - discussed selling their house
- Manuel
 - worked in the yard all afternoon
 - spent the afternoon planting flowers in the yard
 - was outside all afternoon
 - spent the afternoon planting salvia alongside his front sidewalk
 - spent the afternoon in the yard
- The hurricane that struck South Carolina
 - caused more than \$20 million in property damage
 - destroyed dozens of structures
 - was severe and unfortunate
 - produced no fatalities but caused \$25 million in property damage

- ▲ 4. The recent changes in the tax code
 - a. will substantially increase taxes paid by those making more than \$200,000 per year
 - b. will increase by 4 percent the tax rate for those making more than \$200,000 per year; will leave unchanged the tax rate for people making between \$40,000 and \$200,000; and will decrease by 2 percent the tax rate for those making less than \$40,000
 - c. will make some important changes in who pays what in taxes
 - d. are tougher on the rich than the provisions in the previous tax law
 - e. raise rates for the wealthy and reduce them for those in the lowest brackets
- 5. Smedley is absent because
 - a. he's not feeling well
 - b. he's under the weather
 - c. he has an upset stomach and a fever
 - d. he's nauseated and has a fever of more than 103°
 - e. he has flulike symptoms

Exercise 3-2

Which of each set of claims is more precise (i.e., suffers least from vagueness, ambiguity, or generality)?

Example

- a. The trees served to make shade for the patio.
- b. He served his country proudly.

Answer

The use of "served" in (b) is more vague than that in (a). We know exactly what the trees did; we don't know what he did.

- ▲ 1. a. Rooney served the church his entire life.
b. Rooney's tennis serve is impossible to return.
- 2. a. The window served its purpose.
b. The window served as an escape hatch.
- 3. a. Throughout their marriage, Alfredo served her dinner.
b. Throughout their marriage, Alfredo served her well.
- ▲ 4. a. Minta turned her ankle.
b. Minta turned to religion.
- 5. a. These scales will turn on the weight of a hair.
b. This car will turn on a dime.
- 6. a. Fenner's boss turned vicious.
b. Fenner's boss turned out to be forty-seven.
- ▲ 7. a. Time to turn the garden.
b. Time to turn off the sprinkler.
- 8. a. The wine turned to vinegar.
b. The wine turned out to be vinegar.
- 9. a. Harper flew around the world.
b. Harper departed around 3:00 A.M.

- ▲ 10. a. Clifton turned out the light.
b. Clifton turned out the vote.
- 11. a. The glass is full to the brim.
b. Mrs. Couch has a rather full figure.
- 12. a. Kathy gave him a full report.
b. "Oh, no, thank you! I am full."
- 13. a. Oswald was dealt a full house.
b. Oswald is not playing with a full deck.
- 14. a. Money is not the key to happiness.
b. This is not the key to the garage.
- ▲ 15. a. Porker set a good example.
b. Porker set the world record for the 100-meter dash.

DEFINING TERMS

When today's typical student hears the word "definition," we wouldn't be surprised if the first thing to come to mind is television. "High definition" is the new standard of clarity in what we see on the home screen. This is directly analogous to the clarity and distinctness we're looking for as critical thinkers, and the careful definition of terms is one of our most useful tools in pursuing this goal. While the business of definitions may seem straightforward ("carrot" refers to a tapering, orange-colored root eaten as a vegetable"), you'll soon see that there's more to it than you might have thought. For example, a multitude of attempts have been made to construct a definition of "person" (or, if you like, "human being"). Everything from "rational animal" to "featherless biped" has been suggested. But such important issues as whether abortion is morally permissible, whether fetuses have rights, whether a fetus is correctly referred to as an "unborn child," and doubtless many others—all turn on how we define "person" and some of these other basic concepts. Indeed, if we define "abortion" as "the murder of an unborn child," the debate on abortion is over before it begins.

A definition is the start of an argument, not the end of one.

—NEIL POSTMAN, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*



Some arguments against the acceptance of rights for homosexuals depend on the claim that their orientation is “unnatural.”* But to arrive at a definition of “natural” (or “unnatural”) is no easy task. If you spend a few minutes thinking about this difficulty—even better, if you discuss it with others—we think you’ll see what we mean. What is “natural,” depending on who is defining the term, can mean anything from “occurs in nature” to “correct in the eyes of God.”

The definition of the word “use” by the U.S. Supreme Court made a difference of thirty years in the sentence of John Angus Smith in a criminal case a few years ago.** We hope you are convinced of the importance of the subject. Now, let’s have a look at how to deal with definitions.

