CHAPTER 6:

DEFINITION: BOUNDARIES THAT CREATE MEANING

This chapter emphasizes connections between critical thinking and definition. It will enable you to:

- Recognize how the definition of a concept depends on its *context*
- Use definition to enable reader and writer to share ideas
- Apply definition to limit the terms of an argument
- Integrate definition into other modes, especially process, comparison, and argument

Writing a definition requires moving beyond the dictionary. Most students think of a definition as something in a dictionary. Dictionary definitions are only a small part of what the term means. This chapter examines definition in a different way. By thinking about the definitions of ideas, concepts, methods, and theories, writers can build the kinds of documents valued by employers, professors, and others who need a bigger picture of a topic. A real definition builds on detailed information. It arranges the information to create a clear *context* for the topic. For example, someone reading about Mexico's manufacturing industry might find the phrase "supply chain," and want a definition of the concept. Readers might go to a web site, an article, a book, or some other source for help with the definition. They are *already* in a specific set of contexts: Mexico, manufacturing, international trade, and manufacturing processes. The reader *already* knows that something like delivering chain to a jeweler is not within the context of the meanings that will matter. The meaning of the phrase depends on the context within which it takes on its meaning. A genuine definition is something more complex than what a dictionary provides. A genuine

definition is a document that explains the contexts that give a concept its meaning. Such definitions are called *extended definitions.* The term *extended* emphasizes that such definitions go far beyond the thumbnail definitions of dictionaries.

KEY FEATURES OF DEFINITIONS

Contexts Create Definitions

Because context matters, definition is more than looking up a word in the dictionary. A definition has to discover relationships to other networks of words, other networks of ideas, and

> **Where in Your World Are Definitions?**
> _____
>
> Definition recognizes the blanks in the map of a topic by naming all the landmarks and territory that border it. By putting a topic into context, definition creates the opportunity to fill in the blank with related -- and new -- insights.
>
> *Definition in Daily Life*
> - Assessing whether a meeting place is public or private
> - Determining what your mother means when she says, "Don't be late."
>
> *Definition in School*
> - What a teacher means by a "passing performance" on a paper
> - An essay describing the right to free speech
>
> *Definition at Work*
> - Establishing a medical diagnosis
> - Setting criteria for performance reviews
> - Charging an arrested person with a specific crime

to networks of usage that shape its meaning. It is tempting to think that "definition" is about what words *really mean*. The mistake is easy to make because we have all endured those familiar moments when a speaker says, "According to the dictionary," and then we hear some definition that is supposed to tell us what something "really" is: our future, patriotism, success, criticism, marriage, or some other abstraction. Is there a better way? Yes, there is; it requires a clear understanding of how *contexts* create definitions.

Writers begin to build their definitions from within a framework of related pieces of information. The context for a concept, term, or idea can take two major forms:

verbal context: an idea, concept, or term has relationships to other ideas, concepts, or terms. This *surrounding* language is a network of relationships that shapes how readers understand a word. For example, if you are discussing your parents, and you say, "They are critical," your listener cannot tell if they are critically ill, continually criticizing your choices, or if they are analytical thinkers.

social context: race, class, gender, education, place of publication, geography, setting, author's credentials and other signs of the writer's credibility and audience create a persona whose authority readers accept or reject. If we are standing in a uranium refining factory, and we see a scientist in a lab coat come running from a room in terror and shouting, "It's critical," we would benefit from knowing that a "critical" nuclear reaction is a self-sustaining reaction like that of a nuclear bomb. "Critical" has yet another meaning in this social context of laboratories, professionals, and authority.

Two friends are sitting in a bar, talking to a friend and drinking small quantities of organic fruit juice. They start telling jokes, and one friend tells an old joke:

A man walks in a bar, and sits down. The bartender looks at the guy and sees that there's a frog growing out of his forehead. "My god!" the bartender says, "What happened?" "I don't know," says the frog, "it started out as a wart on my butt."

