From August 1987 until January 2007, Alan Greenspan was chairman of the Federal Reserve Board (“the Fed”). Because any remark he made about U.S. monetary policy could cause markets all over the world to fluctuate wildly, he developed a complicated way of speaking that came to be known as “Fedspeak.”

Here’s an example:

It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated risk premiums.*

Greenspan has admitted that such remarks were not really intended to be understood.

Asked to give an example by commenting on the weather, Greenspan replied,

I would generally expect that today in Washington, D.C., the probability of changes in the weather is

highly uncertain. But we are monitoring the data in such a manner that we will be able to update people on changes that are important.*

This tells us nothing about the weather, of course, and was not intended to. Many times, though, we run across similarly complicated examples of speech or writing that do seem to be intended to inform us.

For example, Allan Bloom, the famous American educator who authored The Closing of the American Mind, which was read (or at least purchased) by millions, wrote in that book:

If openness means to “go with the flow,” it is necessarily an accommodation to the present. That present is so closed to doubt about so many things impeding the progress of its principles that unqualified openness to it would mean forgetting the despised alternative to it, knowledge of which makes us aware of what is doubtful in it.

Is this true? Well—that’s really hard to say. The problem is, you don’t know exactly what Professor Bloom is asserting in this passage.

Any number of problems may make a statement unclear. Not infrequently, people just don’t say what they mean. Consider this statement made by President George W. Bush:

You know, when you give a man more money in his pocket—in this case, a woman more money in her pocket to expand a business, it—they build new buildings. And when somebody builds a new building somebody has got to come and build the building. And when the building expanded it prevented additional opportunities for people to work. (Lancaster, PA, October 3, 2007) **

We think he meant “presented” rather than “prevented,” but even then, the point can surely be made more clearly. Here’s an example from former Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien, when asked in Parliament about old versus new money in the health care program:

They say that the money we had promised three years ago to be new money this year is not new money. We have not paid it yet and it is old money versus new money. For me new money is new money if paying in $5 or $10, it’s the same money.†

We have no clue what he had in mind.

One of your authors noticed this as a tease on the front page of a newspaper: “49ers are upset.” This probably means that somebody who was not supposed to beat the San Francisco football team did manage to beat them. On the other hand, it could mean that the team is dismayed about something.

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* Broadcast on BBC World Service Interview, October 25, 2007.
Although obscurity can issue from various causes, four sources of confusion stand out as paramount: excessive vagueness, ambiguity, excessive generality, and undefined terms. In this chapter, we shall consider vagueness, ambiguity, and generality in some detail and then talk about definitions. Also, from time to time situations arise in which we need to think critically about what we write, especially when we are trying to produce an argumentative essay. In this type of writing enterprise, one takes a position on an issue and supports it with argument. A good argumentative essay usually consists of four parts: a statement of the issue, a statement of one’s position on that issue, arguments that support one’s position, and rebuttals of arguments that support contrary positions. Obviously, an argumentative essay is weakened by statements that are obscure, and what we say in this chapter has direct application to writing clear argumentative essays. We shall return to this subject after we discuss vagueness, ambiguity, generality, and definitions.

VAGUENESS

Perhaps the most common form of unclear thinking or writing is excessive vagueness. Pursued to its depths, the concept of vagueness can be a knotty one, and it has been the focus of much philosophical attention in the past.
A word or phrase is **vague** if the group of things to which it applies has border-
line cases. Consider the word “bald.” It’s clear that Paris Hilton is **not** bald, and Mr. Stewart clearly **is** bald. But whether Bruce Willis is bald or not is a good question. He has hair—although it seems to be on the wane—but these days, he keeps his head shaved and thus appears bald. How much hair would he have to lose to be bald whether or not he shaved his head? The fact that there is no good answer demonstrates that “baldness” is a vague concept.

Man is ready to die for an idea, provided that idea is not quite clear to him.

—PAUL ELDRIDGE

Vagueness at the Border

As the text explains, vagueness results when the scope of a concept is not clear—that is, when there are borderline cases. “Bald” is a typical example. Here, Ms. Hilton is clearly **not** bald, and Mr. Stewart clearly **is** bald. But whether Bruce Willis is bald or not is a good question. He has hair—although it seems to be on the wane—but few decades.* Fortunately, at a practical level, the idea is not difficult to grasp. Whether the word “torture” applies to various types of interrogation techniques, especially including “waterboarding,” for example, has been a serious issue for several years. Many former officials have claimed that these techniques did not count as torture, but many others have disagreed. [Some, who subjected themselves to the procedure, have disagreed rather violently.] Possibly more relevant to us and to you personally, whether a bit of driving is “reckless” or not may determine

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whether you pay a small fine or a large one—or even go to jail. Consider, too, the speed limits we are asked to observe on the highways. Ideally, the offense in question would be something like “driving too fast for the circumstances” rather than driving faster than a particular speed. This is because what is safe at 80 miles per hour in one set of circumstances (midday, no traffic, clear weather, and dry roads) might be dangerously unsafe at 40 miles per hour in another (dark, heavy traffic, rain or fog, slick roads). But we have opted for set speed limits because “driving too fast” is a vague term, and we do not want to put our fate in the hands of patrol officers and judges who are in a position to make arbitrary decisions about whether it applies in our case. So, because we are afraid of the consequences of the vague concept, we sometimes get away with driving dangerously fast under bad circumstances, and we are sometimes ticketed for driving over the posted limit when it is quite safe to do so.

Sometimes vagueness is just annoying. Suppose that it’s late and you’re looking for someone’s house and you’re given the following directions: “Go on down this street a ways ’til you get to the first major intersection, make a sharp right, then, when the street starts to curve to the left, you’ll be there.” The vagueness in these directions is as likely to get your blood pressure up as it is to help you find your destination. (How do you decide that a particular intersection is “major,” for example?)

Vagueness is often intentional, used as a means to avoid giving a clear, precise answer. Politicians often resort to vague statements if they don’t want their audience to know exactly where they stand. A vague answer to the question “Do you love me?” may mean there’s trouble ahead in the relationship.

Vagueness occurs to varying degrees, and it is difficult to the point of impossibility to get rid of it entirely. Fortunately, there is no need to get rid of it entirely. We live very comfortably with a certain amount of vagueness in most of what we say. “Butte City is a very small town” presents us with no problems under ordinary circumstances, despite the vagueness of “very small town.” “Darren has no school loans because his parents are rich” doesn’t tell us how much money the parents have, but it tells us enough to be useful. “Rich” and “small,” like “bald,” are vague concepts; there is no accepted clear line between the things to which they apply and those to which they don’t. Nonetheless, they are valuable notions; we get a lot of good use out of them.

Problems arise with vagueness when there is too much of it, as in our direction-giving example above. Similarly, if a politician claims he will “raise taxes on the wealthy,” what should we take that to mean? Unlike with the earlier example of Darren’s rich parents, in this case it would be worthwhile to spend some effort trying to pin down just what our speaker means by “wealthy,” since where the borders fall here really do make a difference.

So, when is a level of vagueness acceptable and when is it not? It’s difficult to give a general rule, aside from urging due care and common sense, but we might say this: When a claim is not too vague to convey appropriately useful information, its level of vagueness is acceptable. For example, if the directions we’re given are not too vague to help us find our destination, they pass the test. If the politician specifies enough about his tax plan to assure us that we understand how it would apply, then we should not complain of vagueness. But when a speaker or writer does indulge in excessive vagueness, thereby making it difficult or impossible for us to fairly assess his or her claim, it is our job to hold that person accountable.

Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize until you have tried to make it precise.
—Bertrand Russell

Ask a man which way he is going to vote, and he will probably tell you. Ask him, however, why, and vagueness is all.
—Barnard Levin
AMBIGUITY

A word, phrase, or sentence is said to be *ambiguous* when it has more than one meaning. Does “Paul cashed a check” mean that Paul gave somebody cash, or that somebody gave cash to him? It could mean either. “Jessica is renting her house” could mean that she’s renting it to someone or from someone. Jennifer gets up from her desk on Friday afternoon and says, “My work here is finished.” She might mean that she has finished the account she was working on, or that her whole week’s work is done and she’s leaving for the weekend, or that she’s fed up with her job and is leaving the company. If you look online, you can find several collections of amusing headlines that are funny because of their ambiguity: “Kids make nutritious snacks,” for example, or “Miners refuse to work after death.”

Most of the time the interpretation that a speaker or writer intends for a claim is obvious, as in the case of these headlines. But ambiguity can have

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**In the Media**

**A Subtle Ambiguity**

A while back, when John Edwards was still a viable presidential candidate, he was asked the following question on *Meet the Press*:

**TIM RUSSERT:** Why don’t you support gay marriage?

**JOHN EDWARDS:** Well, I guess it was the way I was brought up.

Do you see the ambiguity here, and how it works to Edwards’s advantage? You’ll find an explanation in the text.
consequences beyond making us smile. Take a look at the box “A Subtle Ambiguity.” The question Russert asks is ambiguous, although you might not notice it at first. It could be a question about the cause—that is, the *explanation*—for one’s not supporting gay marriage, or it might be about his reasons—that is, his *argument*—for not supporting it. Presidential candidate Edwards took advantage of the ambiguity to duck the question Russert really wanted him to answer, which was the second version. The way Edwards was brought up is something he is not responsible for and which he does not have to defend. On the other hand if he were asked to give arguments for his side of the issue, he could then be asked to defend those arguments.

In discussions of gay rights, we’ve seen an ambiguity in the term “rights” that often stymies rational debate. The issue is whether laws should be passed to prevent discrimination against gays in housing, in the workplace, and so forth. One side claims that such laws would themselves be discriminatory because they would specifically grant to gay people rights that are not specifically guaranteed to others—they would be “special” rights. The other side claims that the laws are only to guarantee for gays the right to be treated the same as others under the law. When the two sides fail to sort out just what they mean by their key terms, the result is at best a great waste of breath and at worst angry misunderstanding.

**Semantic Ambiguity**

A claim can be ambiguous in any of several ways. The most obvious way is probably by containing an ambiguous word or phrase, which produces a case of semantic ambiguity. See if you can explain the ambiguity in each of the following claims:

1. Wingo, the running back, always lines up on the right side.
2. Jessica is cold.
3. Aunt Delia never used glasses.
In the first case, it may be that it’s the right and not the left side where Wingo lines up, or it may be that he always lines up on the correct side. The second example may be saying something about Jessica’s temperature or something about her personality. In the third case, it may be that Aunt Delia always had good eyes, but it also might mean that she drank her beer directly from the bottle (which was true of one of your authors’ Aunt Delia). Semantically ambiguous claims can be made unambiguous (“disambiguated”) by substituting a word or phrase that is not ambiguous for the one making the trouble. “Correct” for “right,” for example, in #1; “eyeglasses” for “glasses” in #3.

**Grouping Ambiguity**

There is a special kind of semantic ambiguity, called *grouping ambiguity*, that results when it is not clear whether a word is being used to refer to a group collectively or to members of the group individually. Consider:

Secretaries make more money than physicians do.

The example is true if the speaker refers to secretaries and physicians collectively, since there are many more secretaries than there are physicians. But it is obviously false if the two words refer to individual secretaries and physicians.

“Lawn mowers create more air pollution than dirt bikes do” is something a dirt biker might say in defense of his hobby. And, because it is ambiguous, there is an interpretation under which his claim is probably true as well as one under which it is probably false. Taken collectively, lawn mowers doubtless create more pollution because there are so many more of them. Individually, we’d bet it’s the dirt bike that does more damage.

Like other types of ambiguity, grouping ambiguity can be used intentionally to interfere with clear thinking. A few years ago, federal taxes were increased, and opponents of the change referred to it as “the biggest tax increase in history.” If true, that makes the increase sound pretty radical, doesn’t it? And it was true, if you looked at the total tax revenue that was brought in by the increase. But this result was largely due to the numbers of people and the circumstances to which the increase applied. If we look at the percentage increase paid by individual taxpayers, this was not the biggest increase in history. Since most of us are mainly interested in how much more we as individuals have to pay, it is the latter interpretation that is usually more important. But the grouping ambiguity underlying the phrase “the biggest tax increase in history” allows one to give another interpretation under which the claim is true; although the individual tax increases were not the biggest, the collective tax increase was.

There are two venerable fallacies based on the grouping type of ambiguity. Each involves taking the ambiguity one step further than we’ve done so far.
A person commits the **fallacy of division** when he or she reasons from the fact that a claim about a group taken collectively is true to the conclusion that the same claim about members of the group taken individually is also true. In 1973, the Miami Dolphins were undefeated for the entire NFL football season and went on to win the Super Bowl in early 1974. Nobody disputes the fact that the team was the best in the league that year. Does it follow that the individual players on that team were the best players in the league? That is, that Bob Griese was the best quarterback, Larry Csonka the best running back, Mercury Morris the best receiver? No, of course not. What is true of the whole may not be true of each individual part. A round building, remember, does not have to be built of round bricks.

Going the other direction, a person commits the **fallacy of composition** when he or she reasons from the fact that each member of a group has a certain property to the conclusion that the group as a whole must have that property. An example: At the current moment (and it is true most of the time, in fact) in their various states and districts, individual members of Congress receive fairly high marks in opinion polls. One might therefore think that opinion polls would give Congress as a whole fairly high marks. But this would be a mistake, since Congress in general gets very low marks in these same polls. The way people feel about the parts is not necessarily what they feel about the whole. To turn our earlier example around: You can use rectangular bricks to build a building that is not rectangular.

You’ll find other examples of these two fallacies in the following “In Depth” box.

**Syntactic Ambiguity**

**Syntactic ambiguity** occurs when a claim is open to two or more interpretations because of its *structure*—that is, its syntax. Not long ago, one of us received information from the American Automobile Association prior to driving to British Columbia. “To travel in Canada,” the brochure stated, “you will need a birth certificate or a driver’s license and other photo ID.”

Just what is the requirement for crossing the border? Under one interpretation, you have to take a photo ID other than a birth certificate or a driver’s
license, and under another, you don’t. If we group by brackets, we can make the two interpretations clear, we hope:

1. [You will need a birth certificate or a driver’s license] and [other photo ID]
2. [You will need a birth certificate] or [a driver’s license and other photo ID]

The problem with the original version of the claim is that, because of its poor construction, we don’t know whether to associate the driver’s license requirement with the birth certificate (as in interpretation 1) or with the “other photo ID” (as in interpretation 2). Rewriting is the key to eliminating syntactic ambiguity. Depending on the intended interpretation, the original could have been written:

1. You will need either a birth certificate or a driver’s license and you will also need an additional photo ID.
   Or
2. You will need either a birth certificate or both a driver’s license and an additional photo ID.

Neither of these is ambiguous.

In the previous example, the problem was produced by a failure to make clear how the logical words “or” and “and” were to apply.* Here are some examples:

Neurosis is the inability to tolerate ambiguity.
—SIGMUND FREUD

Okay. But it’s still true that we should not have to live with too much of it!

More Examples of the Composition and Division Fallacies

**Division:** “A balanced diet consists of the right proportion of protein, carbohydrates, and fat. Therefore, each meal should consist of the same proportion of protein, carbohydrates, and fat.”

—DR. NICHOLAS PERRICONE, author of the bestselling book The Wrinkle Cure

**Mistake:** The balance necessary for a daily intake is not necessary for each part of one’s daily intake—that is, each meal.

**Division:** After the 2008 elections, the Democrats took over both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. A number of pundits characterized the election by saying “the voters have overwhelmingly voted for a Democratic Congress.”

