

Definition Paragraphs

GOAL: To learn how to write a definition paragraph

LANGUAGE FOCUS: Simple adjective clauses

Like all forms of writing, paragraphs are written for a specific purpose. The purpose determines what information you include in the paragraph and how you write it. In this unit, you will look at one kind of paragraph, the definition paragraph.

WHAT IS A DEFINITION PARAGRAPH?

A definition paragraph defines something. The word *definition* comes from the verb *to define*, which means "to state the meaning of a word or to describe the basic qualities of something." In a definition paragraph, the writer's main purpose is to tell you what something is.

A definition paragraph

- explains what something is
- gives facts, details, and examples to make the definition clear to the reader

The best way to learn what a definition paragraph looks like is to read and study several examples. The three paragraphs that follow are about different topics, but each is an example of a definition paragraph.

Activity 1

Studying Example Definition Paragraphs

Read and study these example paragraphs. Answer the questions.

Paragraph 41

This paragraph is about a kind of food that is common in the southern part of Louisiana. You might write a definition paragraph when you need to explain a special dish or dance or custom from your own country.

Before you read the paragraph, discuss these questions with your classmates.

1. What is seafood? Give three examples.
2. What do you know about the people of Louisiana? Do you know anything about the Cajun people? You may need to consult a dictionary, an encyclopedia, or the Internet.
3. Have you ever seen rice growing? What kind of land is good for growing rice?
4. Have you visited or read about New Orleans? What do you know about this city?

Now read the paragraph.

Gumbo

The dictionary definition of gumbo does not make it sound as delicious as it really is. The dictionary defines gumbo as a “thick soup made in south Louisiana.” However, anyone who has tasted this delicious dish knows that this definition is too bland to describe gumbo. It is true that gumbo is a thick soup, but it is much more than that. Gumbo, one of the most popular of all the Cajun dishes, is made with different kinds of seafood or meat mixed with vegetables such as green peppers and onions. For example, seafood gumbo contains shrimp and crab. Other kinds of gumbo include chicken, sausage, or turkey. Regardless of the ingredients in gumbo, this regional delicacy is a tasty dish.

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH



bland: not having much taste (good or bad)

Cajun: people who moved from Acadia
(in Canada) to Louisiana in 1755

such as: like, for example

shrimp: a kind of seafood

crab: a kind of seafood

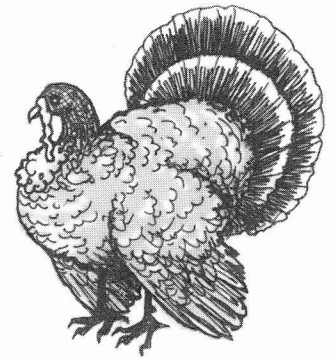
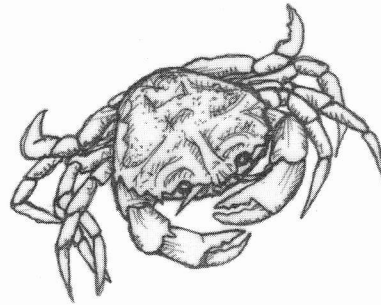
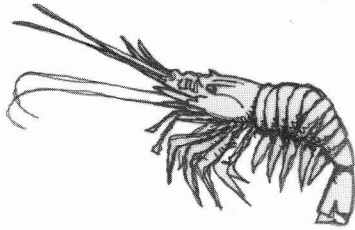
turkey: a kind of bird that cannot fly
long distances

regardless of: anyway, no matter

ingredients: food items in a dish

regional: from a particular area or region

delicacy: a special food



1. What is the topic sentence of this paragraph?

2. Write one sentence of your own that tells what gumbo is. Begin "Gumbo is . . ."

3. Notice that the writer quotes a dictionary definition of gumbo. Choose one of these food items and write a definition in your own words. Do not look in a dictionary.

sandwich

milk shake

dessert

hamburger

sundae

pie

4. Now look in a dictionary for the definition of the word that you chose in number 3. Write a sentence using that definition. Use the topic sentence in "Gumbo" as a model.

5. Is your original definition in number 3 similar to the dictionary definition? If not, how is it different?

Paragraph 42

This paragraph defines something that many people think is wrong, but some people do it anyway. The practice can be harmful.

Before you read the paragraph, discuss these questions with your classmates.

1. What is gossip? Give an example.
2. Is gossip good or bad? Why or why not?
3. Do you think that men gossip less than women do? Explain your answer.

