

## WRITING ABOUT THE THEME

### EXAMINING STEREOTYPES

1. All of the authors in this chapter suggest that stereotypes play a significant part in our perceptions of others and ourselves. Firoozeh Dumas (p. 239) refers to American disdain for “nerds and geeks and dorks,” Sherman Alexie (p. 239) to expectations that American Indians are destined to fail, Alaina Wong (p. 246) to her misguided preference for blond Barbie dolls, Antonio Ruiz-Camacho (p. 252) to his lingering “prejudices” about his home country of Mexico, and Barbara Lazear Ascher (p. 258) to assumptions that homeless people lack dignity. To what extent, if at all, are such stereotypes the result of media hype or distortion, whether in advertising, news stories, television programming, movies, or elsewhere? What else might contribute to popular assumptions in each case? Write an essay explaining how stereotypes arise in the first place. You could use the misconceptions identified by the authors in this chapter for your examples, or you could supply examples of your own.
2. Firoozeh Dumas, Sherman Alexie, Antonio Ruiz-Camacho, and Barbara Lazear Ascher refer to misperceptions of a minority group on the part of the dominant society. Think of a minority group to which you belong. It could be based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, religion, physical disability, or any other characteristic. How is your minority perceived in the dominant culture, and how does this perception resemble or differ from the reality as you know it? Write an essay comparing the perception of and the reality of your group.
3. Most of the writers in this chapter wrestle with questions of identity, addressing issues as diverse as the emotional impact of racial stereotypes (Dumas, Alexie, Wong), cultural attitudes toward intelligence and education (Dumas, Alexie, Ruiz-Camacho), the role of peers and family in the development of an individual's self-esteem (Dumas, Alexie, Wong, Ruiz-Camacho, Ascher), and the importance of a sense of home (Ruiz-Camacho, Ascher). All five authors rely on comparison and contrast, but otherwise they go about their tasks very differently. Most notably, perhaps, their tones vary widely, from irony to vulnerability to anger. Choose the two works that seem most different in this respect, and analyze how the tone of each helps the author achieve his or her purpose. Give specific examples to support your ideas. Does your analysis lead you to conclude that one tone is likely to be more effective than another in addressing stereotypes?

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## DEFINITION

### PURSuing HAPPINESS

**Definition** sets the boundaries of a thing, a concept, an emotion, or a value. In answering “What is it?” and also “What is it *not*?” definition specifies the main qualities of a subject and its essential nature. Since words are only symbols, pinning down their precise meanings is essential for us to understand ourselves and one another. Thus we use definition constantly, whether we are explaining a new word like *clickbait* to someone who has never heard it, specifying what we're after when we say we want to do something *fun*, or clarifying the diagnosis of a child as *hyperactive*.

We often use brief definitions to clarify the meanings of words—for instance, taking a few sentences to explain a technical term in an engineering study. But we may also need to define concepts at length, especially when they are abstract, complicated, or controversial. Drawing on other methods of development, such as example, analysis, or comparison and contrast, entire essays might be devoted to debated phrases (such as *family values*), to the current uses of a word (*monopoly* in business), or to the meanings of a term in a particular context (like *personality* in psychological theory). Definition is, in other words, essential whenever we want to be certain that we are understood.

### Reading Definition

There are several kinds of definition, each with different uses. One is the **formal definition**, usually a statement of the general class of things to which the word belongs, followed by the distinction(s) between it and other members of the class. For example:

	<i>General class</i>	<i>Distinction(s)</i>
A submarine is	a seagoing vessel	that operates underwater.
A parable is	a brief, simple story	that illustrates a moral or religious principle.
Pressure is	the force	applied to a given surface.
Insanity is	a mental condition	in which a defendant does not know right from wrong.

A formal definition usually gives a standard dictionary meaning of the word (as in the first two examples) or a specialized meaning agreed to by the members of a profession or discipline (as in the last two examples, from physics and criminal law, respectively). Writers use formal definition to explain the basic meaning of a term so that readers can understand the rest of a discussion. Occasionally, a formal definition can serve as a springboard to a more elaborate, detailed exploration of a word. For instance, an essay might define *pride* simply as “a sense of self-respect” before probing the varied meanings of the word as people actually understand it and then settling on a fuller and more precise meaning of the author’s own devising.

This more detailed definition of *pride* could fall into one of two other types of definition: stipulative and extended. A stipulative definition clarifies the particular way a writer is using a word: it stipulates, or specifies, a meaning to suit a larger purpose; the definition is part of a larger whole. For example, to show how pride can destroy personal relationships, a writer might first stipulate a meaning of *pride* that ties in with that purpose. Though a stipulative definition may sometimes take the form of a brief formal definition, most require several sentences or even paragraphs. In a physics textbook, for instance, the physicist’s definition of *pressure* quoted above probably would not suffice to give readers a good sense of the term and eliminate all the other possible meanings they may have in mind.

Whereas a writer may use a formal or stipulative definition for some larger purpose, he or she would use an extended definition for the sake of defining—that is, for the purpose of exploring a thing, quality, or idea in its full complexity and drawing boundaries around it until its meaning is complete and precise. Extended definitions usually treat subjects so complex, vague, or laden with emotions or values that people misunderstand

stand or disagree over their meanings. The subject may be an abstract concept like *patriotism*, a controversial phrase like *beginnings of life*, a colloquial or slang expression like *hype*, a thing like *nanobot*, a scientific idea like *neural plasticity*, even an everyday expression like *nagging*. Besides defining, the purpose may be to persuade readers to accept a definition (for instance, that life begins at conception, or at birth), to explain (what is neural plasticity?), or to amuse (nagging as exemplified by great nags).