**Mistake:** It’s true that voters collectively voted for a Democratic Congress, but voters individually did no such thing. No person anywhere voted for a Democratic Congress, since the issue did not appear on any ballot anywhere.

**Composition:** “The Kings don’t have a chance against the Lakers. The Lakers are better at every position except power forward.”

—CHARLES BARKLEY

**Mistake:** Individual players, however talented, may not play that well together.

*This particular kind of syntactic ambiguity is analyzed further in Chapter 9, which deals with truth-functional logic.
other examples of syntactic ambiguity, along with various possible interpretations, to help you get the idea.

Players with beginners’ skills only may use Court 1.

In this case, we don’t know what the word “only” applies to. This word, as we’ll see in later chapters, is both very useful and very easy to use incorrectly. Here, it might mean that beginners may use only Court 1. Or it might mean that players with only beginners’ skills may use Court 1. Finally, it might mean that only players with beginners’ skills may use Court 1. Obviously, whoever puts up such a sign needs to be more careful. (And so does the person who put up a sign in our university’s student union that said, “Cash only this line.” Do you see the ambiguity?)

Susan saw the farmer with binoculars.

This ambiguity results from a modifying phrase (“with binoculars”) that is not clear in its application. Who had the binoculars in this case? Presumably Susan, but it looks as though it was the farmer. “Looking through her binoculars, Susan saw the farmer” clears it up.

People who protest often get arrested.

This is similar to the previous example: Does “often” apply to protesting or to getting arrested?

There’s somebody in the bed next to me.

Does “next to me” apply to a person or to a bed? One might rewrite this either as “There’s somebody next to me in the bed” or as “There’s somebody in the bed next to mine.”

Ambiguous pronoun references occur when it is not clear to what or whom a pronoun is supposed to refer. “The boys chased the girls and they giggled a lot” does not make clear who did the giggling. “They” could be either the boys or the girls. A similar example: “After their father removed the trash

On Language

Making Ambiguity Work for You

Have you ever been asked to write a letter of recommendation for a friend who was, well, incompetent? To avoid either hurting your friend’s feelings or lying, Robert Thornton of Lehigh University has some ambiguous statements you can use. Here are some examples:

I most enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever.
I am pleased to say that this candidate is a former colleague of mine.
I can assure you that no person would be better for the job.
I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment.

All in all, I cannot say enough good things about this candidate or recommend the candidate too highly.

In my opinion, you will be very fortunate to get this person to work for you.
from the pool, the kids played in it.” A less amusing and possibly more trouble-making example: “Paul agreed that, once Gary removed the motor from the car, he could have it.” What does Gary have permission to take, the motor or the car? (Just imagine a written agreement containing this sentence. We’d predict a lawsuit.) It pays to be careful; a speaker or writer who is thinking critically will make clear exactly what he or she means to say.

There are other examples of ambiguity that are difficult to classify. For example, one of us was at lunch with the dean of a college at our university, and the dean said to the waiter, “You can bring the sauce separately, and I’ll put it on myself.” The ambiguity, obviously, is in how he’ll put the sauce on versus where he’ll put it. As in all cases of ambiguity, it is important to see that the claim is ambiguous rather than to be able to classify the type of ambiguity. (This one could be called either semantic or syntactic, by our lights.) By improving your ability to notice when claims are ambiguous, you will be less likely to be misled by them and less likely to mislead others by using them—unless, of course, you mean to mislead them!

**GENERALITY**

We turn now to the notion of generality, which is closely related to both vagueness and ambiguity and which can cause trouble in the same way they do.

From what we learned of vagueness, we realize that the word “child” is vague, since it is not clear where the line is drawn between children and non-children. It can also be ambiguous, because it can refer not only to a person of immature years but also to a person’s offspring. As if this weren’t enough, it is also general because it applies to both boys and girls. Roughly speaking, the less detail a claim provides, the more general it is. Regarding specific words and phrases, the more different kinds of Xs to which a word applies, the more general the word “X” is. “Moore has a dog” is more general than “Moore has an otterhound.” “Moore has a pet” is still more general.

If you learn that Clarence has an arrest record, it may well lower your estimate of him and may prevent you from hiring him to do work around your house, for example. But if some more detail were supplied—for instance, that he had been arrested during a protest against a company that was polluting the local river—it might well make a difference in your opinion of him. The difference between a very general description and one with sufficient detail can be crucial to nearly any decision.

There has been a lot of discussion about whether the War on Terror should really be called a “war” at all. The phrase has continued to be used because “war” is both vague and general. Some believe that the word as traditionally used requires an enemy that is organized and identifiable, such as a country or province, and those are difficult to identify in the War on Terror. Still less-clearly a war is the so-called “War on Drugs.” This seems to be a purely metaphorical use of the word “war,” meant to show that somebody is serious about the issue.

We don’t mean to confuse you with these closely related and overlapping pitfalls—vagueness, ambiguity, and generality. In practical fact, it is less important that you classify the problem that infects a claim or idea than that you see what’s going on and can explain it. For example, “Just what do you mean by ‘war?’” is a good response to someone who is using the word too loosely. In some of the exercises that follow, we’ll ask you to identify problems
in different passages in order to help you become familiar with the ideas. In others, we’ll simply ask you to explain what is needed for clarification.

Anyhow, with all these potential pitfalls to clear thinking and clear communication, what is a critically thinking person to do? To start, we can do the best we can to be clear in what our words mean. So after the following exercises we will turn our attention to the definition of terms.

Here are several exercises to give you practice identifying precision (or lack thereof) in sentences.

The lettered words and phrases that follow each of the following fragments vary in their vagueness and/or generality. In each instance, determine which is the most precise and which is the least precise; then rank the remainder in order of precision, to the extent possible. If these exercises are discussed in class, you’ll discover that many of them leave room for disagreement. Discussion with input from your instructor will help you and your classmates reach closer agreement about items that prove especially difficult to rank.

Example

Over the past ten years, the median income of wage earners in St. Paul

a. nearly doubled
b. increased substantially
c. increased by 85.5 percent
d. increased by more than 85 percent

Answer

Choice (b) is the most general (vague is okay, too) because it provides the least information; (c) is the most precise because it provides the most detailed figure. In between, (d) is the second most precise, followed by (a).

1. Eli and Sarah

a. decided to sell their house and move
b. made plans for the future
c. considered moving
d. talked
e. discussed their future
f. discussed selling their house

2. Manuel

a. worked in the yard all afternoon
b. spent the afternoon planting flowers in the yard
c. was outside all afternoon
d. spent the afternoon planting salvia alongside his front sidewalk
e. spent the afternoon in the yard

3. The hurricane that struck South Carolina

a. caused more than $20 million in property damage
b. destroyed dozens of structures
c. was severe and unfortunate
d. produced no fatalities but caused $25 million in property damage
4. The recent changes in the tax code
   a. will substantially increase taxes paid by those making more than $200,000 per year
   b. will increase by 4 percent the tax rate for those making more than $200,000 per year; will leave unchanged the tax rate for people making between $40,000 and $200,000; and will decrease by 2 percent the tax rate for those making less than $40,000
   c. will make some important changes in who pays what in taxes
   d. are tougher on the rich than the provisions in the previous tax law
   e. raise rates for the wealthy and reduce them for those in the lowest brackets

5. Smedley is absent because
   a. he’s not feeling well
   b. he’s under the weather
   c. he has an upset stomach and a fever
   d. he’s nauseated and has a fever of more than 103°
   e. he has flulike symptoms

Exercise 3-2

Which of each set of claims is more precise (i.e., suffers least from vagueness, ambiguity, or generality)?

Example

a. The trees served to make shade for the patio.
b. He served his country proudly.

Answer

The use of “served” in (b) is more vague than that in (a). We know exactly what the trees did; we don’t know what he did.