The joke relies on violating an expectation. The audience for the joke expects the man to answer, but instead the frog answers. It is a quick laugh that relies on a simple shift in the *context* for the final line: the context of the real world where people speak is replaced by the context of the joke world where frogs speak.

The joke also can be modified to become an attack on a specific person or group. It becomes an attack by replacing "a man" with the name of what is being targeted. The choice of what to put in place of "a man" depends on the values and beliefs of the teller. A Republican might name a Democrat; a Democrat might name a Republican. The modified joke adds another context, and it becomes funny not only because the frog speaks, but because it requires us to recognize the values of the joke teller. For example, imagine that the two friends had been talking about baseball. One is a rabid Yankees fan, and the other is a rabid Boston Red Sox fan. His joke gives his friend an opening, and the friend re-tells the joke:

> *A Red Sox fan walks in a bar, and sits down. The bartender looks at the guy and sees that there's a frog growing out of his forehead. . .*

The audience listening to the story will not even need to get to the end of the joke. The friend will see that the new version has two additional contexts: his previous experience with the general form of the joke; his knowledge about the loathing of Yankee and Red Sox fans for each other. The new joke keeps the old one (the shift of focus from the man to the frog), but by placing it within the context of baseball rivalries, it defines Boston's fans with an attack.

The revised joke defines something much larger than a single word, and it relies on several contexts to do its work. All definitions are created by contexts, and learning to identify how a context works is an important skill for both readers and writers.

Definition Maps the Boundaries of a Meaning

    1. General Features of Definition

        a. Definitions name the contexts within which an idea, concept, fact, or term has meaning.

        b. Definitions prepare readers for taking in complex evidence.

    2. Clarifying contexts provides focus to the definition

        a. By opening possibilities for new insights.

        b. By removing habitual, simplistic beliefs.

        c. By setting limits on ideas, concepts, or facts.

Definitions tend to use specific terms:

context	boundary	limit	connotation
denotation	network	negation	version
derivation	meaning	convergent	divergent
explicit	implicit	exclusions	limitations

Putting Definition to Work

Professional sports make it difficult to define terms such as *violence, assault, and criminality.* For example, a banker who slams a grandmother into a window will be jailed, but a hockey player can check an opponent into the glass without any legal risk. In 2005, the Vancouver Canuck's

Todd Bertuzzi punched Colorado's Steve Moore and broke his neck. The National Hockey League fined and suspended Bertuzzi, but when he was charged with the crime of "assault causing bodily harm," the league said that it "preferred that the [government] not take this action." Discuss the contexts that create definitions for illegal aggressive behavior in each case. Note their differences and their connections by filling out TEQ Sheets on the points raised during the discussion. Your discussion of the contexts should lead to a new and insightful *definition* of assault that discusses the way its various meanings tell us about something important.

USING DEFINITION FOR CRITICAL THINKING

Many students are frustrated by the term "critical thinking" because it seems vague. Too often, it comes without a clear sense of what to *do*. Creating a definition is what you *do* to think critically. Thus, it is often found as part of other modes such as narration, description, comparison, classification, and argument.

The process of creating a definition is a key part of critical thinking. As writers build definitions, they have two jobs. First, they have to survey the topic and discover related ideas, concepts, and terms. Their job is to accept that a complete review of the topic will involve the discovery of contradictions. Thus, the more complete the survey, the more likely it is that the writer will find inconsistencies among the related information. Second, writers have to make judgments about these related and inconsistent items. They will have to emphasize some things, ignore others, judge some unimportant, and infer ideas from the context. This means that they have to continually focus and re-focus their choices, because a careful definition requires insight and judgment. As they work to complete the definition, their thesis gradually emerges. As it emerges, it begins to further guide what is emphasized and what has been ignored. Making a claim is part of the critical thinking process.

Building a good definition requires a constant back-and-forth between the discoveries about contexts and the thesis that connects these discoveries. In extended definitions, the need to create a claim becomes obvious.

Definitions Reveal Differences

Definitions often become serious when we face contemporary issues. For example, terrorism is a serious political and moral issue. Terrorists kill others. People are arrested, imprisoned, and executed for terrorism. Thus, its definition is a life-and-death question not only for the victims of terrorist attacks, but also for anyone accused of terrorism. But those labeled as terrorists sometimes define themselves as soldiers with a just cause. They often name historical, ideological, religious, political, and economic *contexts* that justify their tactics. If you turn to the dictionary, you quickly discover the limits of its simple information: "the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims." Police officers, the FBI, military forces, and other legitimate organizations use force and intimidation. These are not considered terrorist organizations . . . by most U.S. citizens. To Americans, such organizations are part of the complicated relationship between liberty and social order. American history is often a story of its struggles with such issues: slavery, women's rights, and civil rights. Each involves definitions and the process of re-definition.

Turning to a dictionary does not help because the meaning of terrorism doesn't reside in the word; it resides in the context. Were the American revolutionaries who ambushed British troops terrorists? Were the Israeli Irgun operatives who blew up the King David hotel during their war of independence terrorists? Were the Al Qaida operatives who flew planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon terrorists? The term means too many things, and it has consequences that deserve careful thought. Definition is part of such careful thinking because it prevents us from oversimplifying complex issues. Thus, this issue will degenerate into name-calling unless someone (the writer) knows how to put the term *terrorism* into verbal and social contexts that lead to critical thinking. Without them, you are doomed to a good/bad, pro/con mentality.

Definition requires writers to choose the contexts that will create meaning. Choosing contexts is based on values, beliefs, knowledge, and insight. It is not a neutral process, and thus many writers worry that it is *only* a means of building a framework for existing beliefs. After all, definitions are built by including some contexts and excluding others. How can writers avoid misleading their readers? The answer is that both readers and writers have to cooperate. Each has to recognize that a good definition openly names its inclusions and exclusions. Each has to be named, and the reasons for those choices have to be clear. When writers make these choices visible, the reader participates in the creation of the definition. The definition provides key ideas, but also it leaves the definition open to insight. It becomes far more than an attempt to channel the readers' thinking into narrow pathways.

Putting Definition to Work

Many students are used to writing "pro/con" papers. Such papers often avoid critical thinking by using *only* the materials that support a single viewpoint. How can definitions help writers avoid such simplistic writing? For each of the following topics, list the contexts that help explain its meaning. For example, if you were going to define "torture," you might list "international definitions," "current American legal definitions," "history of American legal definitions," and "religious definitions." For the concepts below, list important contexts for their definition:

Citizenship	Academic Success	Just War
Copyright	Zero Tolerance	Piracy

Starting a definition is like finding a detailed map with a blank spot in its middle. The blank space may be empty, but the surrounding map is filled with details that can help understand the unmarked territory. You can begin by identifying rivers that probably extend into the blank area, project geographical features, carry on the routes of highways, and make other careful guesses that frame the blank with details that could fill it with insight. Such guesses are called *hypotheses*, and a good paper begins with a good hypothesis. You might note that *hypothesis* has two terms: *hypo* and *thesis*. You probably are familiar with the ideas of a thesis, but *hypo*, means "less than developed" or "under." A *hypothesis* is an underdeveloped thesis, one that needs development. Extended definitions begin the process of transforming a problem ("What's in that blank spot?") into a hypothesis, and then into a thesis.