Now read the paragraph.

Gossip

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, gossip is a “trivial rumor of a personal nature,” but this definition makes gossip sound harmless when it is really not. At first, gossip might not seem so bad. One person tells a second person something about someone, and that second person tells a third, and so on. The information passes from person to person. However, gossip is much more than just information and rumor. As the rumor continues, it grows and changes. People do not know all the facts. They add information. As the gossip goes from one person to the next person, the damage continues, and the person who is the subject of the gossip can not do anything to answer or protect himself or herself. Because the potential damage may range from hurt feelings to a lost career, gossip is much worse than simply a “trivial rumor.”

trivial: unimportant

damage: harm

rumor: information that is passed
from person to person

subject: topic or person

nature: kind, type; characteristics

potential: possible but not yet actual

and so on: etc. (et cetera)

range: extent

1. What is the topic sentence of “Gossip”?

2. What is the writer's opinion about gossip? Does the writer think it is wrong? How do you know?

3. Do all the supporting sentences relate to the topic? _____
Discuss this with a partner.

4. Like the writer of "Gumbo," this writer also quotes a dictionary definition. Read the following sentences. Which ones are easy to read and understand? Which are difficult? Rank them 1 to 4, with 1 being the easiest to read and 4 being the most difficult.

_____ Paragraph 1: The dictionary defines *gumbo* as a "thick soup made in south Louisiana."

_____ Paragraph 1: The definition of *gumbo* is a "thick soup made in south Louisiana."

_____ Paragraph 2: According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, gossip is a "trivial rumor of a personal nature."

_____ Paragraph 2: *The American Heritage Dictionary* definition of *gossip* is a "trivial rumor of a personal nature."

5. *Gossip* is difficult to define in your own words. Here are some other words that you may find difficult. Choose one, look it up in a dictionary, and write a definition sentence similar to the topic sentence in "Gossip."

pride honesty friendship luck fate patience

Present your sentence to the rest of the class.

Paragraph 43

What is your favorite snack food? This paragraph talks about one kind of popular snack food.

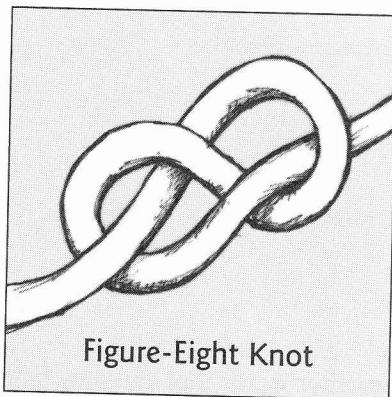
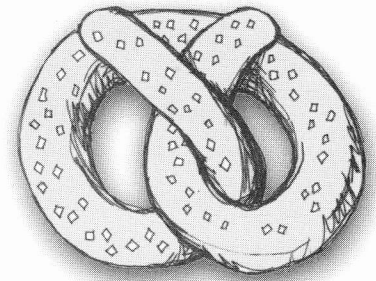
Before you read the paragraph, discuss these questions with your classmates.

1. Write a definition in your own words for *snack*. Compare your definition with other students'.
2. Name three examples of popular snacks.
3. Why do you think these three snacks are so popular?

Now read the paragraph.

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH**Pretzels**

The pretzel, which is a salted and glazed biscuit that is shaped like a knot, has an interesting history. The first pretzels were made in an Italian monastery in A.D. 610. These twisted strips of bread were originally called *pretiola*, which means “little reward” in Latin. They were given as treats to local children. The pretzel rapidly became popular throughout Europe. Today the pretzel is an especially popular snack in Germany, Austria, and the United States.



- pretzel: a snack made of flour
 glazed: having a thin, smooth, shiny coating
 knot: string tied in loops
 monastery: place where members of a religious group live
 twisted: turned in several directions
 strips: long, thin pieces
 reward: something given for a special service or accomplishment
 treats: something special

1. Write the topic sentence here.

2. How is this sentence different from the topic sentences in the first two examples?

3. When you write a definition paragraph, you can include a definition from the dictionary or use an original definition. Here are four things that are difficult to define. Choose one and write your own definition.

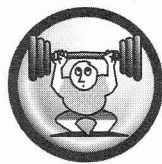
giraffe battery flag cell phone

4. Compare your definition with your classmates' definitions. How are they the same? How are they different? Why is yours (or theirs) better?