As the variety of possible subjects and purposes may suggest, an extended definition may draw on whatever methods will best accomplish the goal of specifying what the subject encompasses and distinguishing it from similar things, qualities, or concepts. Several strategies are unique to definition:

- **Synonyms**, or words of similar meaning, can convey the range of the word’s meanings. For example, a writer could equate *misery* with *wretchedness* and *distress*.
- **Negation**, or saying what a word does not mean, can limit the meaning, particularly when a writer wants to focus on only one sense of an abstract term, such as *love*, that is open to diverse interpretations.
- **The etymology** of a word—its history—may illuminate its meaning, perhaps by showing the direction and extent of its change (*pride*, for instance, comes from a Latin word meaning “to be beneficial or useful”) or by uncovering buried origins that remain implicit in the modern meaning (*patriotism* comes from the Greek word for “father”; *happy* comes from the Old Norse word for “good luck”).

These strategies of definition may be used alone or together, and they may occupy whole paragraphs in an essay-length definition; but they rarely provide enough range to surround the subject completely. That’s why most definition essays draw on at least some of the other methods discussed in this book. One or two methods may predominate: an essay on nagging, for instance, might be developed with brief narratives. Or several methods may be combined: a definition of *patriotism* might compare it with *nationalism*, analyze its effects (such as the actions people take on its behalf), and give examples of patriotic individuals. By drawing on the appropriate methods, a writer defines and clarifies a specific perspective on the subject so that the reader understands the meaning exactly.

## Analyzing Definition in Paragraphs

**Carlin Flora** (born 1975) is a science journalist and the author of *Friendfluence: The Surprising Ways Friends Make Us Who We Are* (2013). The following paragraph is from “The Pursuit of Happiness,” an article she wrote for the magazine *Psychology Today*.

What is happiness? The most useful definition—and it’s one agreed upon by neuroscientists, psychiatrists, behavioral economists, positive psychologists, and Buddhist monks—is more like satisfied or content than “happy” in its strict bursting-with-gee sense. It has depth and deliberation to it. It encompasses living a meaningful life, utilizing your gifts and your time, living with thought and purpose. It’s maximized when you also feel part of a community. And when you confront annoyances and crises with grace. It involves a willingness to learn and stretch and grow, which sometimes involves discomfort. It requires acting on life, not merely taking it in. It’s not joy, a temporary exhilaration, or even pleasure, that sensual rush—though a steady supply of those feelings course through those who seize each day.

**Dagoberto Gilb** (born 1950) is a fiction writer and an essayist. Raised in Southern California by Mexican and German American parents, Gilb often celebrates the lives of working-class Latinos in his work. This paragraph is from his essay “Pride,” first published in the *Texas Observer*.

Pride hears gritty dirt blowing against an agave whose stiff fertile stalk, so tall, will not bend—the love of land, rugged like the people who live on it. Pride sees the sunlight on the Franklin Mountains in the first light of morning and listens to a neighbor’s gallo—the love of culture and history. Pride smells a sweet, musky drizzle of rain and eats huevos con chile in corn tortillas heated on a cast iron pan—the love of heritage. Pride is the fearless reaction to disrespect and disregard. It is knowing the future will prove that wrong.

## Developing an Essay by Definition

### ▶ Getting Started

You’ll sometimes be asked to write definition essays, as when a psychology exam asks for a discussion of *schizophrenia* or a political science assignment calls for an explanation of the term *totalitarianism*. To come up with a subject on your own, consider words that have complex meanings and are either unfamiliar to readers or open to varied interpretations. The subject should be something you know and care enough about to explore in great detail. An idea for a subject may come from an overheard conversation (for instance, a reference to someone as “too patriotic”), a personal experience (an accomplishment that filled you with pride), or something you’ve seen or read (another writer’s definition of *jazz*).

Begin exploring your subject by examining and listing its conventional meanings (consulting an unabridged dictionary may help here, and the dictionary will also give you synonyms and etymology). Also examine the differences of opinion about the word’s meanings—the different ways, wrong or right, that you have heard or seen it used. Run through the other methods to see what fresh approaches to the subject they open up:

- How can the subject be described?
- What are some examples?
- Can the subject be divided into qualities or characteristics?
- Can its processes help define it?
- Will comparing and contrasting it with something else help sharpen its meaning?
- Do its causes or effects help clarify its sense?

Some of the questions may turn up nothing, but others may open your eyes to meanings you had not seen.

### ▶ Forming a Thesis

When you have generated a good list of ideas about your subject, settle on the purpose of your definition. Do you mostly want to explain a word that is unfamiliar to readers? Do you want to express your own view so that readers see a familiar subject from a new angle? Do you want to argue in favor of a particular definition or perhaps persuade readers to look more critically at themselves or their surroundings? Try to work your purpose

Question introduces concept to be defined

Synonyms

Factors that contribute to happiness:

meaningful life  
community  
positive attitude  
activity

Concluding sentence states what happiness is not

Definition by description:

Sound and touch

Sight and sound (a gallo is a rooster)

Smell and taste (huevos are eggs)

Explanations (underlined once) and topic sentence (underlined twice) clarify meaning

into a thesis sentence that summarizes your definition and—just as important—asserts something about the subject. For example:

**TENTATIVE THESIS STATEMENT** The prevailing concept of *patriotism* is dangerously wrong.

**REVISED THESIS STATEMENT** Though generally considered entirely positive in meaning, *patriotism* in fact reflects selfish, childish emotions that have no place in a global society.

(Note that the revised thesis statement not only summarizes the writer's definition and makes an assertion about the subject, but it also identifies the prevailing definition she intends to counter in her essay.)

With a thesis sentence formulated, reevaluate your ideas in light of it and pause to consider the needs of your readers:

- *What do readers already know about your subject, and what do they need to be told in order to understand it as you do?*
- *Are your readers likely to be biased for or against your subject? If you were defining patriotism, for example, you might assume that your readers see the word as representing a constructive, even essential value that contributes to the strength of a country. If your purpose were to contest this view, as implied by the revised thesis statement, you would have to build your case carefully to win readers to your side.*

### ► Organizing

The introduction to a definition essay should provide a base from which to expand and at the same time explain to readers why the forthcoming definition is useful, significant, or necessary. You may want to report the incident that prompted you to define, say why the subject itself is important, or specify the common understandings, or misunderstandings, about its meaning. Several devices can serve as effective beginnings: the etymology of the word; a quotation from another writer supporting or contradicting your definition; or an explanation of what the word does *not* mean (negation). (Try to avoid the overused opening that cites a dictionary: “According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, \_\_\_\_\_ means . . .” Your readers have probably seen this opening many times before.) If it is not implied in the rest of your introduction, you may want to state your thesis so that readers know precisely what your purpose and point are.