Clues to Contexts: the dictionary and thesaurus

Extended definitions often start with bits of information taken from dictionaries and thesauruses. These sources provide historical information about terms and ideas that branch out to other topics. For example, if you use a dictionary to look up the term *piracy,* you might find this:

> **piracy** | ˈpīrəsē |
> noun
> the practice of attacking and robbing ships at sea.
> • a similar practice in other contexts, esp. hijacking *: air piracy.*
> • the unauthorized use or reproduction of another's work *: software piracy.*
> ORIGIN mid 16th cent.: via medieval Latin from Greek *pirateia*, from *peiratēs* (see
>
> **pirate**). [Oxford American Dictionary]

The word is a common one, but the definition seems to change. It begins as a term for robbing ships, is later applied to taking over airplanes, and then is applied to "the unauthorized use or reproduction" of another's work. The three examples raise a question: how is the *use* or *reproduction* of someone's work the same as robbing a ship or taking over an airplane? Did the term first refer to taking concrete objects and then gradually applied to taking ideas? Is there a

difference between taking an object and using an idea? This history of the word helps create an extended definition. Turning to a thesaurus can discover other clues.

Some thesauruses do not include *piracy*, but looking up a related term, *pirate*, gives this result:

> **pirate**
> noun
> **1** *pirates boarded the ship*: freebooter, marauder, raider; historical privateer; *archaic* buccaneer, corsair.
> **2** *software pirates*: copyright infringer, plagiarist, plagiarizer.
> verb
> *designers may pirate good ideas*: steal, plagiarize, poach, copy illegally, reproduce illegally, appropriate, bootleg; *informal* crib, lift, rip off, pinch. [Oxford American Dictionary]

The thesaurus entry makes the same transition from stealing "things" to using ideas, making copies, and plagiarizing. At this point, we can say that the context for the idea of piracy/pirate has branched out. It seems to be tied to concepts such as plagiarism, copyright, and theft. The next task would be to determine when the shift from stealing "things" morphed into these other issues. A good definition would require simple historical work.

Expanding the Context to Include More Detailed Knowledge

The dictionary and thesaurus open the definition to related topics: copyright, plagiarism, ownership, and bootlegging. These topics frame the meaning of *piracy* in contemporary life. Each term leads to further reading. For example, you have already looked at the issue of plagiarism in Chapter 1. A good writer would turn to that chapter for readings, questions, terms, and concepts that might be used in defining piracy. Most students will also turn to general search engines, scholarly databases, general library databases and other sources that further clarify the contexts that surround the idea of piracy.

Naming the Contexts

Once you begin discovering the contexts that shape the meaning of a concept, you need to note three key aspects of the knowledge: domain, history, and actor. These three aspects of information clarify the boundaries of the topic.

   domain: a domain is an area of expertise with a clearly defined set of interests and methods.
          For example, psychology is a domain, chemistry is a domain, mathematics is a

domain, and so forth. The departments in colleges represent major domains of knowledge. Many ideas, concepts, and terms have specific meanings within a domain. Specialists understand that knowledge is constructed *inside* of a domain.

history: concepts have a history, and an extended definition usually recognizes the important changes in their meaning. When you recognize the changes in the meaning of a term, you often discover hidden values and beliefs that need to be discussed.

actor: a definition has no power until it is used. Someone or something has to use it, and these "users" of the definition are called "actors." An actor can be a person, an organization, an institution, or any other means of giving a definition its effect. For example, a politician could define *piracy* in terms of individual behavior and use the term to make moral judgments. A legislature could define piracy in terms of corporate ownership. A musician might define piracy in terms of the need to sample old music for a new work. In short, the definition of piracy is embodied in the nature of the institution or person who uses it. A good definition openly recognizes its actors.

Review Articles Clarify the Domain, History, and Actors

Good writers connect their own insights to the work of others. This means that they must read the work of others. If they do not, the paper will be more about the writers' beliefs than about the topic. A typical research paper illustrates the importance of knowing background material. An undocumented paper may not require citations and a works cited, but it does require a solid background in the topic. You can solve your need for information about the three contexts by turning to a special kind of journal article: the review article. Review articles *re-view* the history of a topic and name the key ideas of a field. They identify publications that have influenced others who work on the topic. By providing a backward look at an important topic, they point out the direction of future work. Often, they contain crucial information about the domain, history, and actors that define a topic.