5. Write an original question and answer about "Pretzels." They can be about the content or about the writing. Work with another student or in small groups and take turns asking and answering your questions.

Question: _____

Answer: _____



Building Better Sentences

Practice 11

Correct and varied sentence structure is essential to the quality of your sentences and paragraphs. For further practice with the sentences and paragraphs in this part of the unit, go to Practice 11 on page 238 in Appendix 5.



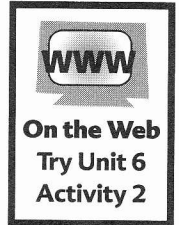
WRITER'S NOTE: Quotation Marks

When you write, the ideas and the words are usually your own. However, sometimes you might want to borrow someone else's words. When you use another person's words, you must let the reader know that they are not yours. In English, you do this by putting the borrowed words in quotation marks.

↑ For example, if you use a definition that is taken from another source, such as a dictionary, put the definition inside quotation marks. Look at the second sentence of Paragraph 41, “Gumbo,” and the first sentence of Paragraph 42, “Gossip.” Both of these sentences include words in quotation marks.

Activity 2**Adding Quotation Marks**

In the following sentences, put quotation marks where necessary. Sometimes you will have to add a comma and capitalize letters. (Remember that commas, periods, and question marks go inside close quotation marks. See page 216 in Appendix 3 for more information.) Numbers 1 and 6 have been done for you.

**words taken from a book**

1. The dictionary defines *marriage* as “the union of a husband and a wife.”
2. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, an errand is a short trip for a specific purpose, but my trip to the courthouse was certainly not a simple errand.
3. If we believe the dictionary definition of *drug* as a narcotic that is addictive, then surely we must say that cigarettes are drugs.
4. The dictionary definition of *opulent*, extremely wealthy or rich, may sound good, but this word does not have a positive meaning for me.
5. Although the dictionary currently defines *a family* as parents and their children, previous definitions probably included additional family members.

words that someone spoke

6. Julie said, “We really hope the vocabulary exam is not too tough.”
7. When all the students were seated, the teacher stood up and announced beginning tomorrow, no student may enter this room wearing any kind of head covering.
8. The taxi driver turned to me and asked where do you want to go?

9. The player stopped the tennis game, approached the net, and calmly asked her opponent are you sure that ball was really out?
10. I can not wait here any longer the man said as he walked out the door.

PUTTING THE PARAGRAPH TOGETHER: SEQUENCING

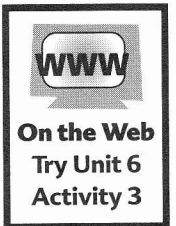
Good writers create paragraphs with sentences in a certain order for the meaning they want.

Activity 3

Sequencing Sentences

These sentences make one paragraph. Read the sentences and number them from 1 to 7 to indicate the best order.

- a. _____ Similarly, an English speaker learning Malay might remember the word *pintu*, which means “door,” by using the English words *pin* and *into*.
- b. _____ The learner might remember that he or she can use a hatchet eight times to cut down a tree.
- c. _____ The key-word method, which can help foreign language learners remember new vocabulary, is gaining popularity among teachers and students.
- d. _____ Through these two simple examples, we can get an idea of how useful this method of remembering vocabulary can be.
- e. _____ For example, a Japanese learner of English might look at the English word *hatchet* and connect it to the Japanese word *hachi* (“eight”) because they sound alike.
- f. _____ In this method, learners first form their own sound association between the foreign language word they are trying to learn and a word in their native language. In the second stage, learners form an image link between the target word and the native language word.
- g. _____ He or she can imagine putting a pin into the door to open it.



Activity 4

Copying a Sequenced Paragraph

Now copy the sentences from Activity 3 in paragraph form. The result will be a definition paragraph that describes a method for remembering vocabulary. Give the paragraph an original title.

Paragraph 44

Activity 5

Analyzing a Paragraph

The paragraph that you copied in Activity 4 is a definition paragraph. You may want to read it again or refer to it as you complete the answers to these questions.

1. What is the general topic of the paragraph in Activity 4? _____

 2. What is the topic sentence? _____
-

3. What is the writer's main purpose for writing this paragraph?

4. How many examples are given in the supporting sentences? _____

List them here: _____

5. If Paragraph 44 did not have any examples, how would that affect your understanding of the information?

6. Can you think of two more examples?



WRITER'S NOTE: Include Examples

Good writers include examples, especially when they are writing about a difficult or abstract topic.

