2.7: Creating Mutual Understanding

Disagreeing over what a word means can lead to a total breakdown of the argumentative process. The critical thinker can use any of the following ways to define any terms that could lead to a communication misunderstanding and, in turn, a collapse of the argumentative process.

**Dictionary Definition** – This is also known as formal definition, and is probably the most common form for clarifying what a word means. Some people consider this the most precise way to define a word, because the dictionary attempts to differentiate the word from all other members of its class.

There are many dictionaries (regular, legal, medical, scientific, psychological, and behavioral), and each discipline’s dictionary will define the word as it applies in that particular field. Too often students will use a popular dictionary like Webster, to define an academic term. The definition this type of dictionary supplies is just too general for real academic use. Instead, in an academic setting, a more precise definition needs to be used.

**Operational Definition** – Sometimes it is most useful to define a word by its function or operation. What does the word or term do that separates it from other words or terms in the same classification? For example, a “good car” is one that starts every morning, gets 25 miles per gallon, requires little maintenance, has low insurance rates, and costs less than $27,000. Explaining a good car in terms of how a good car operates gives a more mutual understanding of the phrase.

**Definition by Example** – The method is the attempt to define a word or phrase by citing specific instances of that word or phrase. For example, The Tesla 3, BMW 230i, The Infiniti I35, and the Toyota Camry are “good cars.” The Griffins, Simpsons, and Sopranos are “nontraditional American families.” Of course, for this type of definition to be effective, your audience would need to have experience with these examples.

**Definition by Negation** – This form of definition tells us what a word or phrase is not. A “good husband” is not one who cheats on his wife. The sport of “baseball” does not use a hoop or have end zones. Robbery, rape, murder, or
Kidnapping are not “white collar” crimes.

**Definition by Etymology** – This is defining a word or phrase by citing its historical roots (when and how was the word or phrase first used) or point of origination (what is the word or phrase’s Latin or Greek origin). For instance, “Euthanasia” comes from the Greek word “eu” (good), and “thanatos” (death), or good death. Sometimes citing the history of the word can help clarify its meaning. The phrase “catch-22” refers to a no-win dilemma. Author Joseph Heller created this term in 1961 in the book titled curiously enough, “Catch 22.”

**Special Definitions** – Much of our everyday conversations may contain an informal quality that comes from our use of slang and colloquialisms. Many of these slang terms can be confusing to a visitor, from another country, from another region of the country, or from any other culture, including another generation. Much of the slang we encounter is through the media, such as television, film, and radio. Many subcultures develop words that contain special meanings only understandable within that subculture. Unfortunately, slang can also be vulgar and offensive and linked to racist, sexist, and prejudicial expressions that give a confusing impression of current language habits.

Clarity in language can only occur when the sender and receiver establish common ground regarding the meaning of words. Unless this common ground is established early on, the argument can turn into a battle over which side is using a word correctly. To avoid this, when someone uses a word that you don’t understand, ask him or her to define the term or explain what he specifically means by using that word or phrase.

**Appreciating Slang’s Creative Contributions to Language**

**By Mindshift December 31, 2014**

English professor Anne Curzan makes an unusual request of her students at the University of Michigan — she asks students to teach her two new slang words. While some might cringe at the use of YOLO or hangry in an academic setting, Curzan, who is also a language historian, appreciates the creativity in the words that make their way into the vernacular, and ultimately, the dictionary. In her TED video, she explains the role of dictionary editors and how they view language, including slang:

“Dictionaries are a wonderful guide and resource, but there is no objective dictionary authority out there that is the final arbiter about what words mean. If a community of speakers is using a word and knows what it means, it’s real. That word might be slangy, that word might be informal, that word might be a word that you think is illogical or unnecessary, but that word that we’re using, that word is real.” ¹

TED Video at: [https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_curzan...es_a_word_real](https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_curzan...es_a_word_real)

Semantic agreement is necessary if an argument is to overcome definitional problems and move on to the more substantive content that led to the argument in the first place. Understanding the meaning of a word or concept gives you another tool with which to build a foundation for a constructive argument. Without clarity between participants, words can be misinterpreted and dangerous.