

Academic English clarification

Listen to your partner talk about or read your partner's written descriptions of "Fundamental terms in my area" and ask for more details, starting with things you really didn't understand or would like more details about.

Suggested clarifying questions

- Am I right in thinking that...?/ Would I be right in assuming that...?
- Can you clear something up for me?
- Can you explain... in more detail?
- Can you give an example/ a more concrete example?
- Can you put this into other words?
- Concretely,.../ Practically speaking,...
- Did you (perhaps) mean to say...?
- Does... mean the same as...?/ Is... similar to...?
- How is... consistent with...?/ There seems to be a contradiction between... and...
- How would you translate...?/ Is there a term (in Japanese) which means the same thing?
- I always confuse... with...
- I (always) thought... meant.../ I understood that to be/ mean...
- I basically know what you mean, but.../ I think I understand (what you mean), but...
- I can't get my head round...
- I don't know much/ anything about this subject, so...
- I don't understand the connection between... and...
- I haven't come across this use of... (before)
- I was with you until.../ You lost me (a bit) at...
- If I understand you correctly,.../ Would it be correct to say that...?
- In my field/ In general parlance, this means...
- Is there a more straightforward way of explaining...?/ Is there a simpler way to explain...?
- I'm not (very) familiar with.../ I hadn't come across the term.../ ... is a new concept for me.
- Just guessing from context,...
- Roughly, does... mean...?
- Some more explanation (of...) might make it a bit clearer for me.
- This is rather a basic question, but...
- To check if I understand properly,...
- What I understand from this is...
- What are you referring to when you mention...?
- What does... mean?
- What's the difference between... and...?
- What's the (technical/ official/ usual) definition of...?
- What's the relevance of... (to...)?
- You seem to be using... to mean...

What written phrases could you use to clarify meanings in your actual academic writing, e.g. in explanations similar to those you gave in answer to the questions above?

Use these key words to help you come up with and check your clarification phrases. You may want to change the grammar of the words and/ or add affixes (like “explain/ explanation” below).

- alternative
- clarify
- clear
- confirm
- confuse
- definition
- detail
- elaborate
- explain/ explanation
- familiar
- help
- illustrate
- inconsistent
- layperson
- mean
- mean
- misunderstanding
- other
- practically
- precise
- put
- rough
- sense
- simple
- simplistic
- specific
- straightforward
- translate/ translation

Put one word into each of the gaps below

Check your sentences as a class or with the suggested answers on the next page.

Suggested answers

Many more phrases are possible, but some are not suitable for academic writing, so please check if you wrote something different.

- ... might benefit from some more **explanation**./ To give a more **detailed explanation**,...
- ... mustn't/ shouldn't be **confused** with...
- A (direct/ literal/ word for word) **translation** is... (but with this **meaning** it is better **translated** as...)
- A common/ possible **misunderstanding** is...
- A more **simplistic** definition/ **explanation** would be...
- A more **straightforward/ simpler** (but less precise) definition/ **explanation** is.../ (More **simply (put)**,.../ In **simpler terms**,...
- A **rough** equivalent/ synonym/ **translation** would be...
- Although this might seem **inconsistent** with...,...
- An **alternative explanation/ definition** is...
- Before I continue, I should probably **clarify**.../ To **clarify**,...
- By... I **mean**.../ ..., by which I mean.../..., meaning (basically)...
- **Explaining** from first principles,...
- For those **familiar** with...,.../ People might be more **familiar** with...
- For those **unfamiliar** with the term/ word/ concept (...),...
- I can **illustrate** this with an analogy./ This is not a **precise** analogy but.../ I can **illustrate** this with an **example**./ To **illustrate** what I mean...
- I don't **mean** by that... (but rather...)
- I should (perhaps) **confirm** that...
- i.e./ In **other** words/ **Putting it another way**,.../ To **put** it **another way**,.../ That is to say,...
- I'm using... to **mean**.../ I'm using... (here) with its (usual) **sense** of...
- In case the **meaning** is not **clear**,...
- In **layperson's** terms,...
- It can **help** to picture it as.../ It can **help** to think of it as (like)...
- It might **help** to know the origins/ roots of this term, which lie in...
- Many people think that **means**..., but in fact...
- **Practically**, this **means** that.../ **Practically speaking**,...
- This does not **mean** that...
- To be (more) **precise/ specific**,...
- To **elaborate**,...
- To **explain** (myself/ what I mean) more **clearly**,...
- To **explain** further,...

Controlled practice

Choose one of the key words and read sentences out from above with that word missing until your partner guesses the missing word.

Choose one of the key words above and help your partner come up with all the example phrases for that key word, giving them hints if they need them.

Explain the differences between clarifying phrases

How are the clarifying phrases on the same line different from each other?

- e.g./ i.e.
- In layperson's terms/ In common parlance,...
- A translation/ A literal translation
- Briefly/ Roughly
- A simple definition/ A simplistic definition

Communicative practice of clarifying phrases

Explain one of the things below as well as you can. Your partner will ask you for more and more clarification (even if they have really understood what you mean). Try to use the language above in both the questions and answers.

- a causal relationship
- a cycle
- a definition of your field area of interest
- a foreign term that is used in academic English, e.g. something from Latin or Greek
- a formula/ an equation
- a fundamental concept of your field
- a hypothesis
- a method of statistical analysis
- a process/ a procedure
- a school of thought/ differences between two different schools of thought
- a trend
- a word which has different meanings in everyday and academic English
- an academic achievement and why it is significant
- an ideology
- changes in ideas on one topic
- contrasting two ideas or two people's ideas
- differences between two or more academic areas, e.g. psychology and psychiatry
- differences between two similar terms
- differences in opinion between two academics
- different approaches to research
- different definitions of one word or phrase
- exceptions to a rule
- how something is administered
- instructions for writing appendices
- rules of citation (e.g. of one publication)
- some specialist terminology
- the consensus view on something
- the content of one book or paper
- the ideas of one person
- the scope of some research
- unifying two theories
- your thesis