

SHAPING WHAT COMES: SIX WAYS TO EXPLAIN

Explaining something means telling what's what. You elaborate on the causes, results, stages, steps, reasons, types, relationships. You inform. Six common ways to explain are to:

1. **Illustrate with examples**
2. **Define**
3. **Discover the parts or types**
4. **Compare or contrast**
5. **Show how**
6. **Show why**

You can use **combinations** of these means of explanation as well.

For example: you're writing about poems. First, you can classify the different kinds of poems. For example: "There are five kinds of poems" and **give an example** of each.

-OR-

Another example: you're writing about *revolution*. First, you can **define** the word, using a dictionary, and then you can **show how** its meaning has changed over the years. Next, you can illustrate with **examples** from books, commercials, magazines.

Ask yourself: which means will help you organize your material for greatest impact? Here's a brief description of different ways to present the facts.

1. **Illustrate with examples** by showing what something is. For example, after writing an opening which gives your slant on a topic, illustrate your point with a series of telling examples. Use sensory specifics create vivid pictures, which can help ideas come alive. Save the "clincher" for last.
2. **Define** by telling what something is. Some essays first define key terms so the reader knows just how you're using an important word. For example, don't take it for granted that the word *world* means the same thing to everyone: just ask, and you'll get many definitions. A dictionary can help you set the bounds for the term you're using, place it in a class, and give specific characteristics. Quote part of the entry as a way to introduce your subject.
3. **Discover the parts of a whole**. For example: "There are three kinds of..." You researched a burning question and discovered the different aspects or parts of your subject, their relationship to each other and to the whole. You sort out, and arrange: what kinds or types exist? (Later you may want to contrast categories and illustrate with specifics.)

4. **Compare or contrast** by showing what something is or is not like. You can do this by listing qualities or characteristics shared by X and Y: these are your bases of comparison. For instance, both X and Y have roots: both flower, and need light. Roots, flower, light: these three items you'll compare in detail for X and Y. Or contrast them: X and Y both have roots, *but* Y rarely yields fruits; they both need light, *but* Y thrives in the shade. You've shown how two things are alike and different. A fair comparison or contrast gives equal attention to X and Y, looking at item 1 for each, then item 2, then item 3.
5. **Show how** by using steps in a process. Demonstrate how to do or how we do something by breaking the process into steps small enough so a reader can follow. Use one step as one sentence or one paragraph. Give examples. If the process is complex, take a small part at a time, and sort out the main steps. Write "first," "second," "next."
6. **Show why** by explaining causes and effects, problems and solutions. Your burning question may have led to discoveries about why and how something happened. You researched an event and traced its causes. You asked, "Why do...?" Decide whether to move from causes to effects, or work back from effects to causes: which would be the stronger way to present your material? (Also, remember that just because something happened before something else, the first didn't necessarily *cause* the second.) Look for several causes, both immediate and remote. Did event A *result* in event B? You may want to try to piece together the puzzle and give an accurate account of what happened. If a particular problem interests you, consider it as an "effect" and discover its causes. They may lead you to possible solutions. Ask yourself, why did this happen and what can be done? (Talk out your answer on paper, nonstop, and see if some solutions come out.) Weigh the advantages and disadvantages (make lists) of possible solutions, so you can decide on the best answer. In your essay, state the problem, what brought it about, and suggest ways to deal with it. End on that strong note.