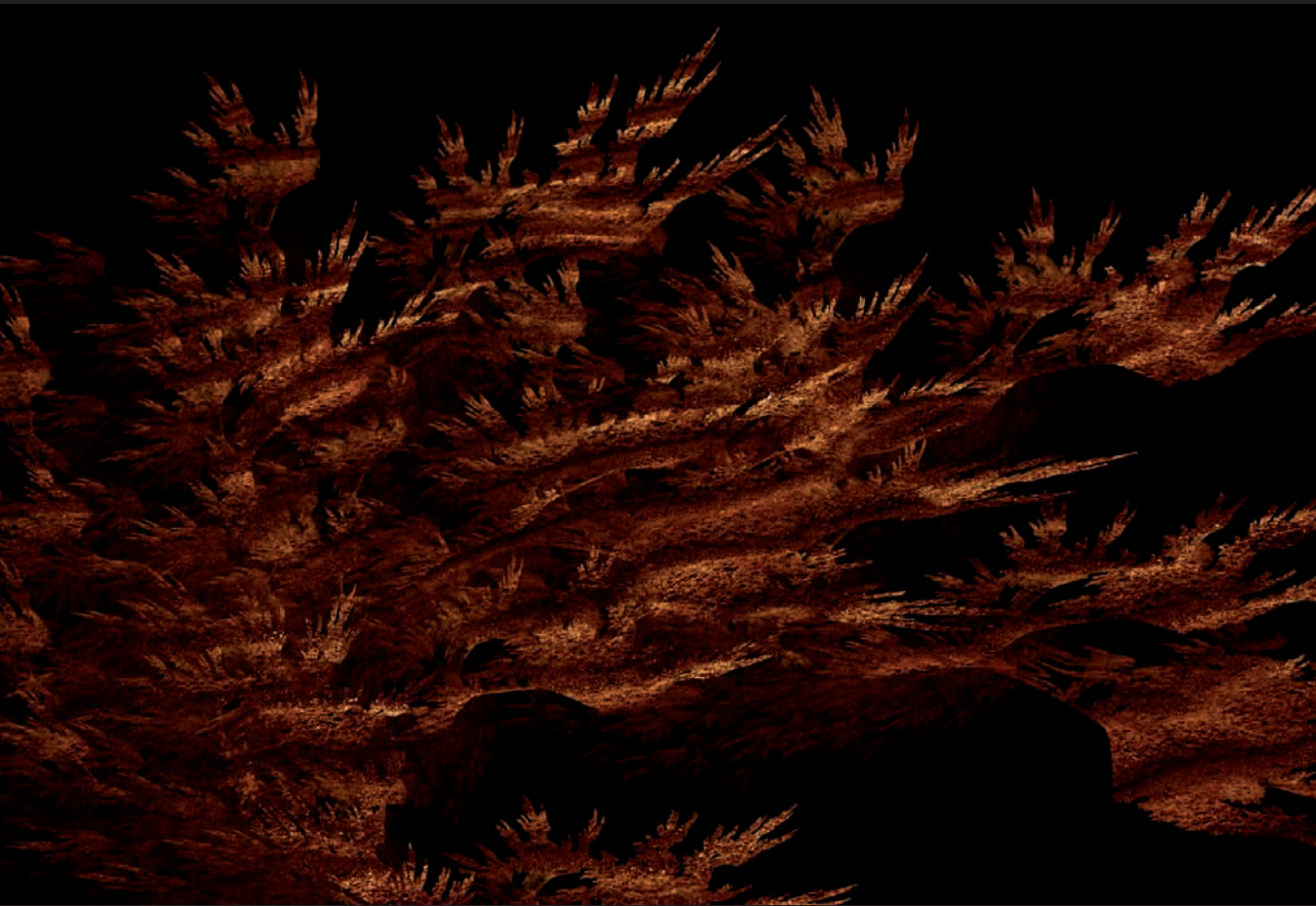


REASON TO WRITE



GINA L. VALLIS

The reason that the people who read our writing tend to see us as biased when we use words with these kinds of connotations is because, frankly, we usually tend to use those words because we *do* have a certain bias.

Such phrases can even be used to deliberately obscure what is actually being described. There is a term for the deliberate use of these kinds of phrases to persuade an audience, and it's the same in the academic world as in the real world. It's called *lying*—deliberately obscuring the truth of a thing by making it sound different than what it is. George Orwell points out a few of the following examples in his essay “Politics and the English Language”:

elimination of unreliable elements

Shooting people who oppose your political viewpoint

collateral damage

Bombing the school when you were aiming for the airbase

final solution

Genocide

transfer of populations

Removing a group of people from an area, against their will

These are obvious examples. However, some connotations are harder for us to spot, and can even indicate a bias we may not know that we have.