When to Use an Example

How do you know when to use an example? Consider your readers. If you think they already know something about your topic, then you do not have to give many examples, details, or facts. However, if the topic may be new to many readers, it is helpful to include some supporting information.

Where to Put an Example

Where should you put examples in the paragraph? The best place to put an example is usually just after you have explained an idea. If your paragraph compares two ideas, explain both ideas first, then provide examples of both in the following sentences.

How to Begin an Example

How should you begin a sentence with an example? You might write, “For example, . . .” “For instance, . . .” or “An example of this is . . .” You can also write an example sentence without such an introduction. In the following sentences, the example sentence is underlined.

Different cultures have different superstitions, but all cultures have some kind of superstition. People might believe that a certain number is lucky or unlucky. Many North Americans think 7 is a lucky number, but the Chinese believe 4 is unlucky.


LANGUAGE FOCUS: Simple Adjective Clauses

A simple adjective clause is made up of a relative pronoun (*that, which, who*) followed by a verb and sometimes an object. It describes the noun(s) that comes before it.

Study these examples:

			ADJECTIVE CLAUSE	
Gumbo is a thick <u>soup</u>	<u>that</u>	<u>contains</u>	<u>seafood or meat.</u>	
NOUN	RELATIVE PRONOUN	VERB	OBJECTS	

			ADJECTIVE CLAUSE	
A goalie is a <u>soccer player</u>	<u>who</u>	<u>protects</u>	<u>his team's goal.</u>	
NOUN	RELATIVE PRONOUN	VERB	OBJECT	

Notes:

- Use *that* or *which* for things. (*That* is more common.)
- Use *who* or *that* for people. (*Who* is preferred.)

Let's look more closely at two examples:

Gumbo	is a thick	<u>soup</u>	<u>that contains seafood or meat.</u>
SPECIFIC NOUN		GENERAL NOUN	ADJECTIVE CLAUSE

Samba is a rhythmic dance that is popular in Brazil.

SPECIFIC NOUN GENERAL NOUN ADJECTIVE CLAUSE

In a definition, the specific noun (*gumbo*, *Samba*) is the word you are defining. The general noun (*soup*, *dance*) is the group that the specific noun belongs to. The relative pronoun (*that*) refers to both nouns.

Activity 6

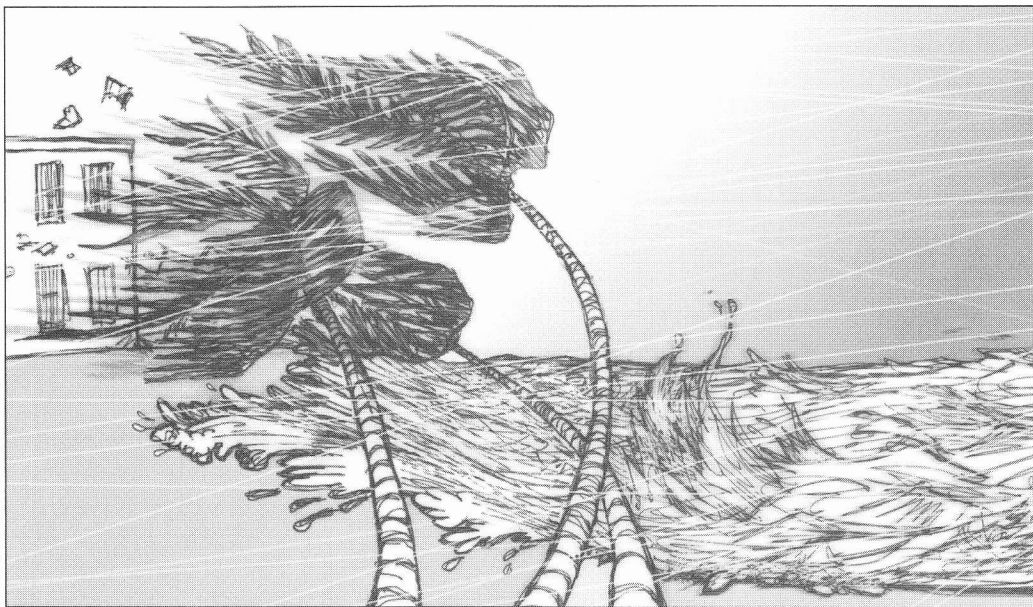
Recognizing Simple Adjective Clauses

Read the next paragraph. Underline all the adjective clauses. Look for the relative pronouns that, which, and who. Circle the noun that each clause modifies or describes. The first one is done for you.