1. a. Rooney served the church his entire life.
   b. Rooney’s tennis serve is impossible to return.

2. a. The window served its purpose.
   b. The window served as an escape hatch.

3. a. Throughout their marriage, Alfredo served her dinner.
   b. Throughout their marriage, Alfredo served her well.

4. a. Minta turned her ankle.
   b. Minta turned to religion.

5. a. These scales will turn on the weight of a hair.
   b. This car will turn on a dime.

6. a. Fenner’s boss turned vicious.
   b. Fenner’s boss turned out to be forty-seven.

7. a. Time to turn the garden.
   b. Time to turn off the sprinkler.

8. a. The wine turned to vinegar.
   b. The wine turned out to be vinegar.

   b. Harper departed around 3:00 a.m.
DEFINING TERMS

When today’s typical student hears the word “definition,” we wouldn’t be surprised if the first thing to come to mind is television. “High definition” is the new standard of clarity in what we see on the home screen. This is directly analogous to the clarity and distinctness we’re looking for as critical thinkers, and the careful definition of terms is one of our most useful tools in pursuing this goal. While the business of definitions may seem straightforward (“’carrot’ refers to a tapering, orange-colored root eaten as a vegetable”), you’ll soon see that there’s more to it than you might have thought. For example, a multitude of attempts have been made to construct a definition of “person” (or, if you like, “human being”). Everything from “rational animal” to “featherless biped” has been suggested. But such important issues as whether abortion is morally permissible, whether fetuses have rights, whether a fetus is correctly referred to as an “unborn child,” and doubtless many others—all turn on how we define “person” and some of these other basic concepts. Indeed, if we define “abortion” as “the murder of an unborn child,” the debate on abortion is over before it begins.
Some arguments against the acceptance of rights for homosexuals depend on the claim that their orientation is “unnatural.”* But to arrive at a definition of “natural” (or “unnatural”) is no easy task. If you spend a few minutes thinking about this difficulty—even better, if you discuss it with others—we think you’ll see what we mean. What is “natural,” depending on who is defining the term, can mean anything from “occurs in nature” to “correct in the eyes of God.”

The definition of the word “use” by the U.S. Supreme Court made a difference of thirty years in the sentence of John Angus Smith in a criminal case a few years ago.** We hope you are convinced of the importance of the subject. Now, let’s have a look at how to deal with definitions.

**Purposes of Definitions**

We’ll start by indicating some of the purposes that definitions serve, then go on to describe several different types of definitions. After that, we’ll give some rough and ready ideas on giving good definitions.

Definitions can serve several purposes, but we want to call your attention to four.

1. The first and main purpose served by definitions is to tell us what a word means. When we don’t know a word’s meaning, we often look it up in a dictionary. The definitions given there are lexical definitions; they tell us what the word ordinarily means (“tamarin. noun: a small, forest-dwelling South American monkey of the marmoset family, typically brightly colored and with tufts and crests of hair around the face and neck.”). You might well ask, Isn’t this what all definitions do? A good question, and the answer is no. Check these next two items.

2. Sometimes a word needs to take on a special meaning in a given context. For this, we need a stipulative definition. An example: “In this environment, ‘desktop’ means the basic opening screen of the operating system—the one with the trash can.” We also assign stipulative definitions to words we invent. Stephen Colbert invented the word “truthiness” on his inaugural Colbert Report in 2005. Its assigned meaning (its stipulative definition) can be stated as “[the quality possessed by] those things a person claims to know intuitively or ‘from the gut’ without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.”

3. A third important purpose of definitions is to reduce vagueness or generality or to eliminate ambiguity. “In this contract, the word ‘dollars’ will refer only to Canadian dollars, even if one party normally deals in U.S. dollars or Australian dollars.” Definitions that serve this purpose are said to be precising definitions.

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**See Exercise 12–13, p. 463, for details.

†This version is due to Dick Meyer, CBS News, December 12, 2006. Actually, the word “truthiness” had been around for a very long time before Colbert reinvented it. It was mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary as a variant of “truth.”
4. Finally, definitions can be used to persuade. These troublesome items are known as **persuasive** or **rhetorical definitions**. It isn’t clear that we should think of them as **real** definitions, since they are not intended to provide either ordinary or agreed-upon meanings for terms. Nonetheless, they are often listed with the others we’ve mentioned. But be warned, these “definitions” are designed to influence beliefs or attitudes, not simply to convey linguistic information. If a liberal friend tries to “define” a conservative as “a hidebound, narrow-minded hypocrite who thinks the point to life is making money and ripping off poor people,” you know the point here is not the clarification of the meaning of the word “conservative.” It is a way of trashing conservatives. Such rhetorical definitions frequently make use of the **emotive meaning** (or, if you prefer, the **rhetorical force**) of words. This meaning consists of the positive or negative associations of a word. Consider the difference between “government-guaranteed health care” and a “government takeover of health care.” These terms might reasonably be used to refer to the same thing, but they clearly have different emotional associations—one positive and one negative. The word “connotation” is the traditional term for these associations.

Our definition of “abortion” as “the murder of an unborn child” at the beginning of this section is another much-quoted example of this type of definition.*

### Kinds of Definitions

We’ve looked at some important purposes to which definitions can be put, and we must now distinguish between those purposes and the **types of definitions** that are used to serve them. Remember that the purpose of a definition and the type of definition it is are different things. (Compare: The **purpose** of food is to nourish our bodies and please our palettes, whereas **types** of food are vegetables, meat, Pringles, etc.)

Regardless of what purpose is served by defining a term, most definitions are of one of the three following types:

1. **Definition by example** (also called **ostensive definition**): Pointing to, naming, or otherwise identifying one or more examples of the sort of thing to which the term applies: “By ‘scripture,’ I mean writings like the Bible and the Koran.” “A mouse is this thing here, the one with the buttons.”

2. **Definition by synonym**: Giving another word or phrase that means the same as the term being defined. “‘Fastidious’ means the same as ‘fussy.’” “‘Pulsatile’ means ‘throbbing.’” “To be ‘lubricious’ is the same as to be ‘slippery.’”

3. **Analytical definition**: Specifying the features that a thing must possess in order for the term being defined to apply to it. These definitions often take the form of a genus-and-species classification. For example, “A samovar is an urn that has a spigot and is used especially in Russia to boil water for tea.” “A mongoose is a ferret-sized mammal native to India that eats snakes and is related to civets.”

Almost all dictionary definitions are of the analytical variety.

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*How this particular definition **begs the question** is noted in Chapter 7.*
Some Tips on Definitions

So far, we’ve seen that definitions serve a variety of purposes and take several different forms. Combinations can be of many sorts: a definition by synonym that is precising ("minor" means under eighteen); an analytical definition designed just to persuade (a liberal is somebody who wants the able and willing to take care of both the unable and the unwilling). But what makes a definition a good one?

First, definitions should not prejudice the case against one side of a debate or the other. This is one form of begging the question, which will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 7. For now, just recall that one cannot usually win a debate simply by insisting on one’s own favored definition of key terms, since those who disagree with your position will also disagree with your definitions. Definitions are instances in which people have to try to achieve a kind of neutral ground.

Second, definitions should be clear. They are designed to clear the air, not muddy the water. This means they should be expressed in language that is as clear and simple as the subject will allow. If we define a word in language that is more obscure than the original word, we accomplish nothing. This includes avoiding emotively charged language whenever possible.

Realize that sometimes you must get along with incomplete definitions. In real life, we sometimes have to deal with claims that include such big-league abstractions as friendship, loyalty, fair play, freedom, rights, and so forth. If you have to give a complete definition of “freedom” or “fair play,” you’d best not plan on getting home early. Such concepts have subtle and complex parameters that might take a lifetime to pin down. For practical purposes, what is usually needed for words like these is not a complete definition but a precising definition that focuses on one aspect of the concept and provides sufficient guidance.

In Depth

Are We Innately Selfish?

You sometimes hear beginning students in philosophy maintaining that every voluntary action is a selfish one, done only to benefit oneself. This is a striking idea, and the student typically is quite impressed by the finding. The argument for the idea normally proceeds something like this: All voluntary acts are done to satisfy one’s own desire to do them; thus, all voluntary acts are done for self-benefit; thus, all voluntary acts are selfish acts.*

The problem, if it isn’t obvious, is that this argument does not make use of our ordinary notion of selfishness. Ordinarily, if we’re told that someone is a selfish person, we think we’ve learned something important about them, not simply that they perform voluntary actions. This indicates that the argument above makes use of a new and different meaning for “selfish.” If we had only the new meaning for the word, we’d probably stop using it, since it conveys nothing interesting about a person.

The key to spotting mistakes like this is to have a clear definition of key terms and to keep it in mind throughout the discussion.

*A diagram for this simple argument is provided in the answer section, p. 509.
for the purposes at hand: “To me, the word ‘justice’ does not include referring to a person’s private life when evaluating his or her work performance.”

The following exercise will give you practice with definitions.

In groups (or individually if your instructor prefers), determine what term in each of the following is being defined and whether the definition is by example or by synonym or an analytical definition. If it is difficult to tell which kind of definition is present, describe the difficulty.

1. A piano is a stringed instrument in which felt hammers are made to strike the strings by an arrangement of keys and levers.
3. Steve Martin is my idea of a successful philosophy major.
4. The red planet is Mars.
5. “UV” refers to ultraviolet light.
6. The Cheyenne perfectly illustrate the sort of Native Americans who were Plains Indians.
7. Data, in our case, is raw information collected from survey forms, which is then put in tabular form and analyzed.
8. “Chiaroscuro” is just a fancy word for shading.
9. Bifocals are glasses with two different prescriptions ground into each lens, making it possible to focus at two different distances from the wearer.
10. Red is the color that we perceive when our eyes are struck by light waves of approximately seven angstroms.
11. A significant other can be taken to be a person’s spouse, lover, long-term companion, or just girlfriend or boyfriend.
12. “Assessment” means evaluation.
13. A blackout is “a period of total memory loss, as one induced by an accident or prolonged alcoholic drinking.” When your buddies tell you they loved your rendition of the Lambada on Madison’s pool table the other night and you don’t even remember being at Madison’s, that is a blackout.

—Adapted from the CalPoly, San Luis Obispo, Mustang Daily

14. A pearl, which is the only animal-produced gem, begins as an irritant inside an oyster. The oyster then secretes a coating of nacre around the irritating object. The result is a pearl, the size of which is determined by the number of layers with which the oyster coats the object.
15. According to my cousin, who lives in Tulsa, the phrase “bored person” refers to anybody who is between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five and lives in eastern Oklahoma.

WRITING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

Recently, the Educational Testing Service revamped the infamous Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which many universities use when determining whether to admit an applicant. The most significant change was to have test takers
write an argumentative essay. This change in the SAT shows the importance the educators place on the ability to write this type of essay. That’s because writing an argumentative essay is doing nothing other than thinking critically—and leaving a paper trail for others to follow. This isn’t a book on writing, but writing an argumentative essay is so closely related to thinking critically that we would like to take the opportunity to offer our recommendations. We know professors who have retired because they could not bear to read another student essay. As a result, we offer our two bits’ worth here in hopes of continuing to see familiar faces.

As we said back on p. 71, an argumentative essay generally has four components:

1. **A statement of the issue**
2. **A statement of one’s position on that issue**
3. **Arguments that support one’s position**
4. **Rebuttals of arguments that support contrary positions**

Ideally, your essay should begin with an introduction to the issue that demonstrates that the issue is important or interesting. This is not always easy, but even when you are not excited about the subject yourself, it is still good practice to try to make your reader interested. Your statement of the issue should be fair; that is, don’t try to state the issue in such a way that your position on it is obviously the only correct one. This can make your reader suspicious; the burden of convincing him or her will come later, when you give your arguments.

Your position on the issue should be clear. Try to be brief. If you have stated the issue clearly, it should be a simple matter to identify your position.

Your arguments in support of your position also should be as succinct as you can make them, but it is much more important to be clear than to be brief. After all, this is the heart of your essay. The reasons you cite should be clearly relevant, and they should be either clearly reliable or backed up by further arguments. Much of the rest of this book is devoted to how this is done; hang in there.

If there are well-known arguments for the other side of the issue, you should acknowledge them and offer some reason to believe that they are unconvincing. You can do this either by attacking the premises that are commonly given or by trying to show that those premises do not actually support the opposing conclusion. More on these topics later, too.

Following are some more detailed hints that might be helpful in planning and writing your argumentative essay.

1. **Focus.** Make clear at the outset what issue you intend to address and what your position on the issue will be. However, nothing is quite so boring as starting off with the words “In this essay, I shall argue that X, Y, and Z,” and then going on to itemize everything you are about to say, and at the end concluding with the words “In this essay, I argued that X, Y, and Z.” As a matter of style, you should let the reader know what to expect without using trite phrases and without going on at length. However, you should try to find
an engaging way to state your position. For example, instead of “In this essay, I shall discuss the rights of animals to inherit property from their masters,” you might begin, “Could your inheritance wind up belonging to your mother’s cat?”

2. **Stick to the issue.** All points you make in an essay should be connected to the issue under discussion and should always either (a) support, illustrate, explain, clarify, elaborate on, or emphasize your position on the issue, or (b) serve as responses to anticipated objections. Rid the essay of irrelevancies and dangling thoughts.

3. **Arrange the components of the essay in a logical sequence.** This is just common sense. Make a point before you clarify it, for example, not the other way around.

When supporting your points, bring in examples, clarification, and the like in such a way that a reader knows what in the world you are doing. A reader should be able to discern the relationship between any given sentence and your ultimate objective, and he or she should be able to move from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph without getting lost or confused. If a reader cannot outline your essay with ease, you have not properly sequenced your material. Your essay might be fine as a piece of French philosophy, but it would not pass as an argumentative essay.

4. **Be complete.** Accomplish what you set out to accomplish, support your position adequately, and anticipate and respond to possible objections. Keep in mind that many issues are too large to be treated exhaustively in a single essay. The key to being complete is to define the issue sharply enough that you can be complete. Thus, the more limited your topic, the easier it is to be complete in covering it.

Also, be sure there is closure at every level. Sentences should be complete, paragraphs should be unified as wholes (and usually each should stick to a single point), and the essay should reach a conclusion. Incidentally, reaching a conclusion and summarizing are not the same thing. Short essays do not require summaries.

**Good Writing Practices**

Understanding the four principles just mentioned is one thing, but actually employing them may be more difficult. Fortunately, there are five practices that a writer can follow to improve the organization of an essay and to help avoid other problems. We offer the following merely as a set of recommendations within the broader scope of thinking critically in writing.

1. **At some stage after** the first draft, outline what you have written. Then, make certain the outline is logical and that every sentence in the essay fits into the outline as it should. Some writers create an informal outline before they begin, but many do not. Our advice: Just identify the issue and your position on it, and start writing by stating them both.

2. **Revise your work.** Revising is the secret to good writing. Even majorleague writers revise what they write, and they revise continuously. Unless you are more gifted than the very best professional writers, revise,
revise, revise. Don’t think in terms of two or three drafts. Think in terms of innumerable drafts.

3. Have someone else read your essay and offer criticisms of it. Revise as required.

4. If you have trouble with grammar or punctuation, reading your essay out loud may help you detect problems your eyes have missed.

5. After you are completely satisfied with the essay, put it aside. Then, come back to it later for still further revisions.