Glidge

Most abstract terms are tricky—they include such words such as *freedom*, *natural*, *human*, *love*, *smart*, *evil*, or *personality*. If a writer does not define these kinds of terms, the associative quality of words will simply act on their own to control the meaning conveyed. Why? For the same reason people climb mountains—because they can.

If one were to write: “It is *natural* for people to fear snakes,” what one could mean is that: “It is *understandable* for people to fear snakes,” or “It is *common* for people to fear snakes.” That is because “natural” and “understandable” and “common” are associated terms.

Yet despite what one might have meant, that is not what one has said. What one has said is that people are *biologically predisposed* to fear snakes. That is not a true statement. It is not “natural” to fear snakes—there are plenty of people who find snakes quite delightful creatures, and who study them, and even have them as pets.

To elaborate, here is the word “natural” used in a series of statements:

1. It is *natural* for poor people to commit crime.
2. Men and women can’t be friends. It’s not *natural*.
3. Religious people are more *naturally* moral than atheists.

There are a lot of things that a writer could mean by the word “natural” in these statements. The writer could mean:

1. Poor people might have more incentive to steal than wealthy people.
2. Cultural norms in the United States tend to treat close friendships between men and women as insincere, and secretly indicative of sexual desire.
3. People who have religious beliefs usually have a moral code that is clearly communicated to them from a pre-existing value system within that religion, and that is therefore more carefully defined than those who do not follow a religious system of belief.

However, until the writer clearly indicates that this was his or her meaning, what the writer has said is:

1. People who do not have money were born with the biological impulse to commit crime.
2. Men and women are born biologically incapable of forming friendships with one another.
3. People become religious because they are born with a biological predisposition toward a sense of morality that is missing in those who do not become religious.

Whatever your response to the second set of statements, the third set is much more difficult to defend, logically. Use of the word “natural” in order to cover a bias on the part of a writer or speaker is very common—but it is not “natural,” and, therefore, it is very much so avoidable.

Defining an abstract term forces the writer to figure out what, exactly, he or she is saying. Sometimes the writer does not even know what he or she means until he or she is forced to define a term. A lot of terms are “covers” for unrefined thinking, meaning simply, in general, positive, or negative. *Freedom* sounds good; *Oppression* sounds bad. *Democracy* sounds good; *Fascism* sounds bad. However, unless one defines the terms, one might as well use “good” or “bad,” instead.

Generalities

Defining terms addresses the tendency to generalize. We all do it. Generalization is a habit; it helps us to group things in our minds in comfortable ways.

It helps to imagine generalities as a kind of “default.” For example, if you grew up in the United States, and you were asked to quickly visualize a “police officer,” you would be more likely to visualize a person who is male, white, and in uniform. It’s not that we are sexist or racist, or that there are not female officers, or officers of color. It’s simply that we draw the “default” from the repetition of certain qualities within the images to which we are repeatedly exposed within social systems. There’s no getting away from the default; the problem is when we mistake it for something that refers to real people.

A default is a kind of generalization. Unconscious generalization inhibits critical thinking; it is a cognitive bias. It’s not just that it leads to the kind of thinking that creates unfair stereotypes (“Asians are smart”), but also that it creates a lack of precision in our thinking. In each case, the test is always: “What can I say that is true?”

1. Is the statement “Americans love football” true?

No.

Some Americans hate football, some love it, and some are indifferent.

2. Is the statement: “In the United States, football is a popular sport” true?

Yes. A sizeable portion of the citizenry shows an interest in playing, watching, discussing, betting upon, and/or emotionally investing in the game.

One of the ways that we generalize is the tendency to take our own way of understanding the world, and letting it cover everyone’s experiences. However, critical writing functions beyond the limitations of what a given writer has experienced, and is offered within the context of a larger world. Consider the following:

3. Is the statement: “Almost everyone uses the Internet” true?

To answer, here is a breakdown that illustrates a small picture of that larger world:

If The Whole World Were a Village with 100 People

60 would be “Asians”

[Presumably, those people residing on the Eastern side of the Caucasus—a mountain range—on the continent of Eurasia]

12 would be “Europeans” [Presumably, those people residing on the Western side of the Caucasus—a mountain range—on the continent of Eurasia, including islands, often referred to as “Caucasians”]

15 would be from America [Presumably, those residing on the land masses that compose the Americas]

Of those 15:

9 would be from Latin America and Caribbean

5 would be from North America, including the U.S./Canada

1 would be from Islands surrounding the Americas

13 would be from Africa

51 would be men

48 would be women

18 would be “white” ***[Whatever that means]***

82 would be [Whatever that means]
“non-white”

33 would be [Presumably, this would
Christian include all Christian
denominations]

67 would be [Presumably, this would
“non-Christian” include Muslims, Buddhists,
Jews, Pyrrhomists, Hindus,
as well as Atheists and
Agnostics, etc.]

90 would be malnourished

1 would be dying of starvation

1 would be dying of HIV

80 would live in substandard housing

EVER WONDERED?

Brackets, [which open and close like this], are different than parentheses, (which open and close like this).

Brackets indicate the interruption, into a quotation from an external source, of the writer’s voice. In other words, it is not a part of the original quotation, but something the writer has inserted into the original quotation.

In the above example, the brackets indicate this writer’s misgivings concerning the way in which the terms of this list are being defined.

67 would be unable to read

7 would have access to the Internet

89 would be heterosexual

11 would be “gay”

1 would have a college education.¹

So, if only an average of **7 out of 100** people has access to the Internet, is the statement: “Almost everyone has access to the internet,” true?

No.

What the writer probably means is that “Almost everyone *I know* has access to the Internet.”

In academic writing, statements must be explicit (the truth is out in the open) as opposed to being implicit (the meaning is indirect). In another kind of writing, you can get away with such generalities. In academic writing, you have an obligation to clarify the meanings of the terms you are using by making their definitions clear. The failure to define terms generates mushy thinking, because they paint people and situations in broad, sloppy strokes.

You may have noticed, in this chapter, that “word” and “term” have been used interchangeably. To define the difference, a *term* is a word for which the definition is in question. You will not find this distinction in the dictionary; it is a distinction that the writer of this text has chosen, in order to make a point. In doing so, the writer *stipulates* the meaning.

DEFINITION

stipulate: to control the conditions of something, or to have authority over the rules that govern it.

¹ I have read numerous versions of this breakdown that offer a variety of statistics, but they all fall into basically the same range. I have averaged them across sources, including the original “State of the Village Report” from the Donella Meadows Archive (http://www.sustainer.org/dhm_archive/index.php?display_article=vn33villageed), copyright Sustainability Institute, Vermont; http://www.100people.org/statistics_detailed_statistics.php; as well as various online and print sources that contest and revise the numbers. Statistically, the original study is based upon an unrepresentative sampling of 1,000 people. However, the interest that it generated and the subsequent duplication and reduplication of the study in various forums means that it likely represent a the general state of things. The problem becomes the matter of reduction: Who is being left out? Doesn’t anybody live in Australia?

5 REVIEW

CHAPTER REVIEW

The information to take from this chapter is that writing involves language, and language functions in a complex manner involving more than the denotative quality of words as they are found in a dictionary.

This requires awareness, as a writer, of the quality of language that can distort meaning when terms remained undefined. Since this distortion of meaning creates cognitive bias, critical thinking involves remaining conscious, while writing, of elements of language that can generate this distortion of meaning. These elements include emotional language, unintended connotation, undefined abstract terms and phrases, and generalities.

GRAMMAR REVIEW

e.g. and i.e.

Used to list an example that refers to the statement that is made. The difference between the two is that “e.g.” means, basically, “for example.” Use it to list one or more items when there is a range of examples you could have given, as in: “There were toys in the room (e.g.: blocks, crayons, and picture books).” In contrast, “i.e.” is used when you mean “this example, specifically,” as in “The toys were for young children (i.e.: two—five years old).”

Brackets

Brackets indicate the interruption, into a quotation from an external source, of the writer’s voice. In other words, it is not a part of the original quotation, but something the writer has inserted into the original quotation.

There may be a variety of reasons to do this. If a writer were to quote from a source in which there was a grammatical error, and the writer wanted to indicate that it was not his or her goof-up, but in the original source, the writer would use brackets, as in “He was bigger then [sic] her.” Since “then” should be “than,” the term “sic,” in brackets, indicates that the writer is aware that the word is being used incorrectly.

