Key Terms

In your first year writing classes, you will hear quite a bit about key terms—what a vital role they play in your essays, how important it is that you define them well and use them throughout a paper. In fact, pinpointing, defining, and working with key terms is often the secret to developing a strong thesis, creating successful connections between readings, and maintaining organizational control throughout a paper.

**Key Terms in Your Thesis**

The most important, and probably the most common, usage of *key terms* that you are likely to encounter in your W130 or W131 class has to do with the use of a key term in your thesis. Ideally, the thesis in any paper you write for your W130 or W131 class will contain a key term. What this means is that there will be a term or an idea that is central to your overall argument contained within your thesis that you will then continue to use throughout the rest of the essay. It is imperative that this key term be clearly defined early in your essay, generally in the introductory paragraph. Wait too long to define your key term, or fail to define it at all, and you run the risk of losing your reader.

A good example of a key term from one of the readings in one of the W130 texts would be “civil disobedience,” from Henry David Thoreau’s seminal essay of the same name. The term is so central to his argument that Thoreau used it as the title to his essay. Ergo, if the term is not adequately defined somewhere early in that text, Thoreau’s argument is going to make little to no sense.

**How to find key terms in a source:**

1. The **title** of the source may include a central key term. Whenever you see a term that seems unfamiliar or coined by the author, that may be a key term.
   Example: “Civil Disobedience” by Thoreau
   Example: “The Parable of the **Democracy of Goods**” by Roland Marchand
   Example: “Class and Virtue” by Michael Parenti
   Example: “Language and Masculinity” by Victor Seidler

2. The terms that are **defined by the author explicitly** in the text are often key terms. Whenever an author spends time with a single term, uses other sources to offer various definitions of the term, or offers a brief explanation of what a word means, that author is likely using a key term.

   Example of incorporating other definitions: In “Landscape, Drama, and Dissensus: The Rhetorical Education of Red Lodge, Montana,” Zita Ingham explains, “Whether we adopt **Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric** as the discovery of ‘the available means of persuasion,’ or **J. Frederick Crews’s notion of rhetoric** as ‘the placement of ideas,’ or the **definition of rhetoric** as the possibilities of language to deform as well as formulate
the truth of events, places, people, ideas, rhetoric is situated and can be analyzed only in the context of literal and figurative location.”

(Here Ingham brings up varying definitions of rhetoric from others first, and then provides her own for the reader. Note: Ingham will continue to refine her definition for the rest of her paragraph—she brings up the key term several times after this to be more explicit about what she means.

Example of brief definition of key term: Ingham writes, “In this view, mediation—the search for a resolution of conflict that has escalated into litigation—seems successful when a balance of power is reached.

(Here, Ingham briefly defines her term, “mediation,” by redefining it within the sentence, off-setting it with dashes.)

3. Terms that are repeated throughout the text. Of course, many words are repeated in a text, but those that the author spends time defining as he or she is repeating them (sometimes in conjunction with other terms) are likely key terms.

Example of repetition to reinforce key term(s): In “The Lost Art of Argument,” Christopher Lasch defines information anew by incorporating debate in the formation of information: “What democracy requires is vigorous public debate, not information. Of course, it needs information, too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by debate. We do not know what we need to know until we ask the right questions, and we can identify the right questions only by subjecting our ideas to the test of public controversy. Information, usually seen as the precondition of debate, is better understood as its by-product.”

(Here, Lasch repeats the terms “information” and “debate” in order to define them in conjunction with one another—these terms will come up again and again throughout the essay, so that, too, is a good sign that these are his key terms. Note: these are terms that people are familiar with, but he is using them in a specific, intentional way with his own definitions. You might also do this with your essays, redefining terms that we think of as “familiar.”)

Using Key Terms as an Organizational Strategy
As you work through the drafts of a paper, identifying and defining the key terms from the sources you are using, and perhaps developing a key term of your own, such as “citizenship” or “entitlement,” you may be able to use these key terms to provide an organizational structure for the paper. For example, Roland Marchand’s essay, “Parable of the Democracy of Goods,” starts by defining and explaining the parable and then uses that parable to provide a structure for the paper. In each subsequent body paragraph, Marchand provides a fresh way of understanding how the parable functions in advertising; he piles on example after example to show the significance of the parable for our society and for how we understand ourselves. As Marchand was writing his essay, he likely created an outline by listing all the different functions of his key term and by
connecting in all the examples, sources, and related key terms that would help him explain each fresh aspect of that term. In subsequent drafts, he likely developed the logic-based connections between his paragraphs that would allow him to start small, by showing how the parable works in a particular advertisement, and then build momentum by showing the implications of the parable for different kinds of advertising and by showing all the complications and contradictions of the parable. Knowing your key terms can help you decide what to include in a paper and what to leave out, and it can help you develop the logic-based connections between your body paragraphs. (See the Handout on “Organizational Strategies”).

**Key Terms in Passages Quoted From Your Sources**
Occasionally, your instructor may ask you about the “key terms” in a passage you are quoting from one of your source texts. What your instructor may mean here is a slightly more localized use of the key term idea: what are the important or significant words in the passage you just quoted? Although you may not go on to define and re-use those particular words throughout your paper, identifying the significant words in the quote will help you explain that quote and apply its language to an example from another essay.

Think of the key term in a passage you quote from one of your source texts as the central idea or concept contained within that passage that made you decide to quote it in your essay. For the sake of your reader, who may not be familiar with the source text(s) you are using, you it will help to define that key term as it is being used in that source as part of the context you provide for that quote. You can also use that key term when connecting that quoted passage to either a passage quoted from another text, an example from another text, or to an example you provide from outside the texts. (See the handout on “Making Connections”).