The body of the essay should then proceed, paragraph by paragraph, to refine the characteristics or qualities of the subject, using the arrange-

ment and methods that will distinguish it from anything similar and provide your perspective. For instance, you might try any of the following approaches:

- *Draw increasingly tight boundaries around the subject, moving from broader, more familiar meanings to the one you have in mind.*
- *Arrange your points in order of increasing drama.*
- *Begin with your own experience of the subject and then show how you see it operating in your surroundings.*

The conclusion to a definition essay is equally a matter of choice. You might summarize your definition, indicate its superiority to other definitions of the same subject, quote another writer whose view supports your own, or recommend that readers make some use of the information you have provided. The choice depends—as it does in any kind of essay—on your purpose and the impression you want to leave with readers.

### ► Drafting

While drafting your extended definition, keep your subject vividly in mind. Say too much rather than too little about it to ensure that you capture its essence; you can always cut when you revise. And be sure to provide plenty of details and examples to support your view. Such evidence is particularly important when, as in the earlier example of patriotism, you wish to change readers’ perceptions of your subject.

In definition the words you use are especially important. Abstractions and generalities cannot draw precise boundaries around a subject, so your words must be as **concrete** and **specific** as you can make them. You’ll have chances during revising and editing to work on your words, but try during drafting to pin down your meanings. Use words and phrases that appeal directly to the senses and experiences of readers. When appropriate, use **figures of speech** to make meaning inescapably clear; instead of “Patriotism is childish,” for example, write “The blindly patriotic person is like a small child who sees his or her parents as gods, all-knowing, always right.” The **connotations** of words—the associations called up in readers’ minds by words like *home*, *ambitious*, and *generous*—can contribute to your definition as well. But be sure that connotative words trigger associations suited to your purpose. And when you are trying to explain something precisely, rely most heavily on words with generally neutral meanings.

**FOCUS ON UNITY**

When drafting a definition, you may find yourself being pulled away from your subject by the descriptions, examples, comparisons, and other methods you use to specify meaning. Let yourself explore byways of your subject—doing so will help you discover what you think. But in revising you'll need to direct all paragraphs to your thesis, and within paragraphs you'll need to direct all sentences to the paragraph topic, generally expressed in a **topic sentence**. In other words, you'll need to ensure that your essay and its paragraphs have **unity**.

One way to achieve unity is to focus each paragraph on some part of your definition and then to focus each sentence within the paragraph on that part. Judy Brady's "I Want a Wife" (p. 276) proceeds in just such a pattern, as the following outline shows. The first two paragraphs conclude with Brady's thesis. Then the sentences from paragraphs 3–9 specify the paragraph topics. A look at Brady's essay will show you that each of her paragraphs elaborates on its topic.

**THESIS (PARAGRAPH 2)** I . . . would like to have a wife.

**PARAGRAPH 3** I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And . . . I want a wife to take care of my children.

**PARAGRAPH 4** I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs.

**PARAGRAPH 5** I want a wife who will not bother me with rambling complaints. . . . But I want a wife who will listen to me.

**PARAGRAPH 6** I want a wife who will take care of the details of my social life.

**PARAGRAPH 7** I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs.

**PARAGRAPH 8** I want the liberty to replace my present wife with another one.

**PARAGRAPH 9** When I am through with school and have a job, I want my wife to quit working and remain at home.

If some part of your definition requires more than a single paragraph, by all means expand it. But keep the group of paragraphs focused on a single idea.

For more on unity in essays and paragraphs, see pages 34–35.

**► Revising and Editing**

When you are satisfied that your draft is complete, revise and edit it against the following questions and the information in the Focus box on the previous page.

- *Have you defined your subject completely and tightly?* Your definition should not leave gaps, nor should the boundaries be so broadly drawn that the subject overlaps something else. For instance, a definition of *hype* that focuses on exaggerated and deliberately misleading claims should include all such claims (some political speeches, say, as well as some advertisements), and it should exclude appeals that do not fit the basic definition (some public-service advertising, for instance).
- *Does your definition reflect the conventional meanings of the word?* Even if you are providing a fresh slant on your subject, you can't change its meaning entirely, or you will confuse your readers and undermine your own credibility. *Patriotism*, for example, could not be defined from the first as "hatred of foreigners," for that definition strays into an entirely different realm. The conventional meaning of "love of country" would have to serve as the starting point, though your essay might interpret the meaning in an original way.

**A Note on Thematic Connections**

Happiness is the core topic of this chapter. The authors represented here all offer their own perspectives on the meanings of an abstract concept that many of us take for granted. In paragraphs, Carlin Flora presents the meaning of happiness as most psychologists understand it (p. 270), and Dagoberto Gilb outlines the sources of pride for one Latino community (p. 270). Judy Brady examines the traditional gender roles that made her miserable (next page), while Augusten Burroughs writes about the satisfaction to be found in accepting unhappiness as a natural state (p. 281). And Jessica Sayuri Boissy finds pleasure in adhering to the Zen principle of living in the moment (p. 287).

I belong to that classification of people known as wives. I am A Wife. And, not altogether incidentally, I am a mother.

Not too long ago a male friend of mine appeared on the scene fresh from a recent divorce. He had one child, who is, of course, with his ex-wife. He is looking for another wife. As I thought about him while I was ironing one evening, it suddenly occurred to me that I, too, would like to have a wife. Why do I want a wife?

