

## **That's Classified**

In academic writing, when we talk about classification, we are not referring to top-secret, for-you-eyes-only dossiers that will self-destruct after thirty seconds. We are talking about sorting things (which sometimes does include people) into categories.

While this kind of classification may not be as exciting as top-secret communiques, it is certainly useful (and dare I say sometimes even fun?).

A quick look at the world around us will reveal that classification is more a part of our everyday experience than we may realize. Dining, entertainment, and shopping are prime examples of classification at work.

## **Classification Everyday**

When it comes to dining, restaurants are classified according to the type of food and modes of service (buffet, sit-down, drive-thru), and the menu is classified according to type of dish: appetizer, entrée, dessert, etc.

Classification is also readily evident in entertainment and social media, with apps that primarily function according to categories—for feeds, search functions, and recommendations. In fact, most streaming show services seems to operate almost solely according to category (comedy, family-friendly, trending now).

The shopping experience, too, is organized by classification because stores themselves are categorized by the items being sold: grocery, pharmacy, clothing, electronics, office supplies, sporting goods, home décor, etc.

Upon entering a physical store, we can at once witness further classification, as the items have been displayed according to type, with the categories often listed on signs at the end of the aisles.

## **Classification Example: Shopping for Jeans**

Classification is also demonstrated in online shopping. The search feature on Amazon, for instance, includes a drop-down menu option to refine the search according to a departmental classification—books, appliances, pet supplies, etc.

But Amazon is not unique in this regard—nearly all online stores function according to a highly developed classification system. Let's say, for example, that you are shopping online for blue jeans for your teenage daughter, and you visit the Old Navy web site.

Once on the Old Navy home page, you see two primary classifications at once:

- Names of related stores/brands at the very top of the screen.
- Categories of clothing across the upper middle of the screen, left to right, from *New Arrivals* and *Women* to *Jeans* and *Masks*.

When you scroll over the *Jeans* category, a floating box appears with more classifications, using bolded headers to help organize all the categories and subcategories, which are more or less organized by gender and/or size.

When you click on *Shop All Women's Jeans*, a horizontal bar of photographs further classifies the jeans, this time by fit (skinny, straight, flare, etc.). A drop-down box to the left of the page offers even more refined classifications according to look and style, such as OG Straight, Pop Icon Skinny, Destructed, and High-Waisted.

If we were to click into these various types of jeans, we would be able to learn from the item details the specific aspects of these jeans and what makes them different enough from one another to qualify as being divided in different categories.

## **Classification (& Division) Defined**

Shopping for jeans is just one example of how we are accustomed to working within the framework of classification. We are so used to it, in fact, that we may not give that framework a whole lot of thought or even have considered so many items to have been classified in the first place!

As mentioned previously, when we talk about classification, we are talking about sorting things into different categories, and there are two main ways to do this kind of sorting, by classifying or by dividing.

- ▶ **Classification:** Grouping items by common characteristics.
- ▶ **Division:** Separating into parts by dissimilar characteristics.

Admittedly, the line between classification and division may seem very thin, but it may help to think about it this way:

- ▶ **Classification** means taking separate individual items and putting them together with other similar items to make groups.  
**Example:** Separate activities like sports, card games, and crafts could be classified as hobbies.
- ▶ **Division** means taking apart one big group of items by breaking it into smaller groups of like items.  
**Example:** A big pile of laundry could be divided by color.

In this way, classification is kind of like working from the bottom up whereas division is kind of like working from the top down.

The important thing is that both processes end up at the same place: items sorted into understandable categories with unifying traits.

### **Dirty Laundry & the Classification Principle**

So it would seem that classification is something that we are more familiar with than we may have thought. We may even be masterful at doing some sorting ourselves—as with laundry.

Actually, let's take a look at our dirty laundry for a minute. When we have a big ol' pile of laundry, we sort it (okay, *most* of us sort it).

But why do we (most of us) sort it? That is, what is the purpose of sorting laundry? Is it for fun? Or to kill time? Or just because our mothers told us to?

No, the purpose of sorting laundry is so that the clothes will wash well.

Therefore, clothes are sorted by...

- Color - so the dark, bold colors won't bleed onto the lighter colors.
- Fabric – so delicate garments don't get mauled by heavy ones.
- Water temperature – so hot water can sanitize some items, and cold water doesn't shrink others.

Classifying our dirty laundry is purposeful: It helps our clothes stay in good shape.

Just like sorting laundry, writing with classification should be purposeful.

The driving purpose behind writing with classification is called the classification principle. The classification principle is the method used to sort items in categories.

For a classification essay about social media users, for example, we may easily be able to sort users into different categories, even coming up with fun, catchy names for our categories (like the name-dropper or the constant complainer or the everything-is-awesome guy or look-at-me gal).

While an essay using these categories might be entertaining and even relatable, it would not mean much without a purpose, or classification principle. We need to find a reason to write about these categories, a way to make our classifications of practical use to our reader. We could contextualize our categories like so:

- Toxic social media users to avoid.
- Social media users to boost your brand.

One classification principle is avoidance and the other is helpfulness, but both principles pull from the same group of people (social media users). The only difference is the purpose—and what a difference it makes!

## **How to Write Using a Classification Framework**

### **1. Think of something that can be sorted into different groups.**

- You can classify by grouping things together,
- Or divide by breaking something into smaller parts.

### **2. Determine the classification principle.**

- What is the reason for classifying these items?
- How can the reader use this classification in real life?

### **3. Sort the subject into distinct categories.**

- Number of categories should be two or more.
- Categories should NOT overlap.
  - For example, dogs should not be divided into the classes friendly, messy, and lazy because one dog could have two or even all of those traits.

### **4. Define the characteristics of each category.**

- Focus on the unifying descriptive traits of each item in a single category.
- Characteristics in one category should not overlap with other categories.

### **5. Say something meaningful.**

- Do not just describe the characteristics of each category but also explain how this category relates to the classification principle.
  - For example, if we were writing about kinds of toxic social media users, we would certainly want to describe their behaviors as those would be the unifying features that make that group its own category. However, we also want to be sure to explain *how* those behaviors are toxic and *why* we should avoid this kind of user.

**Tip:** Creating a graphic of some kind could be useful. A category tree, pie chart, or table could help you organize your thoughts and see if any information overlaps or if categories contain roughly the same amount of information.