On the Web
Try Unit 6
Activity 6

Paragraph 45



Nature's Worst Storm

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

A hurricane is a dangerous (storm) that features high winds and heavy rains. In addition, areas along the coast may experience a tidal surge that can flood whole towns. Hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean occur mostly between April and November. However, the months that have the most hurricanes are August and September. Modern technology has now

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

made it possible for people who live in a given area to know in advance if there is danger of a hurricane striking their region. However, this was not always the case. For example, a hurricane that surprised the residents of Galveston, Texas, in 1900 resulted in thousands of deaths. Though we know much more about hurricanes now and can track their movements, hurricanes continue to be one of the most dangerous weather phenomena.

Activity 7**Writing Sentences with Simple Adjective Clauses**

Write a definition for each term. Include an adjective clause in your definition and underline the clause. An example has been done for you.

1. turtle

A turtle is a slow-moving, four-legged animal that goes inside its shell when there is danger.

2. copilot

3. skunk

4. passport

5. submarine

6. odd numbers

7. William Shakespeare

8. plumber

9. Neil Armstrong

10. the United Nations

Share your sentences with a partner. Did your partner include an adjective clause in each definition?



WRITER'S NOTE: Combine Sentences for Variety

One way to improve your writing is to write different kinds of sentences. Many beginning writers use only simple sentences that have a subject, a verb, and an object. For variety, combine two short sentences with a connecting word, such as *and*, *but*, *or*, and *so*.

Simple sentences:

I studied math for five hours last night. I failed the test.

Example 1: I was walking on Stern Street. I was in front of the bank. I heard a bang. It was loud. It was violent. The front door of the bank opened. This happened suddenly. A boy left the bank. He did this hurriedly. He was tall. He was very thin. He had wavy hair. It was brown. He had a gun. It was silver. It was shiny. It was in his right hand.

17 sentences

Example 2: I was walking in front of the bank on Stern Street. Suddenly I heard a loud, violent bang, and the front door of the bank opened. A tall, very thin boy with wavy brown hair hurriedly left the bank. In his right hand, he had a shiny, silver gun.

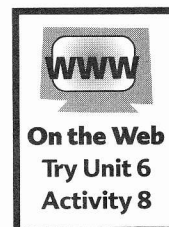
4 sentences

Perhaps you noted that Example 1 has seventeen sentences and Example 2 has only four sentences. However, both examples include the same information. Example 1 has short, choppy sentences, which make reading uneven and difficult. In Example 2, the writer has combined phrases and ideas together to make more complex sentences that sound better and read more smoothly.

Activity 8

Sentence Combining

Each paragraph is missing a sentence. Create the missing sentence from the sentences below the paragraph. You may want to circle the important information in these sentences. Use all the ideas, but not necessarily all the words. Make one sentence. It should be a good supporting sentence. Write the new sentence on the blank lines in the paragraph.



Paragraph 46

Patience

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

Patience means the ability to continue doing something even if you do not see any results immediately. We can see patience in a teacher who works with young children. She may not be feeling very well that day, but she smiles and does not get angry when a child misbehaves. We can see patience in a clerk who is polite to a customer even though the clerk has already been at work for seven or eight hours. _____

In our modern society, people often lack simple patience. People nowadays expect immediate results all the time. To me, patience is one mark of a civilized society.

We can see patience in a person. The person is at a street corner.
 The person is waiting. It is beginning to drizzle.

Combined sentence: I studied math for five hours last night, *but* I failed the test.

Simple sentences: The scientist forgot to control the temperature. The experiment was not successful.

Combined sentence: The scientist forgot to control the temperature, *so* the experiment was not successful.

Examples of Sentence Variety

In addition, good writers use adjectives, adjective clauses, adverbs, adverb clauses, prepositional phrases, and other variations in their sentences. Study these examples. The variations are underlined.

Adjectives

Simple sentence: The manager rejected the schedule.

Variation: The current business manager rejected Mark's revised schedule.

Adjective clauses

Simple sentence: The students liked the suggestion.

Variation: The students who are in charge of planning the party liked the suggestion that Mark made.

Adverbs

Simple sentence: The woman picked up the chain saw.

Variation: Next, the woman carefully picked up the chain saw.

Adverb clauses

Simple sentence: He asked her to sit down.

Variation: Before the doctor told the woman the news, he asked her to sit down.

