

Notebook for

# Successful College Writing

McWhorter, Kathleen T.

---

## PART 3 Patterns of Development

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts >  
Page 409



## Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts

---

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts >  
Page 410

## WRITING A CLASSIFICATION OR DIVISION ESSAY

Whoever arranged the fruits and vegetables in the market used a process called *classification*—grouping things into categories based on specific characteristics. This chapter will show you how to write effective classification and division essays as well as how to incorporate classification and division into essays using other patterns of development.

### What Are Classification and Division?

You use classification to organize things and ideas daily. Your dresser drawers are probably organized by categories, with socks and sweatshirts in different drawers. Grocery stores, phone directories, libraries, and even restaurant menus arrange items in groups according to similar characteristics.

**Classification**, then, is a process of sorting people, things, or ideas into groups or categories to help make them more understandable. For example, your college catalog classifies its course offerings by school, division, and department.

**Division**, similar to classification, begins with *one* item and breaks it down into parts. Thus, for example, the humanities department at your college may be divided into English, modern languages, and philosophy, and the modern language courses might be further divided into Spanish, French, Chinese, and Russian. Division is closely related to process analysis, which is covered in Chapter 14.

A classification or division essay explains a topic by describing types or parts. For example, a classification essay might explore types of advertising—direct mail, radio, television, newspaper, Internet, and so forth. A division essay might describe the parts of an art museum—exhibit areas, museum store, visitor services desk, and the like.

You will find many occasions to use classification and division in the writing you do in college and the workplace (see the accompanying box for a few examples). In the following essay, Jerry Newman classifies the kinds of managers he found in fast-food restaurants. An example of a division essay, “A Brush with Reality: Surprises in the Tube” by David Bodanis, appears on page 417–18.

#### SCENES FROM COLLEGE AND THE WORKPLACE

- For a course in *anatomy and physiology*, you are asked to study the structure and parts of the human ear by identifying the function of each part.
- As part of a *business management* report, you need to consider how debt liability differs for three types of businesses—a single proprietorship, a partnership, and a corporation.
- While working as a *facilities planner*, you are asked to conduct a feasibility study of several new sites. You begin by sorting the sites into three categories—within state, out of state, and out of country.

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts >  
Page 411

## My Secret Life on the McJob: Fast Food Managers

READING

**Jerry Newman**

Jerry Newman is a professor of management at the State University of New York – Buffalo and coauthor of the textbook *Compensation*, tenth edition (2010). He has also worked as a business consultant at AT&T, Hewlett-Packard, RJR Nabisco, and McDonald's. This selection is from *My Secret Life on the McJob: Lessons in Leadership Guaranteed to Supersize Any Management Style* (2007), which Newman wrote after working at various fast-food restaurants to learn about their operation and management. As you read, highlight each category of manager that Newman establishes.

I thought all my fast food stores would be pretty similar. They weren't. Some stores 1 made employees wear name tags, going as far as sending people home if they repeatedly didn't wear their name tags, while other stores didn't seem to care. In some stores crews socialized after work, but in others they barely talked to each other, even during work. Even though every chain had strict rules about every facet of food production and customer interaction, how employees were treated was part of an individual store culture, and this varied from store to store. These differences could often be traced to the managers' values and practices and how consistently they were applied both by the managers and by their *sensei*,<sup>1</sup> much more so than any edicts from headquarters. The best-run store I worked at was [a] Burger King; the worst-run store was also a Burger King. If corporate rules had a controlling impact, shouldn't stores have been much more similar? At one McDonald's the employees were extremely friendly; at another the tension between groups was palpable. The differences, I think, can be traced to the managers. The following is a sampler of the types of managers I encountered. Only the last group, performance managers, was good at finding a *sensei* and developing consistent people practices.

### THE TOXIC MANAGER

Most new employees learn through feedback. When you're first learning a job, there's 2 relatively little ego involvement in feedback; good managers seem to know this and in early days of employment are quick to point out better ways of doing a task. [Toxic] managers, though, use sarcasm or disrespectful comments to indicate when they are unhappy with your work. One of the worst offenders I ran into was the store manager at Arby's, who admitted that the main reason he was hiring me was to change the store culture. He said he was tired of employees who were vulgar and disrespectful, but it didn't take long for me to realize that the role model for their behavior was actually the manager himself—Don. His attitude and style set the tone for everyone else in his store. Almost as bad, the key individual with the necessary attributes to be a *sensei* shared Don's disregard for the feelings of others. Don, in particular, didn't confine

<sup>1</sup>*Sensei*: A Japanese word for "teacher" or "master." Newman uses it to mean an employee who is not a manager but who is both highly skilled at his or her job and socially influential among fellow employees.

