Defining Concepts

why are concepts important?
When you get an assignment, you first need to identify what the key ideas are that you will be dealing with. This can help focus what you are going to write about. Then you can evaluate different definitions from the literature of the key concepts, and choose which you find most persuasive to apply in your own work.

when should you define your concepts?
You can define the concepts you want to use towards the beginning of an essay. This clarifies for the reader early on exactly what you are talking about. This is important because there might be several interpretations in the literature of the concept you are using.

Usually defining the key concept/s won’t be the main part of your essay, so you don’t need to make them too long or use up too much of your word count on it. Always check the aim of the assignment though to be sure - some papers might be about varying definitions of a single concept, for example.

how should you define concepts?
For an academic piece of writing, you should try to find definitions from within relevant academic literature. It is generally not the best idea to find a generic dictionary definition of the concept. Different academic disciplines often have their own specific definitions that are not used in other areas. There is often a difference between the lay (non-specialized) and specialist definition of a word or concept. Consider the following examples of definition of the term deliberation:

- “1. careful consideration before decision. 2. formal consultation or discussion. 3. deliberate quality; leisureliness of movement or action; slowness” (Dictionary.com 2017).
- “Debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers 2003, p309).

Note that although the Dictionary.com definition is technically correct, the second definition is more in-depth and specific. The dictionary definition doesn’t provide enough depth to fully communicate the concept. As you can see from the
Dictionary.com definition, there are three possible interpretations of the word deliberation. Which is most relevant? Different definitions will be required for different purposes, so it’s best to find a definition from within the relevant literature for your essay topic. For the above example, there are also a variety of definitions within the literature on deliberation, so you would need to decide which definition/s you will use and more importantly, why you use them.

Definitions are not neutral. They carry with them assumptions and normative baggage! Therefore, selecting and justifying how you define key concepts involves the same level of critical thinking and analysis that you will use in the rest of your paper.

Sources: