

Essay of Definition

Words mean different things to different people. In this essay student writer Kirsten Zinser takes a whimsical approach to defining the word *eclectic*. The personal approach she uses ends up telling us as much about her as it does about the word she defines.

The introduction piques the readers' interest.

Before defining the word, the writer asks her readers to say it and feel it.

A dictionary definition is given.

The writer describes a highly imaginative experience.

A Few of My Favorite Things

Purple cows, purple bruises, jet fuel, boxes on skateboards, dresses with bells, a dog named Tootsie, a neighbor named Scott, a song about meatballs, a certain good-night kiss, a broken swing. What have all these to do with each other? Nothing.

Go-carting, Handel's *Messiah*, a blue bike, pump organs, box cities, tenth grade . . . "But what do these have to do with each other?" you wonder. Like I said, nothing. My memories, like the things I enjoy, can only be described as one thing: *eclectic*. But this paper is not about my life. It's about my fascination with a word.

E-clec-tic. Say it out loud, savoring each syllable—*e . . . clec . . . tic*. Notice the different positions of your tongue. Odd how a word made of nothing more than clicking noises conveys meaning. I love to say the word. The lips do absolutely no work.

Now try to say it with your lips separated as little as possible. It still works. All the work is done on the inside, a dance of the muscular tongue on the teeth. If I were a ventriloquist, I would use the word as often as possible. Notice how the sound emerges as you form the letters. *E*—here it comes right down the center, *cl*—out from either side, *e*—an open corridor, *c*—the sound cut off, *ti*—the sound explodes past the tongue and over the teeth until pinched off with the last—*c*.

Webster defines *eclectic* as selecting or choosing elements from different sources or systems. *Eclectic* implies variety. But what a grand way of saying variety. Variety sounds so generic; so discount. But *eclectic* is rich with imaginative sound.

I think if I could get inside the word I would find air so pure it would sting my lungs. I imagine the space inside the walls of the word to be like a long hallway that differs in shape every few feet. At one point, the distance between the walls would offer so much space, you could run and jump with little caution. In the next few feet, the walls would be so close together, that you would need to crawl on your belly to pass through. A few feet later, open space again, and so on. You would need to be limber to move through the many different-shaped spaces within the word.

Zinser describes her earliest history with the word.

The writer's "loyalty" to the word is described.

The conclusion echoes the beginning and rounds out the discussion.

For me, *eclectic* is one of those words that isn't simply used to describe something. It is a word that fits my soul. When I was young and first heard the word, I said it all the time, though I did not really understand its meaning. Then, as I began to internalize its definition, something inside me vowed allegiance. I knew this word would become not only a part of my vocabulary, but a part of my life.

And so I pledge my loyalty to the variety of life. To enjoy theater, music, science, the outdoors, sports, philosophy, everything—this is my strategy. I want to be mature enough to carry on a conversation at elite restaurants, and young enough to squish my toes in thick mud. I want to be wild enough to walk on top of tall fences, and wise enough to be afraid of falling.

When I have a house of my own, I want an eclectic house—an old lamp here, a new dresser there, a vintage couch with a knitted afghan. The walls crowded with paintings, pictures, and stencils. Wild plants filling a yard of fragrant, clipped grass and popping up in unexpected places in the gravel driveway. Or perhaps I'll ditch the possession thing and root myself in the poetry of life, soaking in everything by osmosis, but being owned by nothing. I'll adopt a policy of "no policy." I won't be eclectic based on the things I possess, but on the experiences that I have.

Purple cows, purple bruises, jet fuel, boxes on skateboards, dresses with bells, a dog named Tootsie, a neighbor named Scott, a song about meatballs, a certain good-night kiss, a broken swing. "But these have nothing to do with each other," you say. Precisely. ■