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts >  
Page 412

his wrath to “bad” employees. Bill, a diligent long-timer, messed up a coupon order. A customer had an entertainment book coupon for one Value Meal free with the purchase of another. There was a labyrinth of steps to complete some of the discounts correctly. When Bill made the error, it was right before the end of Don’s shift, and Don tore into him, saying loudly enough for everyone to hear, “Well, I’m leaving before Bill can make my life any more miserable.” It didn’t take long to infect others with this lack of respect for employees.

#### THE MECHANICAL MANAGER

The most common type of manager I encountered was the Mechanical Manager, who was for the most part either an assistant manager or a shift manager, not a full store manager. You could spot the Mechanical Managers from across the room—they did their jobs, day after day, as if fast food was slow death. They didn’t want to be there, and they were just going through the motions. They typically had gotten their jobs because they were reliable crew members and had put in enough time that some reward was needed to keep them working. A promotion has a certain finality, though—it makes you confront reality: Is this what I want out of life? Most say “No,” and that’s probably why I didn’t see very many store managers who were mechanical. Before most store managers had reached that level (one store manager told me it was a ten-year journey), those who weren’t interested in fast food as a lifetime career had moved on to other career pursuits. While looking for other opportunities, though, they did what was necessary to get by. Luis at McDonald’s was the perfect example.

In my first McDonald’s experience I made myself a grid showing all of the sandwiches and their ingredients. After a day of having instructions blasted at me, I needed a visual training aid to finally put things together. I shared this grid with Luis on my third day, expecting he might already have training materials like this (as was the case at Wendy’s) or that he could use it to train other visual learners. As I handed Luis the Excel spreadsheet, I watched his face and saw no reaction. None. He told me he’d leave it for Kris, the store manager. Clearly he saw the value in it—he didn’t toss it, after all—but a reinforcing response for my initiative required a level of involvement he didn’t or couldn’t muster.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP MANAGER

The Relationship Manager was a relatively rare breed in my experience. James was the prototype. He led by building relationships and demonstrating that he cared about our destinies—hard to do when it seemed like every week someone was leaving and another person was coming on board. From the first day, James was very different from what I was used to. When I first met him for my job interview, he was fifteen minutes late because he was out picking up an employee whose car had broken down. I never saw any other manager pick up or take home a crew member who had transportation problems. In fact, at one store I watched Mary, an older worker teetering on the edge of poverty, sit in a booth out front for two hours waiting for her husband to pick her up after his shift at a Sam’s Club. As I came to learn, this kindness wasn’t unusual for James. And in being kind, James created a culture that was much more friendly and supportive than that in many of the other fast food places I had experienced. Even the

Highlight (orange) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 413

way James responded to my quitting was refreshing. With my back problems becoming increasingly worse, I called James to tell him that I was quitting and dreaded leaving him in the lurch. But he was amazingly kind, telling me to take care of myself and forcefully telling me to pick up my check.

#### THE PERFORMANCE MANAGER

It's easy to spot the Performance Manager. Here relationships are still important, but now they serve as a means to ensure performance. Through word or deed she very quickly lets you know what is expected. I like this. No ambiguity, no doubt about what it takes to make the grade. The best at this was Kris, who, it seemed to me, watched for slackers much more closely than did the managers at other fast food places. She told me during the interview that I would be watching DVDs my first day. She also mentioned that one of the new people had taken three to four bathroom breaks while watching the videos, which was an excessive number, she thought. She also commented that she might be losing some people because she thought they were slower than they should be. I got the message: She would be watching my work and looking to see if I was going to goof off. My experience in other places was that you got fired for only two things: not showing up and insubordinate behavior. Clearly she was adding a third reason—poor performance. Good for her!

Kris's watchful eye extended beyond bathroom breaks. I found out the hard way that taking breaks, even unpaid ones, wasn't allowed unless legally required. Apparently in New York State, you're not entitled to a break until after five hours of work. So when I asked Kris for a break before the appointed time, she answered with an emphatic "No." Kris's message was clearly that we do our jobs by the book, no exceptions.

Over time at this Burger King I began to notice that Kris wasn't a taskmaster all the time. Sure, during busy times she was prone to exhort the staff to work faster. And she didn't tolerate leaning (remember, "if you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean"). But this attitude relaxed a bit during slower times, and it especially relaxed for the better workers like Daniel, Eric, and Craig, three of the fastest guns on the sandwich assembly board.

## Highlight (yellow) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 415

### *Classification or Division Fully Explains Each Category or Part*

A classification or division essay contains adequate detail so that each category or part can be understood by readers. In "My Secret Life on the McJob: Fast Food Managers," Newman clearly presents the four types of managers, using personal experience, examples, and description. Details such as these enable readers to "see" the writer's categories or parts in a classification or division essay.

### *Classification or Division Develops a Thesis*

The thesis statement in a classification or division essay identifies the topic and may reveal the principle used to classify or divide the topic. In most cases it also suggests why the classification or division is relevant or important.

Here are two examples of thesis statements:

Most people consider videos a form of entertainment; however, videos can also serve educational, commercial, and political functions.

The Grand Canyon is divided into two distinct geographical areas—the North Rim and the South Rim—each of which offers different views, facilities, and climatic conditions.

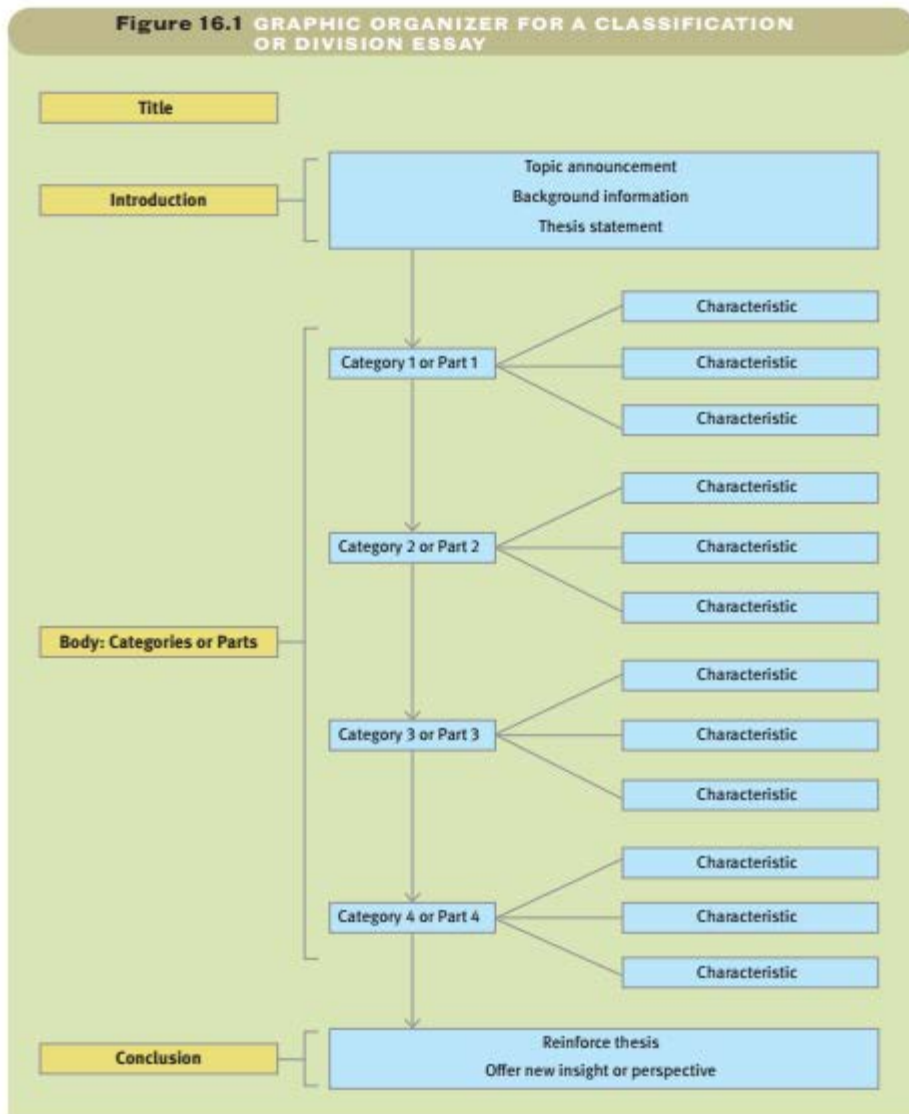
### Visualizing a Classification or Division Essay: A Graphic Organizer

The graphic organizer shown in Figure 16.1 outlines the basic organization of a classification or division essay. The introduction announces the topic, gives background information, and states the thesis. The body paragraphs explain the categories or parts and their characteristics. The conclusion brings the essay to a satisfying close by reinforcing the thesis and offering a new insight on the topic.

