

*Task Twenty-one*

Mark these writing characteristics as *H* (helpful for positioning) or *U* (unhelpful for positioning). In some cases there is room for disagreement.

1. Choosing any writing style that you like
2. Expressing enthusiasm and commitment
3. Writing in a formal academic style
4. Making broad generalizations
5. Being cautious about generalizations
6. Using references
7. Writing only from experience and personal knowledge
8. **Reevaluating** the work of authorities in the field

Can you explain your choices?

## *Unit Two*

### *Writing General-Specific Texts*

Each remaining unit in this book deals with a particular kind of writing task. We have chosen to begin with a type of text sometimes called general-specific (GS) because its structure involves general-to-specific movement. There are three reasons to begin with GS texts. They are quite common in graduate student writing, they are comparatively simple, and they are often used as introductions for longer pieces of writing. You may need to produce a GS text for

- a. an answer to an examination question,
- b. an opening paragraph of an assignment,\* or
- c. a background (or scene-setting) paragraph to an analysis or discussion.\*

GS texts usually begin with *one* of the following:

- a. a short or extended definition,
- b. a contrastive or comparative definition, or
- c. a generalization or purpose statement.

As their name implies, GS texts move from broad statements to narrower ones. However, they often widen out again in the final sentence. The shape is similar to that of a glass or cup (see fig. 5).

General statement

More specific  
detail

Specific  
detail

Broader statement

Fig. 5. Shape of GS texts

\*Both *b* and *c* may also take the form of a descriptive summary (see Unit Five).

*Task One*

Here is a short example of a GS text. Read the text and answer the questions that follow. Sentence numbers have been added here (and in subsequent texts) for ease of reference.

*Writing*

Writing is a complex sociocognitive process involving the construction of recorded messages on paper or on some other material, and, more recently, on a computer screen. <sup>2</sup>The skills needed to write range from making the appropriate graphic marks, through utilizing the resources of the chosen language, to anticipating the reactions of the intended readers. <sup>3</sup>The first skill area involves acquiring a writing system, which may be alphabetic (as in European languages) or nonalphabetic (as in many Asian languages). <sup>4</sup>The second skill area requires selecting the appropriate grammar and vocabulary to form acceptable sentences and then arranging them in paragraphs. <sup>5</sup>Third, writing involves thinking about the purpose of the text to be composed and about its possible effects on the intended readership. <sup>6</sup>One important aspect of this last feature is the choice of a suitable style. <sup>7</sup>Because of these characteristics, writing is not an innate natural ability like speaking but has to be acquired through years of training or schooling.

1. The "shape" of this passage is something like this. Complete the diagram.
  - 1)
  - 2) Main skills involved
  - 3) Skill area 1 \_\_\_\_\_
  - 4) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 5) Skill area 3 \_\_\_\_\_
  - fi) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 7) Learning to write

2. The author of this passage has decided it is too short. Here are three additional statements. Where would you place them?
  - a. Although writing systems have been in existence for about 5,000 years, even today only a minority of the world's population knows how to write.
  - b. Mandarin, for example, uses an ideograph system that is particularly difficult to learn.
  - c. Because of its complexity, the study of writing has become a multidisciplinary activity.

The GS *Writing* passage could have been a short answer to an in-class exam, perhaps in English education or psychology. The exam question could have been:

Outline briefly the main characteristics of two of the following. Write seven to ten sentences.

1. Writing
2. Nonverbal communication
3. **Speech**

Alternatively, the passage on writing could also have been the *opening* paragraph to a longer **assignment**—**perhaps** one asking the student to analyze some experimental data or to assess the current state of research.

As in many GS texts, the "Writing" passage began with a definition. Definitions are a common way of getting started; they are "hooks" from which GS paragraphs can be hung. Such paragraphs typically open with full-sentence definitions. Textbooks, in contrast, often introduce the definitional information as a minor part of the sentence, as in the following example.

The majority of corporate profits, or *earnings after all the operating expenses have been deducted*, are subject to tax by the government.

Textbook definitional information is used to clarify terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader. However, this is not your task, since your audience is already familiar with the terms and expects you to write a text that *demonstrates* your understanding of complex concepts.

In the next part of this unit, we will highlight certain aspects of the structure of these key definitional sentences. Then we will consider more extended definitions, contrastive definitions (e.g., organic versus inorganic chemistry), and comparative definitions (i.e., discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of competing definitions).

## Sentence Definitions

Let us start by looking at sentence definitions. A sentence definition is often a useful starting point for a GS paragraph. In a formal sentence definition, such as the examples that follow, the term being defined is first assigned to a class or group to which it belongs and then distinguished from other terms in the class.

A sole proprietorship is a business which is owned and operated by one individual for personal profit.

