
A Definition Is Where You Don't Say Is Where

If a train station is where the train stops and a bus station is where the bus stops, what is a work station?

—UNKNOWN

A definition is where you say what something means.

Huh?

Is where. What an unuseful, unsatisfying phrase. I'm talking about definitions like these:

A gravy train *is where* someone makes lots of money without doing much for it.

A retweet *is where* you forward a tweet.

Horticulture *is where* people grow plants.

If you wanted to understand gravy trains, retweets, and horticulture, these half-clarifications would leave you wondering what *types of things* these things are. Surely a gravy train has nothing to do with gravy or trains...does it? What exactly is a retweet before it gets forwarded? If horticulture is where people grow plants, does that make it a plot of ground? You might reread the definitions, suspecting that you missed something. You might feel vaguely cheated, left behind, with the most basic of questions unanswered.

Is where. What a great big abandoner.

I say, abandon it right back. Here's how. Whenever you're struggling to define something, think, *Noun is noun*.⁹⁶ The first noun is the thing

96. I owe the phrase *Noun is noun* to Penny Jessie Beebe and Sharon Ahlers. During their many years of teaching Engineering Communications at Cornell University,

you want to define. The second noun is the category that the thing belongs to: the type of thing the thing is.

A gravy train is *a source of income* that ...

A retweet is *a Twitter message* that ...

Horticulture is *the science* of ...

From there, you can go long or short with your definition, depending on what you think your readers will wonder about. You might

Whenever you're struggling to define something, think, *Noun is noun.*

explain what the thing does, how it works, what parts it comprises. You might include images, analyze word origins, give examples.⁹⁷ Or you might not. But don't skip

over that categorizing noun. A definition is a statement that tells what type of thing a thing is. At least that is where, *yes is where*, a definition starts.

they have passed along this tip to hundreds of students—and to at least one fellow teacher, who has now passed it along to you. After reading this chapter, Penny e-mailed (April 7, 2012) to say, “The X is Y definition is one of the most useful tools I know for pressing students to pin down what they’re trying to explain. The companion to ‘noun is noun,’ of course, is ‘to verb is to verb.’ (When students need a definition of ‘verb,’ my version is ‘anything you can do, visible or invisible,’ and a noun is *any thing*, abstract or concrete.) ‘Adjective is adjective’ doesn’t work nearly as well because of the various suffixes, but I use it.”

97. For definition examples of all kinds, see Mike Markel, “Drafting and Revising Definitions and Descriptions” in *Technical Communication*, 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 219–249.