Defining Terms

In academic work students are often expected to give definitions of key words and phrases in order to demonstrate to their tutors that they understand these terms clearly.

When presenting, it is a good practice to start by defining the terms we are going to use in our talk.

**Simple three-part definitions**:

**A is a B that Cs**

**A –** the term to be defined

**B** – the class / category that includes A

**C** – the characteristic(s) that distinguish(es) A form other examples of B

**Some examples:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **A** | **B** | **C** |
| A university is | an institution | where knowledge is produced and passed on to others |
| Social Economics may be defined as | the branch of economics | [which is] concerned with the measurement, causes, and consequences of social problems. |
| Research may be defined as | a systematic process | which consists of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem, or hypothesis, (2) data, and (3) analysis and interpretation of data. |
| Braille is | a system | of touch reading and writing for blind people in which raised dots on paper represent the letters of the alphabet. |
| A valve is | a device | used to halt the flow of a liquid or gas. |

**Important notes:**

* + A formal definition should be structured as a complete sentence, containing a subject and a verb.
  + Don’t include the term being defined in the definition
  + Avoid classes/categories which are too broad (e.g., a thing, somebody)
  + **A** and **B** should agree in terms of *part of speech*
  + A singular countable noun should be preceded by *an article* (a / an / the)
  + The differentiating characteristic (**C**) are expressed using *a relative clause* or *a reduced relative clause* (*to be elaborated in the PPT*).

**In ‘C’ we might choose to answer some of the following questions:**

* + What are **A**’s characteristics?
  + What is it made of?
  + How does it function?
  + What is its purpose?
  + Where is it found?
  + Where or how is it used?
  + Who discovered or invented it?

[**Introductory phrases**](http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/writing-definitions/) (optional)

The term ‘X’ was first used by …  
The term ‘X’ can be traced back to …  
Previous studies mostly defined X as …  
The term ‘X’ was introduced by Smith in her …  
Historically, the term ‘X’ has been used to describe …  
It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by …  
This shows a need to be explicit about exactly what is meant by the word ‘X’.