THREE EXAMPLES OF DEFINITION

Example #1: A Definition That Misuses the Dictionary

Greetings to all of you who have successfully completed high school. It is an important achievement in your life, and today I want to talk about what success means. The diploma you hold in your hand proves that your success is beginning. Success was your goal, and today that term applies to you. According to Webster, success means "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose." Each of you came to high school with the purpose of getting a diploma, and today's ceremony shows that you have accomplished what you set out to do. Your success will grow, and many of you will go on to other successes: college degrees, training certificates, marriage licenses, and birth certificates for your children. These papers will be your success. Each one makes you a success. You will have proof of that in your professional life and your personal life because each one will show that you have accomplished what you meant to do. Every time you wonder what success means, you can thumb through these papers as if they are a deck of cards. Together, they *are* your success.

The speaker begins by recognizing the occasion, and then announcing that s/he will define "success." The speech will be a definition. By claiming that a piece of paper "proves" that success is beginning puts too much value on a piece of paper. More correctly, the diploma is evidence of past achievement. The language does not recognize the context of high school milestones. Citing a dictionary substitutes for recognizing the network of meaning for a diploma: family, curriculum, institutional values, connections to the community, ethnic traditions, and many others. The speaker is creating a circular definition: success is being successful at accomplishing a goal. That is not particularly insightful. The speaker makes a wise choice by saying that that we are *successful* within a particular context: education, career, marriage, and family. These deserve discussion as *contexts* that give success a meaning. The speaker fails to build an insightful definition of *success* because s/he fails to examine the contexts for their similarities, conflicts, and interactions. Instead of careful detail, the listener gets a simplistic equation: success is a stack of certificates and diplomas

What does this example tell us about definition?

The example above relies on a naive belief that the words in the dictionary are equal to the concept of success. The example uses the dictionary as a substitute for discovering the contexts that give the term its meaning. Note that there is no information about the domain of the term, the history of the term, or the actors that use it.

This second example is passage from the novel *Johnny Got His Gun*. In this war novel, the main character is critically injured in WW1, and as he lies in his hospital bed, he questions the meaning of liberty.

Somebody said let's go out and fight for liberty and so we went out and maybe got killed without even once thinking about liberty. And what kind of liberty were they fighting for anyway? Were they fighting for the liberty of eating free ice cream all their lives, or for the liberty of robbing anyone they pleased? You tell a man he can't rob someone and you take away some of his liberty. It's a special kind of word; a guy says house, and he can point to a house to prove it. But a guy says come on lets fight for liberty and he can't show you liberty. He can't prove the thing he's talking about so how can he tell you to fight for it. When I swap my life for liberty I've got to know in advance what liberty is and whose idea of liberty we're talking about. Maybe too much liberty will be as bad as too little. I've got liberty right here at home – liberty to be with my girl and walk around and live my life, and **that** liberty suits me just fine.	The speaker begins by talking about the actors who give the word *liberty* its meaning. The actors are a nameless "they" and they have power over a vague group that includes himself.

The speaker then refers to a variety of domains: legal, social, political, and personal. He connects these domains to his question about the meaning of liberty. The creation of the definition begins in this passage.

At the end of the passage, the definition rejects all social, political, and legal contexts. He turns to a definition based in his personal experience. The other contexts have been raised, discussed, and dismissed.

The definition is a definition by exclusion. It defines liberty by explaining what it is not. |

What does this example tell us about definition?

The example illustrates an extended definition that is meant to be informative. For example, an extended definition of the word "liberty" can help a reader understand that people have very different ideas about what liberty involves. The dictionary definition of liberty is this:

"The quality or state of being free. The quality of not being coerced or
constrained in one's choices or actions. Unrestricted access. The power to do as
one pleases."

In the Declaration of Independence, we are promised life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
On the other hand, there are laws preventing us from driving 100 miles an hour on the freeway,
preventing a certain English professor from taking whatever she wants from the shoe store
without paying. So, how can we understand the term *liberty?* It is clear that this word, because it
is an abstraction and not a concrete object, requires an extended definition to be fully
understood. A dictionary definition is not useful.

