Definitions in Technical Writing

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Overview

1. Function and Importance of Definitions
2. Writing Situation
3. Three Main Types of Definitions
4. Common Errors
Definition of definition

1. \( a \): a statement expressing the essential nature of something

\( b \): a statement of the meaning of a word or word group or a sign or symbol <dictionary definitions>

\( c \): a product of defining

2. : the action or process of stating the meaning of a word or word group [1]
Why Define Anything?

- Increase reader understanding
- Elaborate on technical terms
- Improperly defined terms can have a negative impact
What Kind of Definition?

• Not all types of definitions work in all cases

• Consider your PURPOSE

• Definitions will depend on AUDIENCE

• Analogies can be helpful

“The PAUSE button is the brake pedal of the cassette deck” [2]
Types of Definitions

(Parenthetical)

The Sentence variety

Extended
Parenthetical

- Least formal type of definition
- In-line definition within a sentence
- Used as clarification or brief explanation
Parenthetical Examples

• RAM (random access memory) is a form of computer data storage which stores frequently used program instructions.

• “Cherenkov radiation is electromagnetic radiation emitted when a charged particle (such as an electron) passes through a dielectric medium at a speed greater than the phase velocity of light in that medium.” [3]

• Voltaire was imprisoned twice in the Bastille (French fortress), once in 1717 and a second time in 1726.
Sentence Definitions

• More formal

• Used to provide more information than parenthetical can offer.

• Can be used to create a “working” definition in a document.

• Standard pattern of subject, class, distinguishing feature used.

A comparator is a digital circuit used to compare two voltages.

Subject       Class of object       Differentiating feature
Sentence Definition Examples

• “A Bunsen burner is a small laboratory burner consisting of a vertical metal tube connected to a gas source” [2]

• “An electron microscope is a microscope that uses electrons rather than visible light to produce magnified images.” [2]

• A neodymium magnet is a permanent magnet made of a neodymium, boron, iron alloy.
Extended Definition

• Most formal
• Long, paragraph definition
• Allows for more complete understanding
• Very flexible structure
Common Errors

Cyclical definitions

Vague differentia
Summary

- Variety of definition applications
- Parenthetical used for short, unobtrusive clarification
- Sentence used for more detailed clarification
- Extended used for complex or abstract ideas
References