I would like to go back to school so that I can become economically independent, support myself, and, if need be, support those dependent upon me. I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And while I am going to school I want a wife to take care of my children. I want a wife to keep track of the children's doctor and dentist appointments. And to keep track of mine, too. I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. I want a wife who will wash the children's clothes and keep them mended. I want a wife who is a good nurturant attendant to my children, who arranges for their schooling, makes sure that they have an adequate social life with their peers, takes them to the park, the zoo, etc. I want a wife who takes care of the children when they are sick, a wife who arranges to be around when the children need special care, because, of course, I cannot miss classes at school. My wife must arrange to lose time at work and not lose the job. It may mean a small cut in my wife's income from time to time, but I guess I can tolerate that. Needless to say, my wife will arrange and pay for the care of the children while my wife is working.

I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it. I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a good cook. I want a wife who will plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly, and then do the cleaning up while I do my studying. I want a wife who will care for me when I am sick and sympathize with my pain and loss of time from school. I want a wife to go along when our family takes a vacation so that someone can continue to care for me and my children when I need a rest and change of scene.

I want a wife who will not bother me with rambling complaints about a wife's duties. But I want a wife who will listen to me when I feel the need to explain a rather difficult point I have come across in my course of studies. And I want a wife who will type my papers for me when I have written them.

Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance.

—Jane Austen

Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage.

—George W. Bush

What is fascinating about marriage is why anyone wants to get married.

—Alain de Botton

**JOURNAL RESPONSE** Contemporary society exerts great pressure on single adults to form lasting romantic partnerships. Many unattached people, however, insist that they are perfectly happy to be alone, and many couples are content to live together without a formal commitment. Is marriage a prerequisite for happiness, or is it overrated? Reflect for a moment on what marriage means to you, and write a journal entry that explains your feelings on the subject.

## Judy Brady

Judy Brady was born in 1937 in San Francisco. She attended the University of Iowa and graduated with a bachelor's degree in painting in 1962. Married in 1960, she was raising two daughters within a few years. She began working in the women's movement in 1969 and through it developed an ongoing concern with political and social issues, especially women's rights, cancer, and the environment. She believes that "as long as women continue to tolerate a society which places profits above the needs of people, we will continue to be exploited as workers and as wives." Besides the essay reprinted here, Brady has written articles for various magazines and edited *One in Three: Women with Cancer Confront an Epidemic* (1991), motivated by her own struggle with the disease. She is also a founding member of the Toxic Links Coalition and an honorary board member of Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, both organizations concerned with the environment and human health.

## I Want a Wife

Writing after eleven years of marriage, and before divorcing her husband, Brady here pins down the meaning of the word *wife* from the perspective of someone profoundly unhappy with the role. This essay was first delivered as a speech at a San Francisco women's rally in 1970 and was then published in the premier issue of *Ms.* magazine in December 1971. It has since been reprinted widely. Is Brady's harsh portrayal of gender roles still relevant today?

I want a wife who will take care of the details of my social life. When my wife and I are invited out by friends, I want a wife who will take care of the babysitting arrangements. When I meet people at school that I like and want to entertain, I want a wife who will have the house clean, will prepare a special meal, serve it to me and my friends, and not interrupt when I talk about things that interest me and my friends. I want a wife who will have arranged that the children are fed and ready for bed before my guests arrive so that the children do not bother us. I want a wife who takes care of the needs of my guests so that they feel comfortable, who makes sure that they have an ashtray, that they are passed the hors d'oeuvres, that they are offered a second helping of the food, that their wine glasses are replenished when necessary, that their coffee is served to them as they like it. And I want a wife who knows that sometimes I need a night out by myself.

I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs, a wife who makes love passionately and eagerly when I feel like it, a wife who makes sure that I am satisfied. And, of course, I want a wife who will not demand sexual attention when I am not in the mood for it. I want a wife who assumes the complete responsibility for birth control, because I do not want more children. I want a wife who will remain sexually faithful to me so that I do not have to clutter up my intellectual life with jealousies. And I want a wife who understands that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy. I must, after all, be able to relate to people as fully as possible.

If, by chance, I find another person more suitable as a wife than the wife I already have, I want the liberty to replace my present wife with another one. Naturally, I will expect a fresh, new life; my wife will take the children and be solely responsible for them so that I am left free.

When I am through with school and have a job, I want my wife to quit working and remain at home so that my wife can more fully and completely take care of a wife's duties.

My God; who *wouldn't* want a wife?

### Meaning

1. In one or two sentences, summarize Brady's definition of a wife. Consider not only the functions she mentions but also the relationship she portrays.
2. Brady provides many instances of a double standard of behavior and responsibility for the wife and the wife's spouse. What are the wife's chief responsibilities and expected behaviors? What are the spouse's?

3. If any of the following words are unfamiliar, try to guess what they mean from the context of Brady's essay. Look up the words in a dictionary to check your guesses, and then use each one in a sentence or two of your own.

nurturant (3)  
hors d'oeuvres (6)

replenished (6)  
adherence (7)  
monogamy (7)

### Purpose and Audience

1. Why do you think Brady wrote this essay? Was her purpose to explain a wife's duties, to complain about her own situation, to poke fun at men, to attack men, to attack society's attitudes toward women, or something else? Was she trying to provide a realistic and fair definition of *wife*? What passages in the essay support your answers?
2. What does Brady seem to assume about her readers' gender (male or female) and their attitudes toward women's roles in society, relations between the sexes, and work inside and outside the home? Does she seem to write from the perspective of a particular age group or social and economic background? In answering these questions, cite specific passages from the essay.
3. Brady clearly intended to provoke a reaction from readers. What is your reaction to this essay: do you think it is realistic or exaggerated, fair or unfair to men, relevant or irrelevant to the present time? Why?