Essay Types to Avoid

Seasoned instructors know that the first batch of essays they get from a class will include samples of each of the following types. We recommend avoiding these mistakes:

■ The Windy Preamble. Writers of this type of essay avoid getting to the issue and instead go on at length with introductory remarks, often about how important the issue is, how it has troubled thinkers for centuries, how opinions on the issue are many and various, and so on, and so on. Anything you write that smacks of “When in the course of human events . . .” should go into the trash can immediately.

On Language

And While We’re on the Subject of Writing

Don’t forget these rules of good style:

1. Avoid clichés like the plague.
2. Be more or less specific.
3. NEVER generalize.
4. The passive voice is to be ignored.
5. Never, ever be redundant.
6. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
7. Make sure verbs agrees with their subjects.
8. Why use rhetorical questions?
9. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are (usually) unnecessary.
10. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
11. And it’s usually a bad idea to start a sentence with a conjunction.

This list has been making the rounds on the Internet.
The Stream-of-Consciousness Ramble. This type of essay results when writers make no attempt to organize their thoughts and simply spew them out in the order in which they come to mind.

The Knee-Jerk Reaction. In this type of essay, writers record their first reaction to an issue without considering the issue in any depth or detail. It always shows.

The Glancing Blow. In this type of essay, writers address an issue obliquely. If they are supposed to evaluate the health benefits of bicycling, they will bury the topic in an essay on the history of cycling; if they are supposed to address the history of cycling, they will talk about the benefits of riding bicycles throughout history.

Let the Reader Do the Work. Writers of this type of essay expect the reader to follow them through non sequiturs, abrupt shifts in direction, and irrelevant sidetracks.

Persuasive Writing

The primary aim of argumentation and the argumentative essay is to support a position on an issue. Good writers, however, write for an audience and hope their audience will find what they write persuasive. If you are writing for an audience of people who think critically, it is helpful to adhere to these principles:

1. Confine your discussion of an opponent’s point of view to issues rather than personal considerations.
2. When rebutting an opposing viewpoint, avoid being strident or insulting. Don’t call opposing arguments absurd or ridiculous.
3. If an opponent’s argument is good, concede that it is good.
4. If space or time is limited, be sure to concentrate on the most important considerations. Don’t become obsessive about refuting every last criticism of your position.
5. Present your strongest arguments first.

There is nothing wrong with trying to make a persuasive case for your position. However, in this book, we place more emphasis on making and recognizing good arguments than on simply devising effective techniques of persuasion. Some people can be persuaded by poor arguments and doubtful claims, and an argumentative essay can be effective as a piece of propaganda even when it is a rational and critical failure. One of the most difficult things you are called upon to do as a critical thinker is to construct and evaluate claims and arguments independently of their power to win a following. The remainder of this book—after a section on writing and diversity—is devoted to this task.

Writing in a Diverse Society

In closing, it seems appropriate to mention how important it is to avoid writing in a manner that reinforces questionable assumptions and attitudes about people’s gender, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, physical
ability or disability, or other characteristics. This isn’t just a matter of ethics; it is a matter of clarity and good sense. Careless word choices relative to such characteristics not only are imprecise and inaccurate but also may be viewed as biased even if they were not intended to be, and thus they may diminish the writer’s credibility. Worse, using sexist or racist language may distort the writer’s own perspective and keep him or her from viewing social issues clearly and objectively.

But language isn’t entirely not a matter of ethics, either. We are a society that aspires to be just, a society that strives not to withhold its benefits from individuals on the basis of their ethnic or racial background, skin color, religion, gender, or disability. As a people, we try to end practices and change or remove institutions that are unjustly discriminatory. Some of these unfair practices and institutions are, unfortunately, embedded in our language.

Some common ways of speaking and writing, for example, assume that “normal” people are all white males. It is still not uncommon, for instance, to mention a person’s race, gender, or ethnic background if the person is not a white male, and not to do so if the person is. Of course, it may be relevant to whoever you are writing about to state that this particular individual is a male of Irish descent, or whatever; if so, there is absolutely nothing wrong with saying so.

Some language practices are particularly unfair to women. Imagine a conversation among three people, you being one of them. Imagine that the other two talk only to each other. When you speak, they listen politely; but when you are finished, they continue as though you had never spoken. Even though what you say is true and relevant to the discussion, the other two proceed as though you were invisible. Because you are not being taken seriously, you are at a considerable disadvantage. You have reason to be unhappy.

In an analogous way, women have been far less visible in language than men and have thus been at a disadvantage. Another word for the human race is not “woman,” but “man” or “mankind.” The generic human has often been referred to as “he.” How do you run a project? You man it. Who supervises the department or runs the meeting? The chairman. Who heads the crew? The foreman. Picture a research scientist to yourself. Got the picture? Is it a picture of a woman? No? That’s because the standard picture, or stereotype, of a research scientist is a picture of a man. Or, read this sentence: “Research scientists often put their work before their personal lives and neglect their husbands.” Were you surprised by the last word? Again, the stereotypical picture of a research scientist is a picture of a man.

A careful and precise writer finds little need to converse in the lazy language of stereotypes, especially those that perpetuate prejudice. As long as the idea prevails that the “normal” research scientist is a man, women who are or who wish to become research scientists will tend to be thought of as out of place. So they must carry an extra burden, the burden of showing that they are not out of place. That’s unfair. If you unthinkingly always write, “The research scientist . . . he,” you are perpetuating an image that places women at a disadvantage. Some research scientists are men, and some are women. If you wish to make a claim about male research scientists, do so. But if you wish to make a claim about research scientists in general, don’t write as though they were all males.
The rule to follow in all cases is this: Keep your writing free of irrelevant implied evaluation of gender, race, ethnic background, religion, or any other human attribute.

This list summarizes the topics covered in this chapter:

- Clarity of language is extremely important to the ability to think critically.
- Clarity of language can often be lost as a result of multiple causes, including, importantly, vagueness, ambiguity, and generality.
- Vagueness is a matter of degree; what matters is not being too vague for the purposes at hand.
- A statement is ambiguous when it is subject to more than one interpretation and it isn’t clear which interpretation is the correct one.
- Some main types of ambiguity are semantic ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, grouping ambiguity, and ambiguous pronoun reference.
- A claim is overly general when it lacks sufficient detail to restrict its application to the immediate subject.
- To reduce vagueness or eliminate ambiguity, or when new or unfamiliar words are brought into play, or familiar words are used in an unusual way, definitions are our best tool.
- The most common types of definitions are definition by synonym, definition by example, and analytical definition.
- Some “definitions” are intended not to clarify meaning but to express or influence attitude. These are known as rhetorical definitions.
- Rhetorical definitions accomplish their ends by means of the rhetorical force (emotive meaning) of terms.
- Critical thinking done on paper is known as an argumentative essay, a type of writing worth mastering, perhaps by following our suggestions.

Exercise 3–4

Are the italicized words or phrases in each of the following too imprecise given the implied context? Explain.

1. Please cook this steak longer. It’s too rare.
2. If you get ready for bed quickly, Mommy has a surprise for you.
3. This program contains language that some viewers may find offensive. It is recommended for mature audiences only.
4. Turn down the damned noise! Some people around here want to sleep!
5. Based on our analysis of your eating habits, we recommend that you lower your consumption of saturated fat.

6. NOTICE: Hazard Zone. Small children not permitted beyond this sign.

7. SOFAS CLEANED: $48 & up. MUST SEE TO GIVE EXACT PRICES.

8. And remember, all our mufflers come with a lifetime guarantee.

9. CAUTION: To avoid unsafe levels of carbon monoxide, do not set the wick on your kerosene stove too high.

10. Uncooked Frosting: Combine 1 unbeaten egg white, ½ cup corn syrup, ½ teaspoon vanilla, and dash salt. Beat with electric mixer until of fluffy spreading consistency. Frost cake. Serve within a few hours or refrigerate.