To what class does the sole proprietorship belong? How is it different from other members of the class? How would you define a partnership?

A star is a celestial body that shines by itself and whose source of energy is nuclear fusion occurring in its core.

To what class does a star belong? Can you think of other celestial bodies? How is a star different from these?

Annealing is a metalworking process in which a material is subjected to elevated temperatures for a period of time to cause structural or electrical changes in its properties.

To what class does annealing belong? How is it different from other members of the class, such as hammering or welding?

Notice that each of these definitions is completed by some form of restrictive clause and has the structure shown here.

(A)	term	is (a)	class	<i>wh-word</i> *	specific detail
A	solar cell	is a	device	which that	converts the energy of sunlight into electric energy.

### Language Focus: The Grammar of Definitions

Notice the use of the indefinite articles *a* and *an* in the first part of the definitions. (For a more complete discussion of articles, see Appendix One.)

A sole proprietorship is a business . . .

Annealing is a metalworking process . . .

A star is a celestial body . . .

Writing is a sociocognitive process . . .

In most definitions, the indefinite article is used before both the term and the class. The indefinite article before the class indicates that you are classifying a term, as you do in a definition. The indefinite article before the term conveys the meaning that any representative of this term will fit the assigned class. This use of the indefinite article or the absence of an initial article signals a definition. (As you know, *a* is used for countable nouns, but no article is used before uncountable nouns.)

You may ask why *the* is not used in a formal sentence definition. Take a look at the following sentences.

- A disinfectant is *an* agent capable of destroying disease-causing microorganisms.
- A disinfectant is *the* agent capable of destroying disease-causing micro-organisms.

\*Although the *Chicago Manual of Style* and other style manuals recommend using *that* instead of *which* in restrictive relative clauses, research shows that *which* continues to be used in definition statements. Therefore, we have used both *which* and *that* in the sample definitions presented in this unit.

Now consider the sentence definitions in set *a*.

- a.1. A solar cell is a device that converts the energy of sunlight into electric energy.
2. A foundation is a base on which a structure can be built.

and their less academic counterparts in set *b*.

- b.1. A solar cell is something that changes sunlight into electricity.
2. A foundation is a base a structure can be built *on*.

The sentences in set *b* are perfectly acceptable in spoken English or E-mail. However, they would not be the most effective means of establishing yourself in your academic field. In *b.1*, for instance, *something* is both too broad and informal, and the verb consists of a verb + preposition combination (mentioned in Unit One as something generally to be avoided in academic writing). In *b.2*, the placement of the preposition at the end of the sentence may be considered "wrong" by those who believe that an academic English sentence should never end with a preposition. While it is valuable to understand and acquire such structures for personal use, for example, in E-mail messages, they should be avoided in academic writing (see Appendix Three).

Here are two final pieces of advice about writing formal definitions. Avoid using any form of your term in the definition. Using the term itself in the definition can result in a circular definition and is likely to be noted as such by your audience.

Erosion is a process during which the surface of the earth  
*erodes*. →

Erosion is a process during which the surface of the earth is degraded by the effects of the atmosphere, weather, and human activity.

Finally, avoid using *when* and *where* in definitions. These are less appropriate for a formal definition.

Pollution is when the environment becomes contaminated as a result of human activity. →

Pollution is a form of environmental contamination resulting from human activity.

A fault is where there is a fracture in the earth's crust and the rock on one side of the fracture moves in relation to the rock on the other side. →

A fault is a fracture in the earth's crust in which the rock on one side of the fracture moves in relation to the rock on the other side.

### Task Six

Now write a one-sentence definition for two of the following terms and for at least one term from your own field. Make sure you provide enough specific detail to distinguish your term from other members in its class.

a dormitory  
a bridge  
a plane

a computer virus  
a conductor

a carcinogen  
a market

Exchange and discuss your definitions with a partner.

## Extended Definitions

So far we have only dealt with sentence definitions. In some cases, one sentence may be enough before continuing with your GS passage (as with the text on writing at the beginning of this unit). However, in others, it may be relevant and important to expand your definition. In this way you can demonstrate your knowledge of a concept more fully. An extended definition usually begins with a *general*, one-sentence definition and then becomes more *specific* as additional details are provided. There may be a need to display one or more of the following.

An analysis of components (if you are defining an object)

A microscope is an optical instrument with which the apparent size of an object can be enhanced. A simple microscope consists

of a double convex lens and a magnifying glass. A compound microscope, on the other hand, will contain more than one of each of these lenses, which are situated at the ends of a cylinder.

### Examples

Pollution is a form of environmental contamination resulting from human activity. Some common forms of pollution are wastes from the burning of fossil fuels and sewage running into rivers. Even litter and excessive noise can be considered forms of pollution because of the impact they can have on the environment.