In the paragraph from *Johnny Got His Gun,* there is no narrative. However, there is an odd sort
of comparison that says what liberty is *not*. Writers often explain what something is *not* in order
to say what it *is.* Such definitions are a common medical tool. Doctors frequently make a
"diagnosis by exclusion." The patient's symptoms are put in the context of many illnesses and
syndromes, and then each is eliminated until only one is left. Medical dramas often use a
diagnosis by exclusion because it offers a set of competing narratives. The slight uncertainty
that remains intensifies the drama. The definition drives the narrative. Thus, the modes overlap.
Although it seems like a set of comparisons, it is much more. The list of excluded items becomes
part of the definition.

Example #3: Definition With a Claim

The following definition relies on the differences between domains and actors to develop a
historical definition of the term *hacker.* The thesis is that these domains have to be understood to
avoid labeling legitimate behavior as criminal behavior.

Mark McClelland: Meaning of Hacking	
In current usage, the term "hacking" most commonly refers to gaining unauthorized access to computer resources, such as databases or websites, typically through software-based exploits, with or without criminal intent. Furthermore, it is most often implied that the person doing the hacking is working from a remote network location, such as a home or school computer.	McClelland begins by establishing the common meaning for "hacker." His doubt is shown by the term "common" and by "often implied." The definition is so simple that the reader infers that an improvement is necessary. He has shown his readers a general map, and he implies that more is needed.
However, "hacking" is one of those words where the meaning varies dramatically based on context. Outside the context of software it could range from coughing up a hairball, to creating a robot from unconventional components, to violently cutting up chicken parts with a cleaver. Within the context of software, its meaning has evolved and branched over time.	By finding meanings for "hacking" that lie outside of computers, McClelland enables the reader to recognize that the various contexts are really different domains of knowledge. The reader sees what "context" has to do with specialized knowledge and why the definition uses contexts as a tool. This gives meaning to the last sentence.

At MIT, where the computer-related usage is believed to have originated, hacking was originally a fairly generic term for clever mischief. "The MIT of the 1950s was overly competitive, and hacking emerged as both a reaction to and extension of that competitive culture. Goofs and pranks suddenly became a way to blow off steam, thumb one's nose at campus administration, and indulge creative thinking and behavior stifled by the Institute's rigorous undergraduate curriculum." (Sam Williams, "Free as in Freedom: Richard Stallman's Crusade for Free Software", Appendix B: http://www.faifzilla.org/appendixb.html) With the rise of the computer, a hacker culture developed among MIT students, the spirit of which - although subversively anti-authority - was essentially constructive, not destructive. Acceptance within this culture was based on demonstration of elite programming skills, a nonconformist bent, and enthusiasm about the potential of <u>computers</u>. Through the 60s and 70s, as the place of computers in society was debated, the hacker culture took on an ethical mission to keep computing power and information accessible to all. Much of this mission is carried on today by the open source movement, and a very real example of its significance to society is playing out in the debates and policies surrounding computerized voting in the United States.	The first context for "hacking" is a historical one. He claims that the term originated at a specific college (MIT) and was a reaction to educational contexts that stifled creativity. The definition begins to emerge by naming not only institutions but also by naming institutional contexts.

The definition has gone from the general idea of "context" to more specific ones. He emphasizes the importance of different contexts. The use of an outside source puts McClelland's own article into the domain of expert articles about the subject.

McClelland then shifts to a very large context: ethics and morality. He puts "hacking" in the context of the desire to democratize computing. He connects it to another technological movement: the open source software movement.

The paragraph ends by noting that unsolved problems about computerized voting are important. He ends his second paragraph with a question about a basic freedom. His definition has identified many contexts to imply a claim about hacking, technology, and democracy.