Prepositional phrases

Simple sentence: I did all the homework.

Variation: I did all the homework on my computer in about three hours.

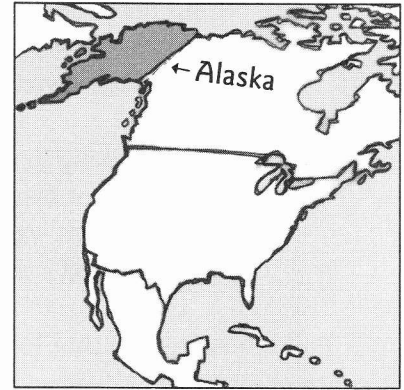
Reading for Sentence Variety

Read the next two paragraphs. Do you notice any difference in the writing styles? Discuss your impression of each paragraph with a partner.

Paragraph 47

Seward's Folly

A folly is a costly action that has a bad or an absurd result. The purchase of Alaska, which is the largest oil-producing state in the United States, was once considered a folly. In fact, Alaska was called "Seward's Folly." This name refers to Secretary of State William Seward, who convinced Congress that buying Alaska from Russia in 1867 was a good idea. At that time, many Americans thought that it was a waste of money to buy a cold, barren land for several million dollars. However, they were wrong. _____
 _____ . Large amounts of gold and other minerals have been found in Alaska. Alaska is an important source of oil for the United States. In addition, thousands of people visit Alaska each year to see the natural beauty of the state. The purchase of Alaska in 1867 may have seemed like a bad decision at the time, but today we know that buying Alaska was certainly not a folly.



EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

Alaska is not a cold place all the time.

Alaska is not a barren place all the time.

It was not a waste of money.

Paragraph 48

An Unusual Word Relationship

You might never guess that the words *pottery* and *sincere* are related. *Sincere* comes from two Latin words: *sin* meaning "without" and *cere* meaning "wax." Thus, *sincere* means "without wax." _____
 _____ . It took a long time to make this pottery, and occasionally the pottery had cracks in it. Pottery with a crack in it was worthless and had to be destroyed. Some

EXAMPLE PARAGRAPH

potters who did not want to make brand-new pottery would put wax on the crack. To the eye of the careless shopper, the pottery looked good. However, people soon realized which potters were good and which were not good. Thus, the most respected potters made pottery that was without wax, or “sincere,” and that is how the word *sincere* began.

People used pottery.

The pottery was for plates.

This was in ancient times.

The pottery was for bowls.

The pottery was made of clay.

Hint: Begin with a time phrase.



Building Better Sentences

Practice 12

Correct and varied sentence structure is essential to the quality of your sentences and paragraphs. For further practice with the sentences and paragraphs in this part of the unit, go to Practice 12 on page 239 in Appendix 5.

Activity 9

Original Writing Practice

Write a definition paragraph. Follow these guidelines:

- Choose a topic.
- Brainstorm some information about the topic. What do you want to include? What do your readers know about the topic? What do they want to know?
- Write a topic sentence with controlling ideas.
- Write a few supporting sentences that relate to the topic.
- End with a concluding sentence that restates the topic or makes a prediction about it.
- If you use words from another source, put quotation marks around them.

If you need help, study the example definition paragraphs in this unit. Be sure to refer to the seven steps in the writing process in Appendix 1 on pages 199–206.

Activity 10

Peer Editing

Work with a partner and exchange paragraphs from Activity 9. Then use Peer Editing Sheet 6 on page 259 to help you comment on your partner's paper. Remember that it is important to offer positive comments that will help the writer.

Activity 11**Additional Writing Assignments**

Here are some ideas for definition paragraphs. When you write your paragraph, follow the guidelines in Activity 9.

1. Choose an emotion such as love or jealousy. How does the dictionary define it? Is it a good emotion or a bad emotion? Who usually feels this emotion and why? Give some examples.
2. Choose a scientific or medical term, such as *gravity*, *tides*, *molecule*, *appendix*, *AIDS*, or *pediatrics*. What is it? Why is it important?
3. Write a paragraph in which you define the word *censorship*. What is it? What is its purpose? Who does this? Is it acceptable? If so, are there any limitations?
4. Write about a word that is borrowed from another language. Examples are *coup d'état*, *siesta*, and *sushi*. What is it? What language does the word come from? What do the words mean in that language? How long has the word been widely used in English?
5. What is freedom? Why do people want it? Should there be limitations on freedom? Can there be limitations? Explore the nature of freedom.