

Definitions in Technical Writing

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Overview

1. **Function and Importance of Definitions**
2. **Writing Situation**
3. **Three Main Types of Definitions**
4. **Common Errors**

Definition of definition

1. **a** : a statement expressing the essential nature of something

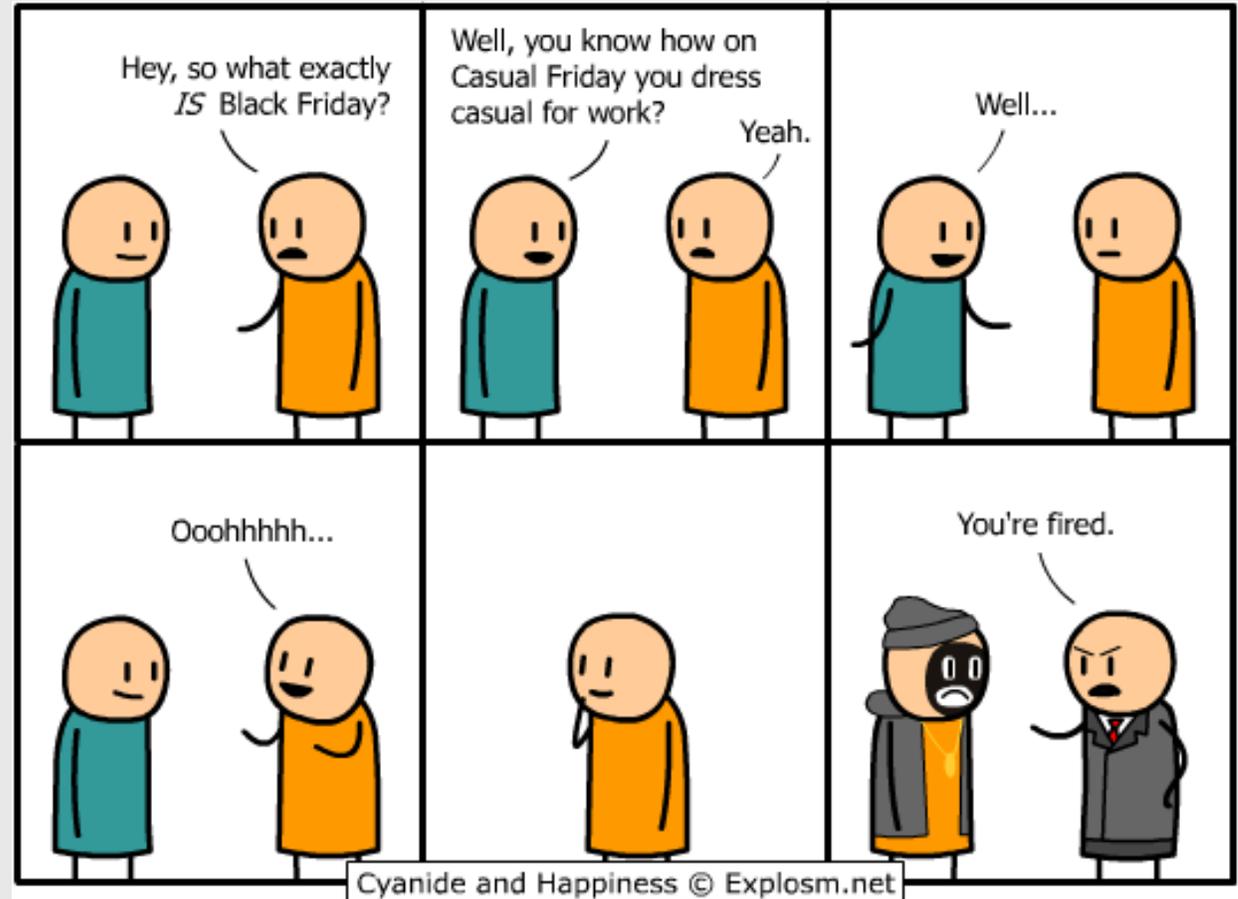
b : a statement of the meaning of a word or word group or a sign or symbol <dictionary *definitions*>

c : a product of defining

2. : the action or process of stating the meaning of a word or word group [1]

Why Define Anything?

- Increase reader understanding
- Elaborate on technical terms
- Improperly defined terms can have a negative impact



What Kind of Definition?

- Not all types of definitions work in all cases
- Consider your PURPOSE
- Definitions will depend on AUDIENCE
- Analogies can be helpful

“The PAUSE button is the brake pedal of the cassette deck” [2]

Types of Definitions

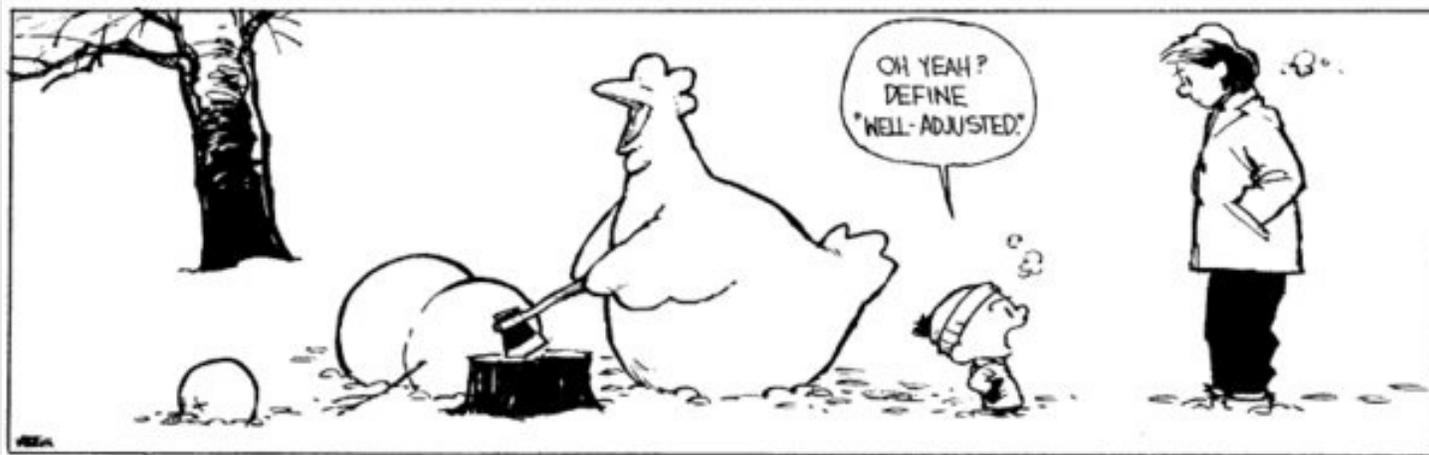
 (Parenthetical)

The Sentence
variety

Extended

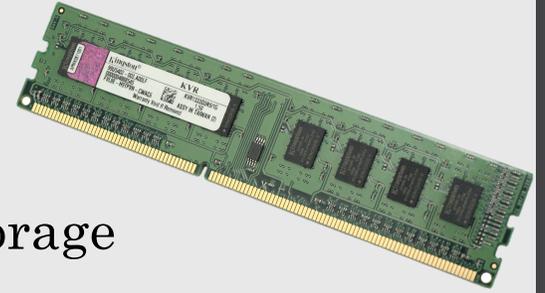
Parenthetical

- Least formal type of definition
- In-line definition within a sentence
- Used as clarification or brief explanation



Parenthetical Examples

- RAM (random access memory) is a form of computer data storage which stores frequently used program instructions
- “Cherenkov radiation is electromagnetic radiation emitted when a charged particle (such as an electron) passes through a dielectric medium at a speed greater than the phase velocity of light in that medium.” [3]
- Voltaire was imprisoned twice in the Bastille (French fortress), once in 1717 and a second time in 1726.



Sentence Definitions

- More formal
- Used to provide more information than parenthetical can offer.
- Can be used to create a “working” definition in a document.
- Standard pattern of subject, class, distinguishing feature used.

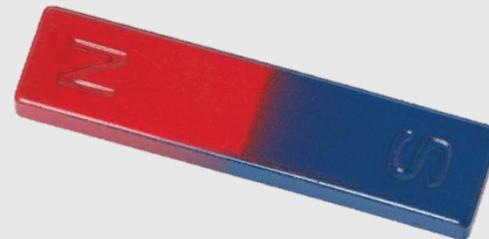
A comparator is a digital circuit used to compare two voltages.

The diagram illustrates the standard pattern of a sentence definition. It shows the sentence "A comparator is a digital circuit used to compare two voltages." with three brackets underneath. The first bracket is under "A comparator" and is labeled "Subject". The second bracket is under "a digital circuit" and is labeled "Class of object". The third bracket is under "used to compare two voltages." and is labeled "Differentiating feature".

Subject Class of object Differentiating feature

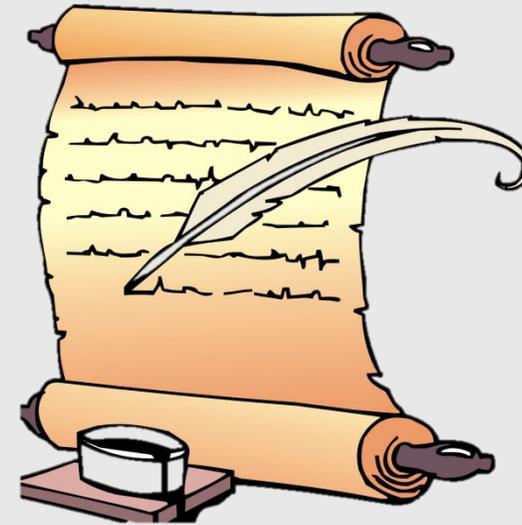
Sentence Definition Examples

- “A Bunsen burner is a small laboratory burner consisting of a vertical metal tube connected to a gas source” [2]
- “An electron microscope is a microscope that uses electrons rather than visible light to produce magnified images.” [2]
- A neodymium magnet is a permanent magnet made of a neodymium, boron, iron alloy.



Extended Definition

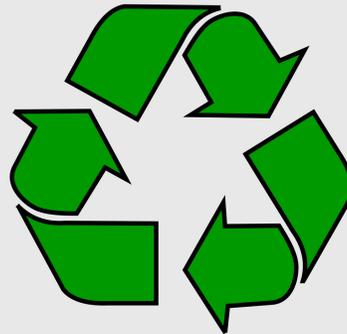
- Most formal
- Long, paragraph definition
- Allows for more complete understanding
- Very flexible structure



Common Errors

Cyclical
definitions

Vague
differentia



Summary

- Variety of definition applications
- Parenthetical used for short, unobtrusive clarification
- Sentence used for more detailed clarification
- Extended used for complex or abstract ideas

References

- [1] Definition | Definition, Merriam-Webster [online], Available: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/definition>
Accessed: Jan. 2 2017
- [2] M.H. Markel, *Technical Writing Situations and Strategies*, New York, USA, St. Martin's Press Inc., 1984, pp. 130-140.
- [3] Cherenkov Radiation, Wikipedia [online], Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherenkov_radiation
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