Thus, McClelland has used the domains of politics, ethics, education, and technology to define hacking. |

As computers became mainstream and computing resources were exposed through telecommunications and networks, a more malicious form of hacking arose, sometimes self-serving and sometimes as a form of vandalism. It is this meaning that is most often used by mass media, and it is applied to such activities as: creating and unleashing malware, such as viruses, worms, and trojan horses; gaining access to private information stored in government or corporate databases; making unauthorized modifications to web content; and crashing corporate computers.	The earlier paragraphs established the domains that would be used to define hacking. By referring to the MIT of the 1950s, they started to discuss the history of hacking. The history continues by describing **new** purposes for hacking. McClelland does not make a claim about these changes. He only describes them.
"Hacking" as a positive term, applied to the mindset that ingenuity, determination, and knowledge-sharing can be used to solve any technical problem, is still alive and well, but this meaning is only implicitly understood in certain circles, where it is contrasted with "cracking," an essentially destructive activity more closely aligned with the now-popular usage of "hacking."	McClelland explores the **new** meanings of hacking and implies that hacking has different meanings in different *computing* contexts. The term is put in the context of specialization, that is, the domain where it is used.
As something of a footnote, the term "hacking" has also taken on a rather different meaning among software developers: the implementation of quick-and-dirty solutions adequate in the short-term, but likely to cause bugs or make enhancements difficult in the future. This sense of the word is more often used in the noun form, "hack." The history of this usage is unclear, but it may have arisen from a confused combination of the term "hack" as used to describe an untalented writer and "hack" as it applied to software.	McClelland ends his definition by re-opening its meaning to another use. He notes that the definition becomes problematic when it shifts between its use by different *domains* with different *histories*. Throughout the essay, McClelland avoids a pro/con, good/bad, either/or type of thinking. His claim is that hacking represents different types of behavior in different domains. The values and beliefs of these different actors are revealed through their domains and histories.

What does this example tell us about definition?

An extended definition creates the opportunity to think about hacking, piracy, civil rights, marriage, war, torture, and other emotionally charged issues. A careful definition includes information from conflicting domains and from forgotten histories. The result is a document that thinks in new ways. These new ways often challenge the popular view of an issue. They