### A sense of historical change and development

Perspective is a technique in art that is used to represent three-dimensional objects and depth relationships on a flat surface. Modern linear perspective (which involves making objects seem smaller the more distant they are from the observer) was probably first used in the 1400s by the artist Masaccio and the architects Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti in Florence, Italy. Before this time, artists paid little attention to realistic perspective. In recent decades, many modern artists have returned to the practices of early artists and have abandoned realistic perspective.

### A knowledge of applications

An acrylic plastic is a polymer which can take a high polish, is clear and transparent, and can be shaped while hot. Because of these and other characteristics, acrylic plastic is used in situations where glass is not suitable or desirable, for instance, in certain types of windshields.

An extended definition may also include information regarding operating principles or causes and effects. A description of operating principles is also known as a process analysis. A process analysis has some unique characteristics, which will be discussed in greater

detail in Unit Three. Extended definitions may also include information about many other features, such as rarity and cost.

You can even go beyond the type of specific detail just described and display your breadth of understanding by discussing problems, exceptions, and future predictions.

An awareness of problems with or exceptions to the general definition.

Lateralization is a developmental process during which the two sides of the brain become specialized for different functions. As a child develops, the two sides of the brain become asymmetric in that each side controls different abilities. Language, for instance, is controlled by the left side of the brain, and certain types of pattern recognition by the right. However, there is some disagreement as to when this specialization is complete. Some researchers believe the process is not complete until puberty, while others maintain that the brain is lateralized by age five.

### Future predictions

A compact disc (CD) is an optical storage medium onto which information has been recorded digitally. In a CD recording of sound, sound waves are converted into digital numbers and inscribed on the disc. The digital data on the disc is read by a laser beam, thus eliminating any form of mechanical friction that could distort sound quality. CDs can also be used to store images as well as information. As optical data storage techniques improve, CD technology will become more widespread and may someday entirely replace magnetic storage.

Notice in the above definition that the full name of the term *compact disc* is given before introducing and using the acronym (CD).

### Task Seven

Now read the following extended definition and answer the questions that follow.

<sup>1</sup>**Navigation** is a process by which means of transport can be guided to their destination when the route has few or no landmarks. <sup>2</sup>**Some** of the earliest navigators were sailors, who steered their ships first by the stars, then with a compass, and later with more complicated instruments that measured the position of the sun. <sup>3</sup>**We** are reminded of this by the fact that the word *navigation* comes from the Latin word for "ship." <sup>4</sup>**However**, the history and importance of navigation changed radically in the 20th century with the development of aircraft and missiles, which fly in three dimensions. <sup>5</sup>**Today**, both ships and aircraft rely heavily on computerized navigational systems that can provide a continuous, immediate, and accurate report of position.

(Benny Bechor, student, minor editing)

1. What type of information is included in each of the sentences in the definition?
2. How is the passage organized?
3. What tenses are used for which sentences? Why?
4. Sentence 3 begins with *we*. Is this appropriate?

Notice how the paragraph moves from a very general statement at the beginning to specific details, then "widens out" again in the final sentence to describe the current status of navigation. This pattern is quite common in paragraphs of this type.

### Task Eight

Here are the sentences of a GS passage on an unusual but interesting topic. Work with a partner to put them back in the correct order. Write *1* next to the first sentence, *2* next to the second, and so on.

#### Palindromes

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. The term itself comes from the ancient Greek word *palindromos* meaning "running back again."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Another good and more recent example is "If I had a Hi-Fi."

- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Some very common English words are palindromes, such as *pop*, *dad*, and *noon*.
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. A palindrome is a word or phrase that results in the same sequence of letters no matter whether it is read from left to right or from right to left.
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. One of the classic long palindromes is "A man, a plan, a canal, Panama."
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. Long palindromes are very hard to construct, and some word puzzlers spend immense amounts of time trying to produce good examples.

### Task Nine

1. Write an extended definition of a term in your field of study as if you were taking an examination. You will have 10 to 15 minutes.
2. For homework, write an extended definition of another term in your field of study. Take as long as you like!

## Contrastive Definitions

So far, we have concentrated on developing a text starting from the definition of a single term. Often, however, you may be asked to display your knowledge about two (or more) related terms. Consider, for example, the following pairs.

- a. An optical and an electron microscope
- b. Pollution and adulteration
- c. Writing and copying
- d.** An acrylic and a polyester
- e. Annealing and welding
- f. A compact disc and magnetic tape
- g. A good-news and bad-news letter
- h. A star and a planet
- i. Formal and informal English

If you were asked in an in-class examination to explain the differences between the members of each pair, how many could you do?