Classification is a mode of critical thinking and writing based on the division of a concept into groups and subgroups, and the examination of important elements within these groups. We have generalized ideas of classes of objects that help us organize and thereby understand the world. Many of these concepts lend themselves to classification. You think and talk frequently about types of teachers, types of cars, types of movies or music. When registering for courses, you know that American Lit is in the English department, biology in the physical sciences, calculus in mathematics, etc. You select these courses on the basis of consistent classification principles, perhaps graduation requirements or the a-g admissions requirements for UCs. What you are doing is thinking about concepts within a class, sorting out and organizing information, and often evaluating possible alternatives. Classification, in short, is a basic mode of critical thought.

As a pattern of writing, classification enables you to make sense of large and potentially complex concepts. You divide a concept into groups and subgroups, and you classify elements within categories. Assume, for instance, that your American Government teacher asks for an analysis of the branches of the American federal government. You divide the federal government into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and, depending on your purpose, you subdivide even further into departments, agencies, and so forth. Then, according to some consistent principle or thesis—let’s say a critical look at the erosion of the division of powers—you develop information for each category reflecting common characteristics. Essentially, if you classify in a rigorous and logical way, you sort out for analysis the parts and ideas within a scheme, progressing from general to specific in your treatment of the topic.

In developing a classification essay, you also have to determine the system of classification that works best for the demands of the assignment. The system you select would depend to an extent on your reader’s expectations and the nature of the subject. Imagine that you have been asked to write an essay on sports by a physiology teacher, a psychology teacher, or a sociology teacher. Your system might be types of sports injuries for the physiology teacher, behavior patterns of tennis players for your psychology teacher, or levels of violence and aggression in team sports for your sociology teacher. For a broad concept like sports, there are many possible classificatory systems depending on the purpose of your paper.

Although several classification and division strategies might be appropriate for any given concept, the following guidelines should be reviewed and applied for any classification essay:

− Think about the controlling principle for your classification. Why are you classifying the concept? What is the significance? Create a thesis statement that gives your reader a clear perspective on your classification scheme.

− Divide the subject into major categories and subdivide categories consistently. Make certain that you isolate all important categories and that these categories do not overlap excessively.
− Arrange the classification scheme in an effective, emphatic order—chronological, spatial, in order of importance, or from simple to complex.

− Present and analyze each category in a clear sequence, proceeding through the categories until the classification scheme is complete.

− Define or explain any difficult concepts within each category, providing relevant details and evidence.

− Combine classification with other appropriate writing strategies—comparison and contrast, process analysis, definition, and so forth.

Examine the following student paragraph:

To many people, fishing is finding a “fishy-looking” spot, tossing a hooked worm into the water, and hoping that a hungry fish just happens to be nearby. Anyone who has used this haphazard method can attest to the fact that failures usually outnumber successes. The problem with the ‘bait and wait” method is that it is very limited. The bait has less chance of encountering a fish than it would if it were presented in different areas of water. A more intelligent approach to fishing is to use the knowledge that at any given moment fish can be in three parts of a lake. Assuming that a lake has fish, anglers will find them on the surface, in the middle, or on the bottom of the lake. Fishing each of these areas involves the use of a separate technique. By fishing the surface, fishing the middle, or fishing the bottom, you greatly increase the chances of catching a fish.

This example is the student’s introductory paragraph to a classification essay that blends description, process analysis, comparison and contrast, and the use of evidence to excellent effect. From the outset, however, the reader knows that this will be a classification essay.

**Creating a Division and Classification System**

Now you’ll try your hand at creating and justifying a system of division and classification. Your task is to create a taxonomy for Redwood High School students (American Heritage Dictionary defines taxonomy as “The classification of organisms in an ordered system that indicates natural relationships, or Division into ordered groups or categories.”). You will write a 1-2 page description of your taxonomy that includes:

1. An *explanation* of and *justification* for the controlling principle of your taxonomy.
   Explain how students are divided in general terms. Tell the reader how your basis for classification is meaningful and superior to other ways of classifying students. Then show how the system might be useful, and how it might benefit certain groups.

2. A detailed description of the membership criteria for each student category in your system of classification, with specific attributes and characteristics that qualify a student as falling into that group.