### Method and Structure

1. Why would anybody need to write an essay defining a term like *wife*? Don't we know what a wife is already? How does Brady use definition in an original way to achieve her purpose?
2. Analyze Brady's essay as a piece of definition, considering its thoroughness, its specificity, and its effectiveness in distinguishing the subject from anything similar.
3. Analyze the introduction to Brady's essay. What function does paragraph 1 serve? In what way does paragraph 2 confirm Brady's definition? How does the question at the end of the introduction relate to the question at the end of the essay?
4. **OTHER METHODS** Brady develops her definition primarily by **classification** (Chapter 9). What does she classify, and what categories does she form? What determines her arrangement of these categories? What does the classification contribute to the essay?



### Language

1. How would you characterize Brady's tone: whining, angry, contemptuous, or something else? What phrases in the essay support your answer?
2. Why does Brady repeat "I want a wife" in almost every sentence, often at the beginning of the sentence? What does this stylistic device convey about the person who wants a wife? How does it fit in with Brady's main idea and purpose?
3. Why does Brady never substitute the personal pronoun "she" for "my wife"? Does the effect gained by repeating "my wife" justify the occasionally awkward sentences, such as the last one in paragraph 3?
4. What effect does Brady achieve with the expressions "of course" (paragraphs 3 and 7), "Needless to say" (3), "after all" (7), and "Naturally" (8)?

### Writing Topics

1. **JOURNAL TO ESSAY** In your journal entry (p. 276), you explained what marriage means to you. Now expand your thoughts into an essay-length definition of *marriage*. Does your definition correspond to traditional assumptions about marriage, or is it unconventional? What characteristics does your definition *not* include?
2. Using your own observations and ideas generated by reading Brady's essay, analyze a role that is defined by gender, such as that of a wife or husband, mother or father, sister or brother, daughter or son. First write down the responsibilities, activities, and relationships that define that role, and then elaborate your ideas into an essay defining this role as you see it. You could, if appropriate, follow Brady's model by showing how the role is influenced by the expectations of another person or people.
3. **RESEARCH** Brady's essay was written in the specific cultural context of the early 1970s. Undoubtedly, many cultural changes have taken place since then, particularly changes in gender roles. However, one could also argue that much remains the same. Write an essay in which you compare the stereotypical role of a wife now with the role Brady defines. In addition to your own observations and experiences, consider images of wives presented by the media—for instance, in advertising or sitcoms—then and now.
4. **CONNECTIONS** Like Brady's "I Want a Wife," Roberto Rodriguez's "The Border on Our Backs" (p. 374) is also notable for a strong, uncompromising tone. Write an analysis of the language Brady and Rodriguez use to define an oppressed group's position in society. How are their attitudes similar or different? Use specific examples from both works.

### STORIES

We are happy when we have family, we are happy when we have friends, and almost all the other things we think make us happy are just ways of getting more family and friends.

—Daniel Gilbert

You cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happiness.

—Jonathan Safran Foer

I do not think we have a "right" to happiness. If happiness happens, say thanks.

—Marlene Dietrich

**JOURNAL RESPONSE** Have you ever said, "I just want to be happy"? Most of us have at some point, whether out loud to a friend or family member or silently to ourselves. Take a few moments to write in your journal about what happiness means to you. What do you want out of life? How do you plan to get it?

## Augusten Burroughs

Augusten Burroughs was born Christopher Robinson in 1965 and legally changed his name when he turned eighteen, an effort to distance himself from a traumatic youth. He has held a variety of positions, including advertising copywriter, dog trainer, and commentator for National Public Radio, but Burroughs is best known for a series of painfully open memoirs about his struggles with abuse and addiction: *Running with Scissors* (2002), an examination of parental abandonment and an unwelcome relationship with a pedophile; *Dry* (2003), a personal study of alcoholism; and *A Wolf at the Table* (2008), an indictment of the author's father. Burroughs has also written a novel and several collections of essays and stories, and in 2012 he published *This Is How: Proven Aid in Overcoming Shyness, Molestation, Fatness, Spinsterhood, Grief, Disease, Lushery, Decrepitude and More*, a self-help book he says he "was born to write." Recently the recipient of a Lambda Literary Award as well as an honorary doctorate of letters from the Savannah College of Art and Design, Burroughs lives with his husband in Manhattan.

### Unhappily Ever After

In this self-contained chapter from *This Is How*, Burroughs draws on personal experience and a dark sense of humor to advise readers on the perils of pursuing happiness. Wanting to be happy, he cautions, is a sure-fire way to make yourself miserable.



"I just want to be happy."

I can't think of another phrase capable of causing more misery and permanent unhappiness. With the possible exception of, "Honey, I'm in love with your youngest sister and she's agreed to marry me so I'd like a divorce."

Yet at first glance, it seems so guileless. Children just want to be happy. So do puppies and some middle-aged custodians.

Happy seems like a healthy, normal desire. Like wanting to breathe fresh air or shop only at Whole Foods.

But "I just want to be happy" is a hole cut out of the floor and covered with a rug.

Here's the problem: when you say to yourself or somebody else, "I just want to be happy," the implication is that you're not.

So what you want is something you don't have.

That's a mole behind your ear. Maybe it's just a mole and that's all it is. Wanting health insurance when you don't have it, wanting your kids to get a good education — nothing troubling about that.

But maybe that mole is something worse that's going to spread. And you become a person who moves frantically through life grabbing things off the shelf — the dark-haired boyfriend with the great parents since the blond musicians haven't worked out so well, the breast implants because then you'll like your body, the law degree that will make your father so proud of you and maybe you'll learn to like the law — but never managing to find the right thing, the one thing that will finally make you feel you aren't missing something essential, such as the point.

The "I just want to be happy" bear trap is that until you define precisely, just exactly what "happy" is, you will never feel it.

By defining what "happy" means to you in absolutely concrete terms you can then see what actions you need to take — or subtractions you need to make — to be able to say, "Yup, okay. This is the happy I was looking for. I've got it now. It's safe to get the breast implants."

If you're not a bespoke sort of person, you could use the standard, off-the-shelf definition.

Happiness is "a state of well-being characterized by emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy."

It's probably far-fetched to think you could be in a state of intense joy for most of the day. But maybe you could be mostly content.