Exercise 3–5

Read the following passage, paying particular attention to the italicized words and phrases. Determine whether any of these expressions are too vague in the context in which you find them here.

Term paper assignment: Your paper should be typed, between eight and twelve pages in length, and double-spaced. You should make use of at least three sources. Grading will be based on organization, use of sources, clarity of expression, quality of reasoning, and grammar.

A rough draft is due before Thanksgiving. The final version is due at the end of the semester.

Exercise 3–6

Read the following passage, paying particular attention to the italicized words and phrases. All of these expressions would be too imprecise for use in some contexts; determine which are and which are not too imprecise in this context.

In view of what can happen in twelve months to the fertilizer you apply at any one time, you can see why just one annual application may not be adequate. Here is a guide to timing the feeding of some of the more common types of garden flowers.

Feed begonias and fuchsias frequently with label-recommended amounts or less frequently with no more than half the recommended amount. Feed roses with label-recommended amounts as a new year’s growth begins and as each bloom period ends. Feed azaleas, camellias, rhododendrons, and similar plants immediately after bloom and again when the nights begin cooling off. Following these simple instructions can help your flower garden to be as attractive as it can be.

Exercise 3–7

Rewrite the following claims to remedy problems of ambiguity. Do not assume that common sense by itself solves the problem. If the ambiguity is intentional, note this fact, and do not rewrite.
Example

Former professional football player Jim Brown was accused of assaulting a thirty-three-year-old woman with a female accomplice.

Answer

This claim is syntactically ambiguous because it isn’t clear what the phrase “with a female accomplice” modifies—Brown, the woman who was attacked, or, however bizarre it might be, the attack itself (he might have thrown the accomplice at the woman). To make it clear that Brown had the accomplice, the phrase “with a female accomplice” should have come right after the word “Brown” in the original claim.

1. The Raider tackle threw a block at the Giants linebacker.
2. Please close the door behind you.
3. We heard that he informed you of what he said in his letter.
4. “How Therapy Can Help Torture Victims”
   —Headline in newspaper
5. Charles drew his gun.
6. They were both exposed to someone who was ill a week ago.
7. Chelsea has Hillary Clinton’s nose.
8. I flush the cooling system regularly and just put in new thermostats.
   —An ad for formal wear, quoted by Herb Caen
10. “Police Kill 6 Coyotes After Mauling of Girl”
    —Headline in newspaper
11. “We promise nothing”
    —Aquafina advertisement
12. A former governor of California, Pat Brown, viewing an area struck by a flood, is said to have remarked, “This is the greatest disaster since I was elected governor.”
    —Quoted by Lou Cannon in the Washington Post
13. “Besides Lyme disease, two other tick-borne diseases, babesiosis and HGE, are infecting Americans in 30 states, according to recent studies. A single tick can infect people with more than one disease.”
    —Self magazine
14. “Don’t freeze your can at the game.”
    —Commercial for Miller beer
15. Volunteer help requested: Come prepared to lift heavy equipment with construction helmet and work overalls.
16. “GE: We bring good things to life.”
    —Television commercial
17. “Tropicana 100% Pure Florida Squeezed Orange Juice. You can’t pick a better juice.”
   —Magazine advertisement

18. “It’s biodegradable! So remember, Arm and Hammer laundry detergent gets your wash as clean as can be [pause] without polluting our waters.”
   —Television commercial

19. If you crave the taste of a real German beer, nothing is better than Dunkelbrau.

20. Independent laboratory tests prove that Houndstooth cleanser gets your bathroom cleaner than any other product.

21. We’re going to look at lots this afternoon.

22. Jordan could write more profound essays.

23. “Two million times a day Americans love to eat, Rice-a-Roni—the San Francisco treat.”
   —Advertisement

24. “New York’s first commercial human sperm-bank opened Friday with semen samples from 18 men frozen in a stainless steel tank.”
   —Strunk and White, The Elements of Style

25. She was disturbed when she lay down to nap by a noisy cow.

26. “More than half of expectant mothers suffer heartburn. To minimize symptoms, suggests Donald O. Castell, M.D., of the Graduate Hospital in Philadelphia, avoid big, high-fat meals and don’t lie down for three hours after eating.”
   —Self magazine

27. “Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.”
   —Richard Lederer

28. “When Queen Elizabeth exposed herself before her troops, they all shouted ‘harrah.’”
   —Richard Lederer

29. “In one of Shakespeare’s famous plays, Hamlet relieves himself in a long soliloquy.”
   —Richard Lederer

30. The two suspects fled the area before the officers’ arrival in a white Ford Mustang, being driven by a third male.

31. “AT&T, for the life of your business.”

32. The teacher of this class might have been a member of the opposite sex.

33. “Woman gets 9 years for killing 11th husband.”
   —Headline in newspaper

34. “Average hospital costs are now an unprecedented $2,063.04 per day in California. Many primary plans don’t pay 20% of that amount.”
   —AARP Group Health Insurance Program advertisement
35. “I am a huge Mustang fan.”  
   —Ford Mustang advertisement

36. “Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of  
9:00 and 11:00 A.M. daily.”  
   —Sign in an Athens, Greece, hotel

37. “Order your summers suit. Because is big rush we will execute custom- 
ers in strict rotation.”  
   —Sign in a Rhodes tailor shop

38. “Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to  
the guard on duty.”  
   —Sign at a Budapest zoo

39. “Our wines leave you with nothing to hope for.”  
   —From a Swiss menu

40. “Our Promise—Good for life.”  
   —Cheerios

41. Thinking clearly involves hard work.
42. “Cadillac—Break Through”

Exercise 3–8

Determine which of the italicized expressions are ambiguous, which are more  
likely to refer to the members of the class taken as a group, and which are  
more likely to refer to the members of the class taken individually.

Example

   Narcotics are habit forming.

Answer

In this claim, narcotics refers to individual members of the class because  
it is specific narcotics that are habit forming. [One does not ordinarily  
become addicted to the entire class of narcotics.]

1. Swedes eat millions of quarts of yogurt every day.
2. Professors at the university make millions of dollars a year.
3. Our amplifiers can be heard all across the country.
4. Students at Pleasant Valley High School enroll in hundreds of courses  
each year.
5. Cowboys die with their boots on.
6. The angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees.
8. On our airline, passengers have their choice of three different meals.
9. On our airline, passengers flew fourteen million miles last month with-  
out incident.
10. *Hundreds of people* have ridden in that taxi.

11. *All our cars* are on sale for two hundred dollars over factory invoice.

12. *Chicagoans* drink more beer than *New Yorkers.*

13. *Power lawn mowers* produce more pollution than *motorcycles.*

14. *The Baltimore Orioles* may make it to the World Series in another six or seven years.

15. *People* are getting older.

**Exercise 3-9**

From your reading of this chapter, it should be fairly easy to identify the two kinds of mistakes present in the following ten examples. Identify which of the mistakes is present in each.

1. Irish wolfhounds are becoming increasingly popular these days. My dog is an Irish wolfhound. Therefore, my dog is becoming increasingly popular these days.

2. Humans are made of atoms and molecules. But neither atoms nor molecules are visible to the unaided eye. Therefore, humans should not be visible to the naked eye.

3. Salmon are disappearing from this river. Hey! There’s a salmon now! Let’s watch and see if it disappears!

4. During the nineteenth century, the English ruled the world. Harold Bingham was a nineteenth-century Englishman. Therefore, during the nineteenth century, Harold Bingham ruled the world.

5. A Humvee uses much more gasoline than a Honda automobile. So, clearly, more of the gasoline pumped these days is used by Humvees than by Hondas.

6. Humans give live birth to their children. Arnold Schwarzenegger is a human. Therefore, Arnold Schwarzenegger gives live birth to his children.

7. Every actor in the movie, as well as the director and the screenwriter, is Oscar-winner quality. So, the movie is surely Oscar-winner quality.

