

# SOTL SNAPSHOT: GIVING CHOICES FOR DEFINITION ARGUMENTS

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Students in English Composition II write a definition argument for their first of three essays. Definition arguments focus on whether an example fits the definition of a given term. For example, “Cheerleading is a sport” takes an example, in this case being cheerleading, and asserts that it fits into a certain category, a sport. Definition arguments are common first-year writing assignments for English Composition students (Collins, n.d.). While students routinely demonstrated comprehension of the argument type in class discussions, it rarely translated to on-topic essays. Low success rates in students writing a definition argument led to the implementation of assigned definition topics, considerably increasing student comprehension and outcomes.

In an apparent contradiction to essay results, students routinely demonstrated their comprehension of definition arguments in other components of the class, particularly in forum discussions. A Classroom Assessment Technique (CAT) on whether a hot dog is a sandwich is often the most responded to thread in the entire class (Angelo & Cross, 1993). In those discussions, students competently and consistently demonstrate their ability to state and support a definition argument. Responses, although aided by instructor input, organically flow into discussions of what makes something a sandwich and whether hot dogs share those defining characteristics. This led to a question of why students demonstrated competence with the argument type in the forum context and not in their essays.

A comparison of the two situations showed the main difference was that the forum definition topic was provided to the students, whereas the essay topic was not. In the forum post, students immediately recognized what to discuss because the title was, “Definition Argument: Is a Hot Dog a Sandwich?” They immediately recognized the borderline case, which term to define, and that their responses must have taken a side and supported

an argument on whether the borderline example fit the definition. In contrast, the directions stated to “argue that a contested ‘case’ involving the sale, trade, or donation of human organs fits (or does not fit) within a given category” (Grand Canyon University, n.d.). The directions provided only vague guidance on what a contested case might be in the context of organ transplants, how to figure out what definition to apply to it, and how to determine whether it is something contested in the first place. Collins (n.d.) noted that English instructors should select specific topics and avoid anything too extensive. The directions for the assignment did not provide a topic or topics and only vaguely mentioned that it should relate to an issue related to organ transplants, which is an extensive topic. As a result, students too often mentioned feeling lost, which was confirmed by the essays received. They often wrote on general topics relating to transplants, but not in a definition argument format, with the most common topic being whether organ sales should be legal. To address this, students were given specific definition topics related to organ sales in the form of questions, drastically improving their ability to produce on-topic essays.

After requiring students to pick topic from a provided list of examples of definition arguments, essay outcomes immediately improve from well under 25% of received papers focusing on definition arguments to over 75% having the correct focus. The list of acceptable topics was posted in an announcement and in the discussion forums. Like in the forum, the topics were given in the form of a question, with the students understanding that their essay should answer that question. Some examples included, “Is a person selling an organ a donor? What is a donor?” and, “Are organs technically property? What is property?” By providing the topics in question format, like in the “Is a hot dog a sandwich?” example, students immediately understood their essay must answer that question

by defining the term and showing how the example fit or did not fit that definition.

By picking a topic from a list, students have a starting point that allows them to focus on research, thinking through the term's definition, and taking a stance on whether the definition fits the term. Going forward, consideration should be given to adjusting the assignment directions to include concrete examples of definition arguments for students to select from. A definition argument provided students a meaningful opportunity to demonstrate effective communication and critical thinking skills, assuming appropriate guidance is provided.

## References

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