Whatever being happy means to you, it needs to be specific and also possible. Maybe if you didn't have to go to work every day at a job you only tolerate but instead started your own online jewelry business. Maybe this would make you happy because you love jewelry; you find it interesting, you like to make it, you like the people who like it.

When you have a blueprint for what happiness is, lay it over your life and see what you need to change so the images are more aligned.

This recipe of defining what happiness means to you and then fiddling with your life to make the changes needed to make yourself happy will work for some people. But not for others.

I am one of the others.  
I am not a happy person.

There are things that do make me experience joy. But joy is a fleeting emotion, like a very long sneeze.

I feel contentment rarely, but I do feel it.

A lot of the time what I feel is interested. Or I feel melancholy. And I also frequently feel tenderness, annoyance, confusion, fear, hopelessness, friskiness.

It doesn't all add up to anything I would call happiness.

What I'm thinking is, is that so terrible?

I used to say "I just want to be happy" all the time. I said it so frequently and without care that I forgot to refill the phrase with meaning, so it was just a shell of words.

When I said these words, I had only a vague sense of what happiness even meant to me.

I can see it in others. I even know one person who is happy 95% of the time, seriously. He's not stupid. As a matter of fact, he's right here beside me as I write, his own computer on his own lap organizing his playlist. And he makes me happy more often than I have ever been happy. But I will never be as happy as he is. And I don't mind this because I might not appreciate his happiness so much if I had it, too.

Also, I know a physicist who loves his work. People mistake his constant focus and thought with unhappiness. But he's not unhappy. He's busy. I bet when he dies, there will be a book on his chest.

Happiness is a wonderful goal for those who are inclined on a genetic level toward that emotional end of the spectrum.

Happiness is a treadmill of a goal for people who are not happy by nature.

Being an unhappy person does not mean you must be sad or dark. You can be interested instead of happy. You can be fascinated instead of happy.

## Meaning

1. What is wrong, in Burrroughs's estimation, with saying "I just want to be happy" (paragraph 1)? What's the harm in expressing a universal human desire?

*What does Happiness mean to you?*

2. In your own words, **paraphrase** Burroughs's understanding of the "standard, off-the-shelf definition" of happiness (paragraph 13). How would he like to see happiness defined instead?
3. The title of this essay is an **allusion**, a reference to something else that Burroughs assumes his readers know of. What does the title refer to? How does the allusion reinforce his meaning?

4. Based on their context in Burroughs's essay, try to guess the meanings of any of the following words that you don't already know. Test your guesses in a dictionary, and then use each new word in a sentence or two of your own.

guileless (3)      contentment (13, 21)      friskiness (22)  
bespoke (12)      melancholy (22)      spectrum (29)

### Purpose and Audience

1. Burroughs identifies two kinds of people: those who are happy and those who are not. Which of these groups (if either) do you think Burroughs is addressing, and why?
2. What assumptions does Burroughs make about his audience? How do those assumptions influence his purpose? Support your response with evidence from the essay.
3. What is your attitude toward happiness? Did Burroughs's essay change your way of thinking? If so, how? If not, why not? Use specific examples from the essay to support your answer.

### Method and Structure

1. "Unhappily Ever After" identifies several potential synonyms for *happiness*. Make a list of those synonyms, both the "standard" ones (paragraph 13) and Burroughs's own. Which ones come closest to your own understanding of what happiness is? What other synonyms would you propose?
2. Consider how Burroughs uses negation to develop his definition. Why does he focus on unhappiness to the extent that he does?
3. This essay contains many short paragraphs. Do you find the short paragraphs more or less readable than the longer paragraphs used by most of the other writers in this book? As an exercise in revision, link Burroughs's short paragraphs into longer paragraphs wherever such links seem sensible. What specific reasons can you give for each of your changes?

4. **OTHER METHODS** As writers often do, Burroughs employs several methods to develop his definition, including **division or analysis** (Chapter 8), **cause-and-effect analysis** (Chapter 13), **process analysis** (Chapter 10), **comparison and contrast** (Chapter 11), **classification** (Chapter 9), and **example** (Chapter 7). What do the examples of happy people he cites in paragraphs 27–28 have in common?

### Language

1. In several places throughout his essay, Burroughs uses **metaphors** to add depth to his definition. Locate two examples that you find especially striking, and explain their meaning and their effect.
2. Burroughs generally uses the second-person *you* or the first-person *I*. Do you think the essay would have been more or less effective if he had stuck with less intimate alternatives, such as *he*, *she*, *they*, or *the unhappy person* throughout? Why?
3. "Unhappily Ever After" contains many vague pronoun references, **comma splices**, and, most notably, **sentence fragments**. Identify at least three instances. (Refer to pp. 42–47 if you need help.) Is this sloppy writing, or does Burroughs break the rules of grammar and punctuation for a purpose? What do the sentence errors contribute to (or take away from) his essay? Explain your answer.

### Writing Topics

1. **JOURNAL TO ESSAY** Burroughs claims that "until you define precisely, just exactly what 'happy' is, you will never feel it" (paragraph 10). In your journal entry (p. 281), you pondered what happiness means to you. Now, build on that entry to write an extended definition of *happiness*. As Burroughs does, present a wide range of examples to suggest various aspects of your subject, and be careful that your personal definition is "specific and also possible," as Burroughs advises (15). Does your definition correspond to traditional assumptions about happiness, or is it more like Burroughs's definition? What characteristics does your definition *not* include?
2. Think of a person you know or know of whose life is unhappy by contemporary standards but satisfying by Burroughs's standards. Write an essay describing this person's personality, interests, and accomplishments in detail, showing how his or her personal values and goals ensured contentment despite pressure from society to be externally happy. Be sure to include plenty of concrete details and examples.