ask others to recognize new alternatives and to understand how pro/con thinking can blind us. Thus, an extended definition can be highly ethical in its ability to stand back and recognize all the contexts that create meaning.
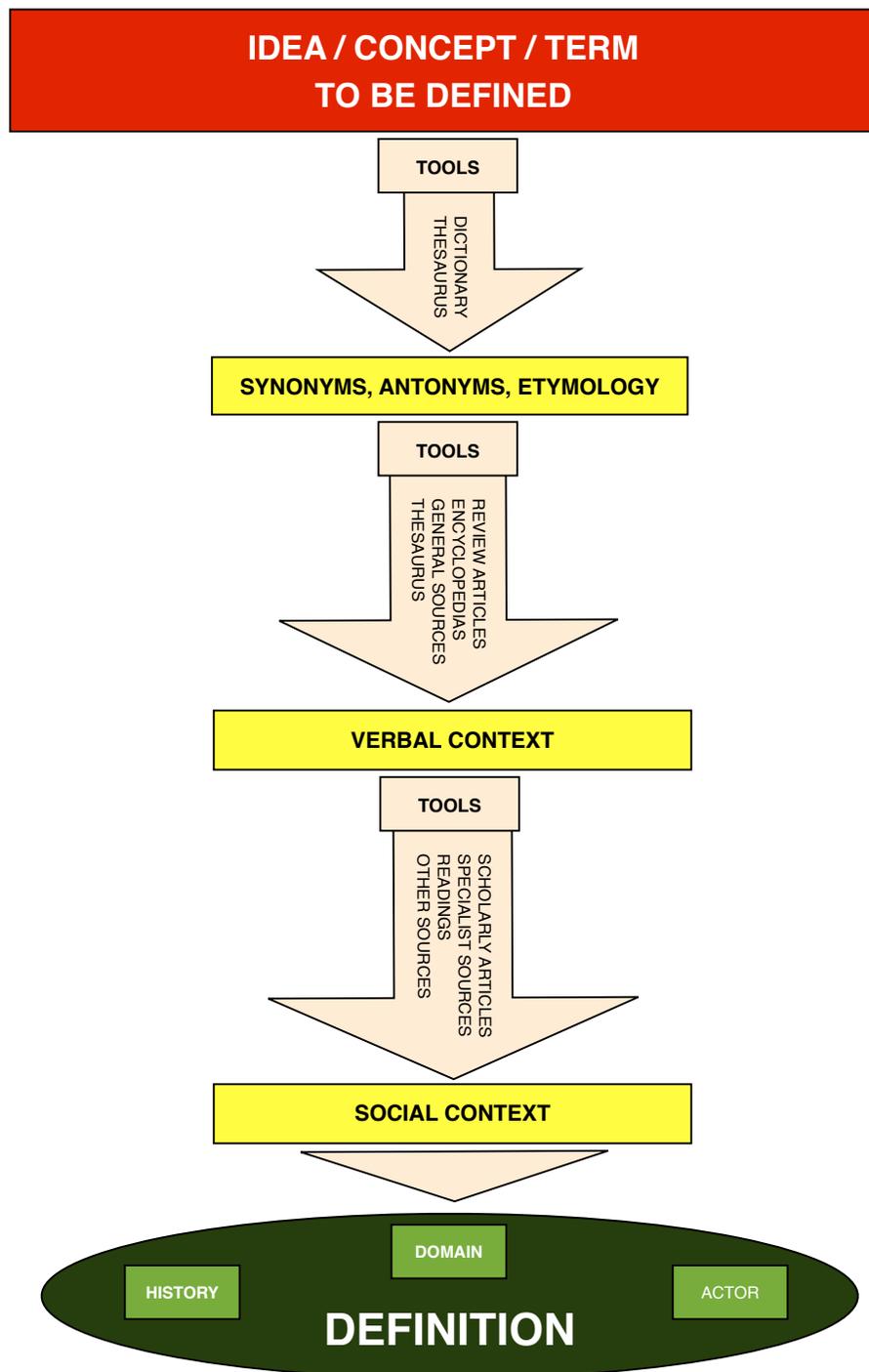
DEFINITION AND THE OTHER MODES

Definition has close ties to other modes. For example, the definition of *hacker* tells a story about the evolution of two meanings for the term. This story is a narrative, but the story is about two domains with different meanings for the term: computer specialists and popular audiences. The narrative is only a tool for building the definition. Narration and definition often work together because a good definition requires some sort of history for the term. Even a simple dictionary offers a history of each word, called the "etymology."

Mode	Feature Shared With Definition
Narration	history: sequence; etymology
Description	evidence: concrete detail
Process	actor: uses and purpose of the definition
Comparison	contexts: multiple contexts; negation

Descriptions tend to use definition. By turning to questions about history, domains of knowledge, and the purpose of the description, the description is more likely to answer the question and go beyond simple reporting. The overlap between these two modes points to an underlying critical process that all the modes serve.

**IDEA / CONCEPT / TERM
TO BE DEFINED**

TOOLS

DICTIONARY
THESAURUS

SYNONYMS, ANTONYMS, ETYMOLOGY

TOOLS

REVIEW ARTICLES
ENCYCLOPEDIAS
GENERAL SOURCES
THESAURUS

VERBAL CONTEXT

TOOLS

SCHOLARLY ARTICLES
SPECIALIST SOURCES
READINGS
OTHER SOURCES

SOCIAL CONTEXT

DOMAIN

HISTORY

DEFINITION

ACTOR

SUMMARY

Definition is a powerful tool for exploring the contexts that make an idea valuable. Definitions create a common understanding for the reader and the writer that allows the other modes to overlap and gain power. By limiting the meaning of key terms, the document becomes more focused and the thesis becomes more clear.