Purposes of Definitions

We’ll start by indicating some of the purposes that definitions serve, then go on to describe several different types of definitions. After that, we’ll give some rough and ready ideas on giving good definitions.

Definitions can serve several purposes, but we want to call your attention to four.

1. The first and main purpose served by definitions is to tell us what a word means. When we don’t know a word’s meaning, we often look it up in a dictionary. The definitions given there are **lexical definitions**; they tell us what the word ordinarily means (“**tamarin**. *noun*: a small, forest-dwelling South American monkey of the marmoset family, typically brightly colored and with tufts and crests of hair around the face and neck.”). You might well ask, Isn’t this what all definitions do? A good question, and the answer is *no*. Check these next two items.

2. Sometimes a word needs to take on a special meaning in a given context. For this, we need a **stipulative definition**. An example: “In this environment, ‘desktop’ means the basic opening screen of the operating system—the one with the trash can.” We also assign stipulative definitions to words we invent. Stephen Colbert invented the word “truthiness” on his inaugural *Colbert Report* in 2005. Its assigned meaning (its stipulative definition) can be stated as “[the quality possessed by] those things a person claims to know intuitively or ‘from the gut’ without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.”†

3. A third important purpose of definitions is to reduce vagueness or generality or to eliminate ambiguity. “In this contract, the word ‘dollars’ will refer only to Canadian dollars, even if one party normally deals in U.S. dollars or Australian dollars.” Definitions that serve this purpose are said to be **precising definitions**.

* “[W]e’re talking about a particular behavior that most American’s [sic] consider strange and unnatural, and many Americans consider deeply immoral.” “Equal Rights for Homosexuals,” by Gregory Kouki, <<http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5226>>.

** See Exercise 12–13, p. 463, for details.

† This version is due to Dick Meyer, *CBS News*, December 12, 2006. Actually, the word “truthiness” had been around for a very long time before Colbert reinvented it. It was mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a variant of “truth.”

4. Finally, definitions can be used to persuade. These troublesome items are known as **persuasive or rhetorical definitions**. It isn’t clear that we should think of them as *real* definitions, since they are not intended to provide either ordinary or agreed-upon meanings for terms. Nonetheless, they are often listed with the others we’ve mentioned. But be warned, these “definitions” are designed to influence beliefs or attitudes, not simply to convey linguistic information. If a liberal friend tries to “define” a conservative as “a hidebound, narrow-minded hypocrite who thinks the point to life is making money and ripping off poor people,” you know the point here is not the clarification of the meaning of the word “conservative.” It is a way of trashing conservatives. Such rhetorical definitions frequently make use of the **emotive meaning** (or, if you prefer, the **rhetorical force**) of words. This meaning consists of the positive or negative associations of a word. Consider the difference between “government-guaranteed health care” and a “government takeover of health care.” These terms might reasonably be used to refer to the same thing, but they clearly have different emotional associations—one positive and one negative. The word “connotation” is the traditional term for these associations.

Our definition of “abortion” as “the murder of an unborn child” at the beginning of this section is another much-quoted example of this type of definition.*

Kinds of Definitions

We’ve looked at some important purposes to which definitions can be put, and we must now distinguish between those purposes and the *types* of definitions that are used to serve them. Remember that the purpose of a definition and the type of definition it is are different things. (Compare: The *purpose* of food is to nourish our bodies and please our palettes, whereas *types* of food are vegetables, meat, Pringles, etc.)

Regardless of what purpose is served by defining a term, most definitions are of one of the three following types:

1. **Definition by example** (also called **ostensive definition**): Pointing to, naming, or otherwise identifying one or more examples of the sort of thing to which the term applies: “By ‘scripture,’ I mean writings like the Bible and the Koran.” “A mouse is this thing here, the one with the buttons.”
2. **Definition by synonym**: Giving another word or phrase that means the same as the term being defined. “‘Fastidious’ means the same as ‘fussy.’” “‘Pulsatile’ means ‘throbbing.’” “To be ‘lubricious’ is the same as to be ‘slippery.’”
3. **Analytical definition**: Specifying the features that a thing must possess in order for the term being defined to apply to it. These definitions often take the form of a genus-and-species classification. For example, “A samovar is an urn that has a spigot and is used especially in Russia to boil water for tea.” “A mongoose is a ferret-sized mammal native to India that eats snakes and is related to civets.”

Almost all dictionary definitions are of the analytical variety.

* How this particular definition *begs the question* is noted in Chapter 7.

It’s bad poetry executed by people who can’t sing. That’s my definition of Rap.

—PETER STEELE

We’re guessing he doesn’t like it.