3. **RESEARCH** Burroughs insists that some people are simply unhappy by nature. Do some library research on the psychological problem of depression. (A periodicals database or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* can give you a start, and many books have been written on the subject.) Write a brief essay outlining the contemporary definition of depression and some of its treatments, including therapy and medication.
4. **CONNECTIONS** While Judy Brady (p. 276) suggests that having a “wife” of her own would make her happy, Burroughs cautions that saying “I want” is a mental trap destined to make a person miserable. In what ways could “Unhappily Ever After” be read as a response to “I Want a Wife”? Consider, for instance, the functions Brady and Burroughs assign to marriage, each writer’s assumptions about personal responsibility for happiness, and the constraints of gender roles as they appear to factor in each essay. What advice might Burroughs offer Brady? How might she respond?

We’re all so busy chasing the extraordinary that we forget to stop and be grateful for the ordinary.

—Brené Brown

—George Saunders

We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.

—Ray Bradbury

**JOURNAL RESPONSE** How do you cope with the stress of college? Of life in general? In your journal, make a list of the activities and mental strategies you use to keep yourself calm and centered. Do some efforts work better than others? Why do you think that is?

## Jessica Sayuri Boissy

Jessica Sayuri Boissy was born in 1988 and raised in a bilingual household in San Francisco. The product of a cross-cultural marriage in a highly diverse city, she often found herself effortlessly switching between English and Japanese in order to communicate with her American-born father and her Japanese-born mother. Boissy graduated in 2010 from the University of California, Davis. Two years later she achieved her “childhood dream” of living in Japan, where she currently teaches English, studies written Japanese (which Boissy describes as “a complex but beautiful writing system”), and practices Bikram yoga. She spends her free time exploring the museums of modern Tokyo and the shrines and temples of ancient Kyoto.

### One Cup at a Time (Student Essay)

Boissy wrote “One Cup at a Time” for her first-year writing class in response to a prompt asking students to examine a language barrier they had experienced with a single word or phrase. Of *ichigo ichie*, the Japanese proverb the assignment inspired her to translate, Boissy says it reminds us “to cherish even the most seemingly mundane days, for these days will only occur once, never to happen again.” Her essay was first published in *Prized Writing*, an anthology of the best student work to come out of the writing program at the University of California, Davis.

*Ichigo ichie* conveys a Japanese aesthetic ideal relating to transience that, when translated into English, literally signifies “one encounter, one chance.” The philosophy behind it is that one should always do one’s best

when meeting someone, treasuring each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event, even if it is a friend whom one sees often. For me, this phrase has brought awareness of the value of living each day, hour, minute, and second to the fullest and seizing each chance encounter that life unexpectedly brings. Though the ritual of meeting people follows a regular routine, this phrase stresses that each moment is a unique meeting to be lived intently, never to be repeated, as if today were the last time you might meet—in other words, this phrase teaches one to live his or her whole life now—the fullest in the moment.

Unlike the English alphabet, the Japanese writing system is composed of *kanji*, characters that embody the meanings in graphic forms. Although *ichigo ichie* can be written with the English alphabet, in Japanese, the phrase is written as 一期一会, giving a more visual representation of the meaning. The first part of the word, *ichigo* or 一期, symbolizes one period, in the terms of *ichigo, ichie*, one lifetime. The second part, *ichie* or 一会, symbolizes one meeting. Thus, when put together the phrase *ichigo ichie* is formed, a phrase that easily rolls out of my mouth. Each character has three syllables, and the *ichi*, signifying the number one, at the beginning of each character gives a particular ring to the phrase, a consistency if not an echo—stressing the importance of only “one meeting” in our “one lifetime.”

Also, because the meaning of *ichigo ichie* can be comprehended visually, nothing impinges on one’s understanding. It is as though no interpretation is needed because the visual representation of the characters gives the reader the feeling of the word through the characters. Thus, the reader can be the sole interpreter of what *ichigo ichie* means to him or her.

However, the simplicity of meaning shatters when translated into English. Instead, the English language suggests a blizzard of wordy interpretations, such as “with every departure there is an encounter” or “one chance in a lifetime” or “treasure every meeting, for it will never reoccur”—phrases that sound nice but still cannot communicate the simplicity and wholeness of the original phrase.

Phrases and words can be translated into many different languages, but the culture still plays a significant role in understanding not just the

literal meaning but also the roots of words. The English equivalents lack the Zen spirit that permeates this phrase. Much like the Zen teachings, *ichigo ichie* teaches the importance of living in the present moment.

In fact, this Zen thinking lies at the heart of *chado*, the Japanese tea ceremony. By concentrating on making tea inside a quiet tearoom, participants in the Japanese tea ceremony can reach a calm state of mind and reflect on themselves, cultivating a serene and mindful attitude towards each ceremony and towards life outside the tearoom. This attitude demands the awareness that although the steps of the ritual have not changed over the centuries, every time people come together over a bowl of tea, they create an original experience. In this context *ichigo ichie* retains the meaning of “one encounter, one chance,” but also acquires another meaning—“one cup, one moment.” In this context, *ichie* maintains the meaning of “one encounter” but *ichigo* becomes “one bowl of tea.”

It wasn’t until I attended my first tea ceremony in my first year of middle school that I actually experienced *ichigo ichie* in its fullest sensory delight. I can remember slowly sliding the door to the tearoom and being showered by an abundance of sensations . . .

... from the fragrance of the sandalwood incense set into the charcoal beneath the hot water kettle to the aroma of freshly whisked green tea . . .

... from the sound of water coming to a boil to the sound of soft cotton socks gliding over tatami . . .

... from the handling of the yakimono, pottery streaked with ash glaze, to the small wooden lacquer-ware plates . . .

... from the visual beauty of the calligraphy hanging beside the flower arrangement and, ultimately, from the taste of sweet bean cakes to the flavor of bitter green tea . . .