VOCABULARY REVIEW

vernacular

Language spoken in a given country or region, as it is used, whether “proper” or not

dialect

A variety of distinct forms of a language spoken within a given country or region. For example, what is commonly called “Standard English,” or sometimes “GA,” is the dialect of newscasters, and commonly used in formal education. It comes from a regional Midland dialect. The Midland dialect is one of three to eight major dialects spoken in the United States, (there is some disagreement on this), which are in turn broken into various **sub-dialects**

stipulate

To control the conditions of something, or have authority over the rules that govern it. As long as it is a plausible definition, one is free to stipulate the meaning of a word for the purpose of clarifying one’s meaning within one’s own writing. In academic writing, one can even create a new word (such as **adjectivitis**, which you will not find in the dictionary), on the condition that: one is willing to explain one’s definition; that the creation of the word is needful (it does not yet exist in another form); that its creation serves a purpose. Such a term is called a **neologism**: that which results from the creation of a new word or expression

6 WAYS TO DEFINE

On the following pages, you will find:

1. Types of Definitions and Examples.
2. **Step 3 Ways to Define Guide** for use in defining the terms of your critical question in a manner that stipulates a clear definition of what you mean by that word, in the context of your own writing.
3. Example completed Definition Guide.

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS/EXAMPLES

WAY TO DEFINE	EXAMPLE	SAMPLE WORD
<p>DICTIONARY</p> <p>Defining a term by all possible meanings of a term, in general</p>	<p>The Oxford English Dictionary defines tramp as</p> <p>1) v. walk heavily or noisily, or for a long distance;</p> <p>2) n. a person who travels in search of work, a vagrant;</p> <p>3) n. the sound of footsteps;</p> <p>4) n. a long way, on foot;</p> <p>5) adj. a cargo boat that travels on an unfixed route (tramp steamer);</p> <p>6) n. a promiscuous woman;</p> <p>7) n. a metal plate protecting the sole of a boot.</p>	<p>JUSTICE</p> <p>justice: 1) fairness or reasonableness, especially in the ways people are treated or decisions made;</p> <p>2) the legal system, or the act of applying or upholding the law; 3) validity in law;</p> <p>4) sound or good reason;</p> <p>5) a judge, especially in a high court.</p>
<p>EXEMPLAR</p> <p>Defining a term by example</p>	<p>bird: a canary, hawk, or pidgeon</p>	<p>justice: conviction of a guilty person</p>
<p>ANALOGICAL</p> <p>Defining a term by comparison to something else</p>	<p>child: a blank page</p>	<p>justice: a balancing of the scales</p>
<p>SYNONYMOUS</p> <p>Defining a term by other words</p>	<p>wisdom: clever, smart</p>	<p>justice: fairness</p>

WAY TO DEFINE	EXAMPLE	SAMPLE WORD
<p>NEGATIVE</p> <p>Defining a term by what it not</p>	<p>apple: an apple is not an orange, a peach, or a banana</p>	<p>justice is not revenge, because revenge is personal</p>
<p>ETYMOLOGICAL</p> <p>Defining a word by its roots</p>	<p>deadline: a line at a prison past which, if an inmate were to step, the inmate would be shot</p>	<p>justice: purity; righteousness</p>
<p>STIPULATIVE</p> <p>Defining a term by stipulating its meaning in a way that is clear within the context of your writing.</p>	<p>“For the purpose of this essay, <i>dream</i> means the way in which an individual imagines, and may take action toward, a desirable future.”</p>	<p>“For the purpose this essay, <i>justice</i> means to establish the motive behind an illegal act, and to determine a consequence based upon that motive.”</p>

STEP 3: WAYS TO DEFINE GUIDE

STEP 1

Write your question, as it is now.

STEP 2

Delimitation of Question.

Can I, or do I want to, answer for all time? Yes/No

Rephrase _____

Can I, or do I want to, answer for all places? Yes/No

Rephrase _____

Can I, or do I want to, answer for all people? Yes/No

Rephrase _____

Can I, or do I want to, answer for all instances? Yes/No

Rephrase _____

STEP 3

Rewrite your question with the rephrased delimitation.

STEP 4

List any terms whose definition are in question, especially those that are abstract. Treat all *phrases* as *terms* (e.g.: “fashion sense” would be treated as a whole term, instead of defining “fashion” and “sense,” separately).

STEP 5

Define each term as each type of definition, except for *Dictionary*.

Exemplar: Define all terms by giving an example of that term.

Analogical Define all terms by analogy: by comparison to something else

Synonymous Define all terms through words that are similar in meaning.

Negative Define all terms by what they are not.

Etymological Define all term by an origin.

Stipulative *Stipulate* your terms by defining what you mean by them, as clearly as possible, within the context of your question.

STEP 6

Rewrite your critical question, in which you stipulate each of your terms/phrases. The result will be lengthy, but will situate your question both within a context, and to help you, as writer, to have a solid sense of what, exactly, you are asking.