Understanding definitions, descriptions, and instructions

- A *definition* is typically a brief explanation of an item or concept using words and (sometimes) graphics.
- A *description* is typically a longer explanation, usually accompanied by graphics of an item, concept, or process.
- A set of *instructions* is a kind of process description intended to enable a person to carry out a task.
Definitions have two main uses:

• Definitions clarify a description of a new development or a new technology in a technical field. For instance, a zoologist who has discovered a new animal species names and defines it.

• Definitions help specialists communicate with less knowledgeable readers. A manual explaining how to tune up a car includes definitions of parts and tools.
Use these four strategies for defining terms for readers from another culture:

• Add a glossary: a list of definitions.
• Use Simplified English and easily recognizable terms in definitions.
• Pay close attention to key terms.
• Use visuals to help readers understand a term or concept.
There are three types of definitions:

- parenthetical
- sentence
- extended
Sentence definitions follow a typical pattern:

**Item = Category + Distinguishing Characteristics**
Follow these four guidelines for writing effective sentence definitions:

• Be specific in stating the category and the distinguishing characteristics.

• Don’t describe a specific item if you are defining a general class of items.

• Avoid writing circular definitions, that is, definitions that merely repeat the key words or the distinguishing characteristics of the item being defined in the category.

• Be sure the category contains a noun or a noun phrase rather than a phrase beginning with *when*, *what*, or *where*.
Eight techniques are used in extended definitions:

- graphics
- examples
- partition
- principle of operation
- comparison and contrast
- analogy
- negation
- etymology
Decide where to place the definition:

- in the text
- in a marginal gloss
- in a hyperlink
- in footnotes
- in a glossary
- in an appendix
Descriptions are verbal and visual representations of three items:

- objects
- mechanisms
- processes
Follow these four principles in writing descriptions:

• Clearly indicate the nature and scope of the description.
• Introduce the description clearly.
• Provide appropriate detail.
• Conclude the description.
Answer these five questions in introducing object or mechanism descriptions:

- What is the item?
- What is the function of the item?
- What does the item look like?
- How does the item work?
- What are the principal parts of the item?
Answer these six questions in introducing process descriptions:

• What is the process?
• What is the function of the process?
• Where and when does the process take place?
• Who or what performs the process?
• How does the process work?
• What are the principal steps of the process?
Provide appropriate detail in mechanism and object descriptions

• Choose an appropriate organizing principle:
  ▪ functional
  ▪ spatial

• Use graphics.
Provide appropriate detail in process descriptions

- Structure the step-by-step description chronologically.
- Explain causal relationships among steps.
- Use the present tense.
- Use graphics.
This is a process description based on a graphic.
Consider five questions in designing a set of instructions:

• What are your reader’s expectations?
• Do you need to create more than one set of instructions for different audiences?
• What languages should you use?
• Will readers be anxious about the information?
• Will the environment in which the instructions are read affect the document design?
Follow these two guidelines in designing clear, attractive pages:

- Create an open, airy design.
- Clearly relate the graphics to the text.
Create uncluttered, attractive page designs
Understand the four signal words in safety labels:

- **Danger**: an immediate and serious hazard that will likely be fatal
- **Warning**: potential for serious injury or death or serious damage to equipment
- **Caution**: potential for anything from moderate injury to serious equipment damage or destruction
- **Note**: a tip or suggestion to help readers carry out the procedure successfully
This is a typical safety label:
A typical set of instructions includes four elements:

- title
- general introduction
- step-by-step instructions
- conclusion
Effective titles:

• *How-to*. “How to Install the J112 Shock Absorbers”

• *Gerund*. “Installing the J112 Shock Absorber”

Ineffective titles: *Noun strings.*

“J112 Shock Absorber Installation Instructions”
Consider answering these six questions in drafting introductions for instructions:

• Who should carry out the task?
• Why should the reader carry out this task?
• When should the reader carry out this task?
• What safety measures or other concerns should the reader understand?
• What items will the reader need?
• How long will the task take?
Follow these six guidelines in drafting steps in instructions:

- Number the instructions.
- Present the right amount of information in each step.
- Use the imperative mood.
- Don’t confuse steps and feedback statements.
- Include graphics.
- Do not omit the articles (*a*, *an*, *the*) to save space.
Consider these three questions in writing for multicultural readers:

• In what language should the information be written?
• Do the text or graphics need to be modified?
• What is the reader’s technological infrastructure?