Palm Beach Atlantic University
Center for Writing Excellence

Classification Essays

What is a Classification Essay?

In a classification essay, a writer organizes or sorts things into categories.

Three Steps to Effective Classification:

1. Sort things into useful categories.

2. Make sure all the categories follow a single organizing principle.

3. Give examples that fit into each category.

Finding Categories

This is a key step in writing a classification essay. To classify, or sort things in a logical way, find the categories in which to put them. For example, say you need to sort the stack of papers on your desk. Before you would put them in random piles, you would decide what useful categories might be: papers that can be thrown away; papers that need immediate action; papers to read; papers to pass on to other coworkers; or papers to file.

Thesis Statements in Classification Essays

The thesis statement usually includes the topic and how it is classified. Sometimes the categories are named.

(topic)…(how classified)…(category)(category)(category)

Example: *Tourists in Hawaii can enjoy three water sports: snorkeling, surfing, and sailing.*

How to Write an Effective Classification Essay

1. **Determine the categories**. Be thorough; don't leave out a critical category. For example, if you say water sports of Hawaii include snorkeling and sailing, but leave out surfing, your essay would be incomplete because surfing is Hawaii's most famous water sport. On the other hand, don't include too many categories, which will blur your classification. For

example, if your topic is sports shoes, and your organizing principle is activity, you wouldn't include high heels with running shoes and bowling shoes.

2. **Classify by a single principle**. Once you have categories, make sure that they fit into the same organizing principle. The organizing principle is how you sort the groups. Do not allow a different principle to pop up unexpectedly. For example, if your unifying principle is "tourist-oriented" water sports, don't use another unifying principle, such as "native water sports," which would have different categories: pearl diving, outrigger, or canoe racing.

3. **Equally support each category with examples**. In general, you should write the same quantity, i.e., give the same number of examples, for each category. The most important category, usually reserved for last, might require more elaboration.

Common Classification Transitions

- The first kind, the second kind, the third kind, etc.

- The first type, the second type, the third type, etc.

- The first group, the second group, the third group, etc.