

Definitions; taking the initiative

DEFINITIONS

Many students state definitions in an imprecise way. Below are some tips to help you do better.

1. Avoid the imprecise use of terms like “when” and “where.”

For instance, do not say:

A *circle* is when all the points on a plane are equidistant from a given point.

A *conference* is where people get together to discuss a topic.

The problem is that “when” refers to a time, but a circle is not a time; and “where” refers to a place, but a conference is not a place. Instead say:

A *circle* is the set of all points on a plane that are equidistant from a given point.

A *conference* is a gathering of people to discuss a topic.

2. As a default, use “is” or “are” to connect a term with its definition.

For instance, do not say:

Transparency means that you can’t directly attend to an experience.

We will see a better option in a moment.

3. Sometimes it is easiest to define a term by embedding it in a larger phrase.

For instance, it is very hard to complete this sentence:

Transparency is ____.

So you might instead say this:

For an experience to be *transparent* is for a subject to be unable to attend to that experience directly.

4. For the sake of signposting, always italicize a term when you define it (as I have done in all of the examples above). Students forget to do this surprisingly often!

TAKING THE INITIATIVE

If you are like me, then you have some goals that are very important to you. Before you continue reading, jot down three of these (which need not be academic):

1.

2.

3.

Most people are very capable of making progress towards their goals *when others give them opportunities to do so*. But I would like to invite you to *take the initiative*: to make opportunities, academic and otherwise, *for yourself*. Let me give you a brief example of what this might look like.

Recently, I took a class in improv comedy and realized that it was possible to be much funnier than I actually was. So I resolved to practice the skill of being funny. I set myself the following exercise: I would watch comedies on Netflix, pausing whenever I thought a character might make a joke. I would then write down two or three punchlines of my own before restarting the show. Finally, I would compare my lines to the (usually much funnier) lines from the show, and I would see what I could learn from that. I did this exercise several times a week for months. And, though I still have a long way to go, I have already seen clear benefits in my daily life.

The point is that no one designed the exercise for me. *I designed it for myself, to achieve a goal that was important to me.*

I know that all of you are exceptional at learning *when your instructors tell you how*. But many of you stop there. I invite you to press forward! If there is something that you do not understand, *ask*. If your instructor forgets to post an assignment, *email them*. If you want to achieve something, *figure out how*. In doing so, you will seize control of your own life.

I suspect that the largest obstacle to this is fear. When you first consider how to make progress towards your goals, you may have no idea what to do. That is a scary feeling! But I encourage you to embrace your fear. You are allowed to feel it – but there is no reason to let it stop you. Just ask yourself how to take one very small step forward, and take that step.

In light of this, jot down a first step that you can take to fulfill each of the three goals that you identified above. It is fine if this first step is a very small one that would take only a few minutes to actually carry out.

First step towards 1:

First step towards 2:

First step towards 3: