

What is a Definition?

In an effort to clear up confusion (or ignorance) about the meaning of a word, does anyone ask, What is a definition of this word? Just about always, the way of putting the question is, What is *the* definition of this word? The difference between *a* and *the* in this context is vast, and I have no choice but to blame the schools for the mischief created by an inadequate understanding of what a definition is. From the earliest grades through graduate school, students are given definitions and, with few exceptions, are not told whose definitions they are, for what purposes they were invented, and what alternative definitions might serve equally as well. The result is that students come to believe that definitions are *not* invented; that they are not even human creations; that, in fact, they are—how shall I say it?—part of the natural world, like clouds, trees, and stars.

(The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School by Neil Postman, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, 172; From Chapter 9, The Word Weavers/The World Makers)