In that moment, this mixing of sensory impressions—whereas in everyday life one at a time will do—helps to create the feeling of *ichigo ichie*. Although incense smoke always rises and the water in the kettle eventually boils, the combination of sounds, tastes, smells, textures, and visual pleasures of the day’s tea ceremony will never be reproduced exactly that way again. This reflection brings to mind another aspect of the physical nature of the tea ceremony—the interrelationship of three basic elements: *monosuki*, *furumai*, and *chashitsu*, or things, behavior, and setting. The tea ceremony that I experienced on that day when I was twelve will never be relived in a tea ceremony when I am eighteen. And the same philosophy can be applied to each day we experience in a lifetime—one



Jessica Sayuri Boissy

should always do one's best, whether it is making tea for another or simply meeting up with a friend, treasuring each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Even before you knew the phrase *ichigo ichie*, you were living this word in your life, because life is about the coming and going—about the changes. These changes can take on many forms: our first tea ceremony, high school graduation, twenty-first birthday, or receiving our PhD. And even if we meet each other in class every Tuesday and Thursday, I am not the same student and you are not the same teacher, because we are all participants in this inevitable change. But it is through these changes that *ichigo ichie* stresses the importance of treating each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event and focusing on the details of each occasion, the particular people and things involved daily. In other words, living fully in the present—*ichigo ichie*—drinking life, and tea, to its fullest—one cup at a time.

### Meaning

1. What is the “cup” to which the title of this essay refers? What is Boissy's main idea?
2. What is the meaning of *Zen* as Boissy uses it in paragraphs 5 and 6? (If necessary, look up the word in an encyclopedia or unabridged dictionary.) How do Zen teachings relate to Boissy's thesis?
3. If any of the following words are unfamiliar, try to guess what they mean from the context of Boissy's essay. Look up the words in a dictionary to check your guesses, and then use each one in a sentence or two of your own.
 

aesthetic (1)	permeates (5)	tatami (7)
transience (1)	serene (6)	lacquer (7)
impinges (3)		

### Purpose and Audience

1. What is Boissy's purpose or purposes in writing this essay: to express herself? to explain something? to persuade readers of something? Support your answer by referring to passages from the essay.
2. How can you tell that Boissy wrote this essay for her teacher and classmates at the University of California, Davis? How do you think her original readers may have responded to her ideas? How do *you* respond? Why?

### Method and Structure

1. Why is definition particularly well suited to Boissy's subject and purpose? In what ways is the literal translation of *ichigo ichie* inadequate to explain its meaning?
2. What is the function of the hand-painted Japanese characters Boissy includes with her essay? What additional meanings does the calligraphy impart?
3. Why do you suppose Boissy uses italics and ellipses so extensively in paragraph 7? What is their effect?
4. **OTHER METHODS** Explain the tea ceremony Boissy depicts in paragraphs 6–8. How does this use of **process analysis** (Chapter 10) and **description** (Chapter 6) help to develop her definition?

### Language

1. In addition to *ichigo ichie*, Boissy uses several other Japanese words in her essay. How does she ensure that readers understand their meaning? What do they contribute to her main idea?
2. How would you characterize the overall tone of the essay? How does Boissy achieve it?

### Writing Topics

1. **JOURNAL TO ESSAY** In your journal entry (p. 287), you listed some of your strategies for managing stress. How do you react to Boissy's essay? Do you agree with her that life is an endless series of changes and so we must take care to live in the moment? Or do you find her philosophy impractical, her suggestions overly idealistic? Write an essay of your own responding to Boissy's ideas and advice. Be sure to include examples to support your view.
2. Boissy writes that the ritual of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony teaches a lesson that “can be applied to each day we experience in a lifetime— one should always do one's best, whether it is making tea for another or simply meeting up with a friend, treasuring each encounter as a once-in-a-lifetime event” (paragraph 8). Think of some rituals that are important to you and your friends or your family—for instance, a holiday celebration, a vacation activity, a way of decompressing after a difficult week. Choose one such ritual and, in a brief essay, explain it to outsiders. Focus on the details and steps of the ritual as well as on the significance it has for you and other members of your group.

**3. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS** As noted on page 287, Boissy wrote her essay in response to a prompt asking her to examine a language barrier she had experienced with a single word or phrase. Try your hand at a similar essay of your own. Start by recalling a language barrier you have encountered. It may have involved a language other than English, a regional dialect, a slang term, workplace or academic jargon, or perhaps a generation gap. Focusing on a single word or phrase, examine the misunderstandings you have experienced. You might choose to define the term, as Boissy did, or you could narrate a representative incident involving it or compare and contrast your understanding with other people's comprehension. Whatever approach you choose, be sure to use concrete and specific words as well as vivid descriptions and plenty of detail to ensure that readers understand your meaning.

**4. CONNECTIONS** While Boissy writes about the pleasures to be found in even the most mundane personal interactions, Barbara Lazear Ascher, in "The Box Man" (p. 258), asserts that we should learn to appreciate our own company, to find "a friend in our own voice." In an essay, compare these two writers' assumptions about relationships, and then draw your own conclusions about the value of friends and family. Consider, for instance, in what ways Ascher's "Box Man" and two lonely women might be said to have embraced or rejected Boissy's notion of *ichigo ichie*, as well as what we stand to gain—or lose—by treasuring each encounter with another person, as Boissy advises. What role do other people play in building and maintaining a happy life?

## WRITING WITH THE METHOD

### DEFINITION

Select one of the following topics, or any other topic they suggest, for an essay developed by definition. Be sure to choose a topic you care about so that definition is a means of communicating an idea, not an end in itself.

#### Personal Qualities

1. Intelligence
2. Introversion or extroversion
3. Empathy
4. Responsibility
5. Hypocrisy

#### Experiences and Feelings

6. A nightmare
7. Love
8. Parenthood
9. An emotion such as fear, excitement, or shame

#### Social Concerns

10. Charity
11. Homelessness
12. Domestic violence
13. Addiction
14. Racism

#### Art and Entertainment

15. Dubstep or some other kind of music
16. Steampunk
17. Abstract expressionism or some other art movement

#### Ideas

18. Freedom
19. Respect
20. Feminism
21. Success or failure
22. A key concept in a course you're taking