8. Sodium is dangerous if ingested in even modest quantities. The same is true of chloride. So, a combination of sodium and chloride will surely be very dangerous if ingested.

9. Students at the University of South Carolina consume more than 1,000 kilos of grits every semester. Susan is a student at South Carolina. Hard to see how anyone could eat that much of anything, but I guess she does.

10. If people are thrifty and save a large percentage of their money, then their personal economy is better off in the long run. Therefore, if a society is thrifty and saves a large percentage of its money, the society will be better off in the long run.
Exercise 3–10

What is the ambiguity behind the joke?

Exercise 3–11

Determine which of the following definitions are more likely designed to persuade and which are not.

1. Punk is musical freedom. It’s saying, doing and playing what you want. In Webster’s terms, ‘nirvana’ means freedom from pain, suffering and the external world, and that’s pretty close to my definition of Punk Rock.
   —Kurt Cobain

2. Congress’s definition of torture...[is] the infliction of severe mental or physical pain.
   —John Yoo

3. Democrats’ definition of “rich”—always seems to be set just above whatever the salary happens to be for a member of Congress. Perhaps that says it all.
   —Steve Steckler

4. That is the definition of faith—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove.
   —Dan Brown

5. Sin: That’s anything that’s so much fun it’s difficult not to do it.
   —Dave Kilbourne

Exercise 3–12

Make up six definitions, two of which are designed to make the thing defined look good, two of which are designed to make it look bad, and two of which are neutral.
Exercise 3-13

The sentences in this Associated Press health report have been scrambled. Rearrange them so that the report makes sense.

1. The men, usually strong with no known vices or ailments, die suddenly, uttering an agonizing groan, writhing and gasping before succumbing to the mysterious affliction.
2. Scores of cases have been reported in the United States during the past decade.
3. In the United States, health authorities call it “Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome,” or “SUDS.”
4. Hundreds of similar deaths have been noted worldwide.
5. The phenomenon is known as “lai tai,” or “nightmare death,” in Thailand.
6. In the Philippines, it is called “bangungut,” meaning “to rise and moan in sleep.”
7. Health officials are baffled by a syndrome that typically strikes Asian men in their thirties while they sleep.
8. Researchers cannot say what is killing SUDS victims.

Exercise 3-14

The sentences in the following passage have been scrambled. Rearrange them so that the passage makes sense. You’ll find an answer in the answer section.

1. Weintraub’s findings were based on a computer test of 1,101 doctors twenty-eight to ninety-two years old.
2. She and her colleagues found that the top ten scorers aged seventy-five to ninety-two did as well as the average of men under thirty-five.
4. “The studies also provide intriguing clues to how that happens,” said Sandra Weintraub, a neuropsychologist at Harvard Medical School in Boston.
5. “The ability of some men to retain mental function might be related to their ability to produce a certain type of brain cell not present at birth,” she said.
6. The studies show that some men manage to escape the trend of declining mental ability with age.
7. Many elderly men are at least as mentally able as the average young adult, according to recent studies.
Exercise 3-15

Rewrite each of the following claims in gender-neutral language.

Example

We have insufficient manpower to complete the task.

Answer

We have insufficient personnel to complete the task.

1. A student should choose his major with considerable care.
2. When a student chooses his major, he must do so carefully.
3. The true citizen understands his debt to his country.
4. If a nurse can find nothing wrong with you in her preliminary examination, she will recommend a physician to you. However, in this city the physician will wish to protect himself by having you sign a waiver.
5. You should expect to be interviewed by a personnel director. You should be cautious when talking to him.
6. The entrant must indicate that he has read the rules, that he understands them, and that he is willing to abide by them. If he has questions, then he should bring them to the attention of an official, and he will answer them.
7. A soldier should be prepared to sacrifice his life for his comrades.
8. If anyone wants a refund, he should apply at the main office and have his identification with him.
9. The person who has tried our tea knows that it will neither keep him awake nor make him jittery.
10. If any petitioner is over sixty, he (she) should have completed form E-7.
11. Not everyone has the same beliefs. One person may not wish to put himself on the line, whereas another may welcome the chance to make his view known to his friends.
12. God created man in his own image.
13. Language is nature’s greatest gift to mankind.
14. Of all the animals, the most intelligent is man.
15. The common man prefers peace to war.
16. The proof must be acceptable to the rational man.
17. The Founding Fathers believed that all men are created equal.
18. Man’s pursuit of happiness has led him to prefer leisure to work.
19. When the individual reaches manhood, he is able to make such decisions for himself.
20. If an athlete wants to play for the National Football League, he should have a good work ethic.
21. The new city bus service has hired several women drivers.
22. The city is also hiring firemen, policemen, and mailmen; and the city council is planning to elect a new chairman.
23. Harold Vasquez worked for City Hospital as a male nurse.
24. Most U.S. senators are men.
25. Mr. and Mrs. Macleod joined a club for men and their wives.
26. Mr. Macleod lets his wife work for the city.
27. Macleod doesn’t know it, but Mrs. Macleod is a women’s libber.
28. Several coeds have signed up for the seminar.
29. A judge must be sensitive to the atmosphere in his courtroom.
30. To be a good politician, you have to be a good salesman.

Exercise 3-16

A riddle: A man is walking down the street one day when he suddenly recognizes an old friend whom he has not seen in years walking in his direction with a little girl. They greet each other warmly, and the friend says, “I married since I last saw you, to someone you never met, and this is my daughter, Ellen.” The man says to Ellen, “You look just like your mother.” How did he know that?

This riddle comes from Janice Moulton’s article “The Myth of the Neutral Man.” Discuss why so many people don’t get the answer to this riddle straight off.

Classroom/Writing Exercise

This exercise is designed for use in the classroom, although your instructor may make a different kind of assignment. Consider the often heard claim, “Homosexuality is not natural.” Many people agree or disagree with this statement even though they have only the most rudimentary idea of what it might mean. Discuss what you think might be meant by the claim, taking note of any vagueness or ambiguity that might be involved.

Writing Exercises

Everyone, no matter how well he or she writes, can improve. And the best way to improve is to practice. Since finding a topic to write about is often the hardest part of a writing assignment, we’re supplying three subjects for you to write about. For each—or whichever your instructor might assign—write a one- to two-page essay in which you clearly identify the issue (or issues), state your position on the issue (a hypothetical position if you don’t have one), and give at least one good reason in support of your position. Try also to give at least one reason why the opposing position is wrong.

1. The exchange of dirty hypodermic needles for clean ones, or the sale of clean ones, is legal in many states. In such states, the transmission of HIV and hepatitis from dirty needles is down dramatically. But bills [in
the California legislature] to legalize clean-needle exchanges have been stymied by the last two governors, who earnestly but incorrectly believed that the availability of clean needles would increase drug abuse. Our state, like every other state that has not yet done it, should immediately approve legislation to make clean needles available.

—Adapted from an editorial by Marsha N. Cohen, professor of law at Hastings College of Law

2. On February 11, 2003, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the state of Arkansas could force death-row prisoner Charles Laverne Singleton to take antipsychotic drugs to make him sane enough to execute. Singleton was to be executed for felony capital murder but became insane while in prison. “Medicine is supposed to heal people, not prepare them for execution. A law that asks doctors to make people well so that the government can kill them is an absurd law,” said David Kaczynski, the executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty.

3. Some politicians make a lot of noise about how Canadians and others pay much less for prescription drugs than Americans do. Those who are constantly pointing to the prices and the practices of other nations when it comes to pharmaceutical drugs ignore the fact that those other nations lag far behind the United States when it comes to creating new medicines. Canada, Germany, and other countries get the benefits of American research but contribute much less than the United States does to the creation of drugs. On the surface, these countries have a good deal, but in reality everyone is worse off, because the development of new medicines is slower than it would be if worldwide prices were high enough to cover research costs.

—Adapted from an editorial by Thomas Sowell, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution