**LC-1114**

**Defining and Elaborating on Terms and Concepts**

**(adapted from the OEPP Instructor’s Manual)**

**A Quick Method**

The following is a method for quickly and succinctly defining terms. This method may be useful in academic writing, presentations, discussions, or answering questions. Here are some other typical situations:

* The audience has not been introduced to the term.
* The audience knows the term but are not familiar with how it is used in a particular field.
* The term is confusing and is often mixed up with another term (e.g. “turbulence” has a different meaning as academic jargon than it does in everyday usage)

A formal definition often has three parts:

1 2 3

The item you are defining A category to which The differentiation of the

it belongs item from all other

members of its class

“Kinetic energy” “is a type of energy” “that is related to

the motion of a

body.”

*More Examples:*

CRISPR (term) is a gene editing tool (category) that targets a desired location for gene addition or removal (distinction from others in category).

A bound morpheme (term) is a linguistic unit of meaning (category) that must be attached to a word (distinction from others in category).

**Six Ways of** **Elaborating on a Term**

A formal definition may be precise, but not everyone may always grasp the meaning immediately. To help your audience understand in more depth, the following section discusses some of those ways to elaborate on the meaning of a term.

1. Practical example: Give an example from common experiences. Use information the audience already knows to help them learn what they do now know. Try to choose examples that are creative and interesting.

“To understand what a *fulcrum* is, think of two children in a seesaw. As you know, children sit on the two ends of the long seesaw board. The point where the board touches the seesaw’s base is called the fulcrum.”

1. Personal example: Give an example from your own experience. Use a story or event from your own life to help others understand unfamiliar material. Research (Nelson 1989, 1992) has shown this to be a very effective method.

“To help you understand what *déjà vu* is, let me share a personal experience. One evening I was at a party talking to my supervisor’s wife, whom I had never met before. As I was listening to her speak, I knew exactly what she was going to say because I had dreamed it earlier. As I answered her, I felt compelled to repeat what I had said in the dream, just like an actor following a script. This is *déjà vu*, which means ‘seen before,’ a sense of being in a situation that is happening for the second time.”

1. Analogy: Make an analogy to some other concept that is commonly known. Think about a pattern, relationship, or function that is similar to the concept you are defining.

“The structure of an *atom* is like that of the solar system. Electrons orbit around a nucleus the same way that planets orbit around the sun.”

1. Comparison or contrast: Compare the term with a similar term or contrast it with an opposing term. Many terms have an opposite term or a similar term that differs in a specific way.

Similar: “*Nuclear fusion* is similar to *nuclear fission* because mass is converted to energy, but different because fusion involves the union of atomic nuclei and fission involves the splitting of atomic nuclei.”

Opposite: “*Parallel* lines can never intersect and *perpendicular* lines intersect at right angles.”

1. Word origin: Tell about the origin of the term. What language did it come from? Does it have a prefix or suffix that can help others understand its meaning? Is it an acronym (an abbreviation consisting of the first letters of several words)? Has the meaning of the term changed over time?

“*Prefix* comes from Latin. It has two parts: *pre*, which means ‘before,’ and *fix*, from *fixus*, the past participle of *figere*, ‘to attach.’ A prefix is a particle that we attach to the beginning of a word to modify the word’s meaning.”

“*Radar* is an acronym that stands for radio detecting and ranging. Radar is a device that uses echoes of radio waves to detect the presence or location of an object.”

1. Visual means: Provide a visual illustration or model of the term: a picture, drawing, diagram, or chart. Be sure to consider if illustrations or models from books need altering in some way to make them more understandable. Several of the examples of strategies listed above could include simple visual illustrations.

**Defining a Term or Concept: A Brief Example**

**Term:** morpheme

**Definition:** a word or part of a word; the smallest meaningful lexical unit of a language

**Word origins**: morph= shape eme = unit of linguistic analysis

**Example:** In English, we have many prefix morphemes: un-, de-, re- and suffix morphemes: -ing, -s, -ed, -able, -ness.

**Elaboration (Compare/contrast):** In English, many morphemes can be combined to form single written words which are sometimes quite long (ex: preparatory, unfortunately, nonprescription, antidisestablishmentarianism), while in some languages most written words are short and made up of only one or two morphemes.

**Elaboration (Practical example):** Because English is a morphemic language, it is easy to create new words by combining morphemes in new ways, and by creating new morphemes. For example: chocoholic. *-oholic* was not originally a morpheme, it was part of the word *alcoholic*, which is made up of 2 morphemes: *alcohol* and *ic.* Now *–oholic* has become a morpheme meaning “person addicted to (something),” and we have words such as *chocoholic* and *shopoholic*. Other recently coined words are: e-commerce, fanzine, reskill

\*\*