Read the division essay on page 417 and then study the graphic organizer for it in Figure 16.2 (on p. 419).

For more on graphic organizers, see Chapter 3, pp. 59–61.

## Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts >



Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 420

To draw detailed graphic organizers using a computer, visit [www.buffordstmartins.com/SuccessfulCollege](http://www.buffordstmartins.com/SuccessfulCollege).

### Exercise 16.3

Draw a graphic organizer for “My Secret Life on the McJob: Fast Food Managers” (pp. 411–13). Note that because this is an excerpt from a book, it does not include a conclusion.

## Integrating Classification or Division into an Essay

Classification or division is often used along with one or more other patterns of development. For example, an essay that argues for stricter gun control may categorize guns in terms of their firepower, use, or availability. A narrative about a writer’s frustrating experiences in a crowded international airport terminal may describe the different parts or areas of the airport.

Use the following tips to incorporate classification or division into an essay based on another pattern of development:

1. **Avoid focusing on why the classification or division is meaningful.** When used as a secondary pattern, its significance should be clear from the context in which the classification or division is presented.
2. **State the principle of classification.** Do so briefly but make sure it is clear to your readers.
3. **Name the categories or parts.** In the sentence that introduces the classification or division, name the categories or parts to focus your readers’ attention on the explanation that follows.

In “The Dog Ate My Flash Drive, and Other Tales of Woe” on page 433, Carolyn Foster Segal uses classification along with other patterns of development to develop her thesis about student excuses.

### A GUIDED WRITING ASSIGNMENT

The following guide will lead you through the process of writing a classification or division essay. Note that you may need to integrate one or more other patterns of development in your essay to develop your thesis or make a point. Depending on your learning style, you may choose various ways of generating and organizing ideas.

#### The Assignment

Write a classification or division essay on a topic of your own choosing or on a topic in one of the following lists:

##### *Classification*

1. Types of pets
2. Types of sports fans

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 421

3. Types of movies
4. Types of classmates
5. Types of shoppers
6. Types of television dramas

#### **Division**

1. Your family
2. A machine or a piece of equipment
3. An organization
4. A sports team or an extracurricular club
5. A public place (building, stadium, department store, or theme park)
6. Your college

Depending on the topic you select, you may need to use Internet or library sources to develop and support your ideas about it. You may also need to narrow the topic. Your audience consists of readers of your local newspaper.

As you develop your classification or division essay, consider using one or more other patterns of development. For example, in a classification essay, you might compare and contrast types of sports fans or give examples of types of movies. In a division essay, you might describe the parts of a theme park or another public place.

*For more on description, illustration, and comparison and contrast, see Chapters 12, 13, and 15.*

### **Generating Ideas**

There are two primary methods for generating ideas and for classifying or dividing those ideas. With method 1, you first generate details and then group the details into categories or parts. With method 2, you first generate categories or parts and then generate details that support them. Here is how both methods apply to classification essays and division essays:

#### **Classification**

*Method 1:* First think of details that describe the group. Then use the details to categorize group members.

*Method 2:* First identify categories. Then think of details that describe each category.

#### **Division**

*Method 1:* Brainstorm details about your topic and then group the details into parts or sections.

*Method 2:* Think about how your topic can be divided into easy-to-understand parts. Then think of details that describe each part.

Method 1 is effective when you approach the classification or division from part to whole—identifying details and then grouping the details. Depending on your learning style and your topic, it may be easier to start by creating categories or parts and then filling in details about each one. In this case, use method 2.

**Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 422**



For more on purpose, audience, and point of view, see Chapter 5, pp. 106–9.

### Considering Your Purpose, Audience, and Point of View

Your principle of classification or division, your categories or parts, and your details must all fit your purpose and audience. If your purpose is to inform novice computer users about the components of a personal computer (PC), your parts and details must be straightforward and nontechnical. However, if your purpose is to persuade computer technicians to purchase a particular kind of PC, your parts and details would be more technical. For this Guided Writing Assignment, your audience consists of readers of your local newspaper.

As you work on your classification or division essay, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is my principle of classification or division appropriate for my purpose and audience?
- Do my categories or parts and my details advance the purpose of the essay?
- Will my readers understand the categories or parts?
- What point of view will best suit my purpose and audience—first, second, or third person? The first person (*I, we*) or second person (*you*) may be appropriate in informal writing if you or your audience have personal knowledge of or experience with the topic you are classifying or dividing. The third person (*he, she, it, they*) is appropriate in more formal writing or for topics less familiar to you or your audience.

### Generating Details and Grouping Them into Categories or Parts

Work through the following tasks in whatever order suits your topic and your learning style, using either method 1 or method 2 (p. 421).

**Generating details.** For each category or part, you need to supply specific details that will make it clear and understandable to your readers. As you work on your essay, then, write down examples, situations, or sensory details that illustrate each category or part. Use one or more of the following strategies:

1. Visit a place where you can observe your topic or the people associated with it. For example, to generate details about pets, visit a pet store or an animal shelter. Make notes on what you see and hear. Record conversations, physical characteristics, behaviors, and so forth.
2. Discuss your topic with a classmate or friend. Focus your talk on the qualities and characteristics of your topic.
3. Brainstorm a list of all the features or characteristics of your topic that come to mind.
4. Draw a map or diagram that illustrates your topic's features and characteristics.
5. Conduct library or Internet research to discover facts, examples, and other details about your topic.

**Choosing a principle of classification or division.** Look for shared features or characteristics. Your principle of classification or division should be interesting, meaningful,

For more on prewriting strategies, see Chapter 5, pp. 110–18.

For more on observation, see Chapter 22, pp. 617–18.

#### Learning Style Options

For more on library and Internet research, see Chapter 22, pp. 597–606.

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 423

and worthwhile to your audience. Experiment with several principles of classification or division until you find one that fits your purpose and audience.

**Choosing categories or parts.** Use the following suggestions to determine your categories or parts:

1. *In a classification essay*, make sure most or all members of the group fit into one of your categories. For example, in an essay about unsafe driving habits, you would include the most common bad habits. *In a division essay*, no essential parts should be left out. For example, in an essay about parts of a baseball stadium, you would not exclude the infield or bleachers.
2. *In a classification essay*, be sure the categories are exclusive; each group member should fit into one category only. In the essay about unsafe driving habits, the categories of reckless drivers and aggressive drivers would overlap, so exclusive categories should be used instead. *In a division essay*, make sure the parts do not overlap. In the essay about the parts of a baseball stadium, the parts “playing field” and “infield” would overlap, so it would be better to use three distinct parts of the field—infield, outfield, and foul-ball area.
3. Create specific categories or parts that will engage your readers. *In a classification essay*, categorizing drivers by their annoying driving habits would be more interesting than simply distinguishing between “good” and “bad” drivers. *A division essay* on players’ facilities in a baseball stadium—dugout, locker room, and bullpen—might be more interesting to sports fans than an essay describing different seating sections of the stadium.
4. Choose descriptive names that emphasize the distinguishing feature of the category or part. *In a classification essay*, you might categorize highway drivers as “I-own-the-road” drivers, “I’m-in-no-hurry” drivers, and “I’m-daydreaming” drivers. *In a division essay* about the parts of a baseball stadium, you might use “home-run heaven” to name one part.

Do not hesitate to create, combine, or eliminate categories or parts, as needed.

#### Essay in Progress 1

Choose a topic for your classification or division essay from the list of assignment options on pages 420–21, or choose one on your own. Then use the preceding guidelines for method 1 or method 2 to generate details about your topic, choose a principle of classification or division, and devise a set of categories or parts. Whatever method you use, list the examples, situations, or other details that you will use to describe each category or part. You might try drawing a graphic organizer.

#### Developing Your Thesis

Once you choose categories or parts and are satisfied with your details, you are ready to develop a thesis for your essay. Remember that your thesis statement should identify your topic and reveal your principle of division or classification. In most cases, it should also suggest why your classification or division is useful or important. Notice how the following weak theses have been strengthened by showing both what the categories are and why they are important.

For more on thesis statements, see Chapter 6.

**Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 424**

WEAK	There are four types of insurance that most people can purchase.
REVISED	If you understand the four common types of insurance, you will be able to make sure that you, your family members, and your property are protected.
WEAK	Conventional stores are only one type of retailing; other types are becoming more popular.
REVISED	Although conventional stores are still where most people purchase products, three new types of shopping are becoming increasingly popular—face-to-face sales conducted in a home, sales via telephone or computer, and sales from automatic vending machines.

Draft your thesis and then check your prewriting to make sure you have enough details to support the thesis. If necessary, do some additional prewriting.

#### Essay in Progress 2

Using the preceding guidelines, develop a thesis for your classification or division essay.

### Evaluating Your Ideas and Thesis

Take a few minutes to evaluate your ideas and thesis. Start by rereading everything you have written with a critical eye. Highlight the most useful details and delete those that are repetitious or irrelevant. If you are working on a computer, highlight useful details in bold type or move them to a separate file. As you review your work, add useful ideas that come to mind.

#### Trying Out Your Ideas on Others

Working in a group of two or three students, discuss your ideas and thesis for this chapter's assignment. Each writer should describe to the group his or her topic, principle of classification or division, and categories or parts. Then, as a group, evaluate each writer's work and suggest recommendations for improvement.

#### Essay in Progress 3

Using the preceding suggestions and comments from your classmates, evaluate your thesis, your categories or parts, and the details you plan to use in your essay. Refer to the list of characteristics on pages 413–15 to help you with your evaluation.

### Organizing and Drafting

Once you have evaluated your categories or parts, reviewed your thesis, and considered the advice of your classmates, you are ready to organize your ideas and draft your essay.

For more on drafting an essay, see Chapter 7.

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 425

### Choosing a Method of Organization

Choose the method of organization that best suits your purpose. One method that works well in classification essays is the least-to-most or most-to-least arrangement. You might arrange your categories in increasing order of importance or from most to least common, difficult, or frequent. Other possible sequences include chronological order (when one category occurs or is observable before another) or spatial order (when you classify physical objects).

Spatial order often works well in division essays, as does order of importance. In describing the parts of a baseball stadium, you might move from stands to playing field (spatial order). In writing about the parts of a hospital, you might describe the most important areas first (operating rooms and emergency department) and then move to less important facilities (waiting rooms and visitor cafeteria).

For more on methods of organization, see Chapter 7, pp. 144–47.

### Drafting the Classification or Division Essay

Once you decide how to organize your categories or parts, your next step is to write a first draft. Use the following guidelines to draft your essay:

- 1. Explain each category or part.** Begin by defining each one, taking into account the complexity of your topic and the background knowledge of your audience. Define any unfamiliar terms. Then provide details that describe each category or part, and show how each is distinct from the others. Include a wide range of details—sensory details, personal experiences, examples, and comparisons and contrasts.
- 2. Provide roughly the same amount and kind of detail and description for each of your categories or parts.** For instance, if you give an example of one type of mental disorder, you should give an example for every other type discussed in the essay. Generally, allow one or more paragraphs for each category or part.
- 3. Consider using headings or lists.** Presenting the parts or categories within a numbered list or in sections with headings can help make them clear and distinct. Headings or lists can be especially useful when you have a large number of categories or parts.
- 4. Use transitions.** You need transitions to keep your reader on track as you move from one category or part to another. In addition, transitions help distinguish key features between and within categories or parts.
- 5. Consider using a visual.** Diagrams, charts, or other visuals can make your system of classification or division clearer for your readers.
- 6. Write an effective introduction.** Your introduction usually includes your thesis statement and suggests why the classification or division is useful. It also should provide background information and explain further, if needed, your principle of classification or division.
- 7. Write a satisfying conclusion.** Your conclusion should bring your essay to a satisfying close, reemphasizing your thesis or offering a new insight or perspective on the topic.

For more on transitions, see Chapter 7, pp. 150–52.

For more on writing effective paragraphs, including introductions and conclusions, see Chapter 7.

## Highlight (orange) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 433

### The Dog Ate My Flash Drive, and Other Tales of Woe

Carolyn Foster Segal

Carolyn Foster Segal is professor of English at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where she specializes in American literature, poetry, creative writing, and women's film. She has published poems in *Buffalo Spree* magazine, *Phoebe: A Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, *Theory*, and *Aesthetics*, and the *Bucks County Writer*, as well as many essays in the *Chronicle*

READING

## Highlight (orange) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 434

of *Higher Education*, a weekly newspaper for college faculty and administrators. The following essay appeared in the *Chronicle* in 2000. With the author's permission, it has been revised slightly to update some technological references. As you read, notice how Segal's classification essay also uses description and illustration to fully explain each category she identifies.

Taped to the door of my office is a cartoon that features a cat explaining to his feline teacher, "The dog ate my homework." It is intended as a gently humorous reminder to my students that I will not accept excuses for late work, and it, like the lengthy warning on my syllabus, has had absolutely no effect. With a show of energy and creativity that would be admirable if applied to the (missing) assignments in question, my students persist, week after week, semester after semester, year after year, in offering excuses about why their work is not ready. Those reasons fall into several broad categories: the family, the best friend, the evils of dorm life, the evils of technology, and the totally bizarre.

*The Family.* The death of the grandfather/grandmother is, of course, the grandmother of all excuses. What heartless teacher would dare to question a student's grief or veracity? What heartless student would lie, wishing death on a revered family member, just to avoid a deadline? Creative students may win extra extensions (and days off) with a little careful planning and fuller plot development, as in the sequence of "My grandfather/grandmother is sick"; "Now my grandfather/grandmother is in the hospital"; and finally, "We could all see it coming—my grandfather/grandmother is dead."

Another favorite excuse is "the family emergency," which (always) goes like this: "There was an emergency at home, and I had to help my family." It's a lovely sentiment, one that conjures up images of Louisa May Alcott's little women rushing off with

Highlight (pink) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts >  
Page 435

baskets of food and copies of *Pilgrim's Progress*, but I do not understand why anyone would turn to my most irresponsible students in times of trouble.

**The Best Friend.** This heartwarming concern for others extends beyond the family to friends, as in, "My best friend was up all night and I had to (a) stay up with her in the dorm, (b) drive her to the hospital, or (c) drive to her college because (1) her boyfriend broke up with her, (2) she was throwing up blood [no one catches a cold anymore; everyone throws up blood], or (3) her grandfather/grandmother died."

At one private university where I worked as an adjunct,<sup>1</sup> I heard an interesting spin that incorporated the motifs of both best friend and dead relative: "My best friend's mother killed herself." One has to admire the cleverness here: A mysterious woman in the prime of her life has allegedly committed suicide, and no professor can prove otherwise! And I admit I was moved, until finally I had to point out to my students that it was amazing how the simple act of my assigning a topic for a paper seemed to drive large numbers of otherwise happy and healthy middle-aged women to their deaths. I was careful to make that point during an off week, during which no deaths were reported.

**The Evils of Dorm Life.** These stories are usually fairly predictable; almost always feature the evil roommate or hallmate, with my student in the role of the innocent victim; and can be summed up as follows: My roommate, who is a horrible person, likes to party, and I, who am a good person, cannot concentrate on my work when he or she is partying. Variations include stories about the two people next door who were running around and crying loudly last night because (a) one of them had boyfriend/girlfriend problems; (b) one of them was throwing up blood; or (c) someone, somewhere, died. A friend of mine in graduate school had a student who claimed that his roommate attacked him with a hammer. That, in fact, was a true story; it came out in court when the bad roommate was tried for killing his grandfather.

**The Evils of Technology.** The computer age has revolutionized the student story, inspiring almost as many new excuses as it has Internet businesses. Here are just a few electronically enhanced explanations:

- The computer wouldn't let me save my work.
- The printer wouldn't print.
- The printer wouldn't print this file.
- The printer wouldn't give me time to proofread.
- The printer made a black line run through all my words, and I know you can't read this, but do you still want it, or wait, here, take my flash drive. File name? I don't know what you mean.
- I swear I attached it.
- It's my roommate's computer, and she usually helps me, but she had to go to the hospital because she was throwing up blood.
- I did write to the Listserv, but all my messages came back to me.
- I just found out that all my other Listserv messages came up under a different name. I just want you to know that it's really me who wrote all those messages, you can tell which ones are mine because I didn't use the spellcheck! But it was yours truly :) Anyway, just in case you missed those messages or don't believe my writing, I'll repeat what I said: I thought the last movie we watched in class was boring.

<sup>1</sup>adjunct: A part-time instructor.

## Highlight (orange) - 16 Classification and Division: Explaining Categories and Parts > Page 436

**The Totally Bizarre.** I call the first story “The Pennsylvania Chain Saw Episode.” A commuter student called to explain why she had missed my morning class. She had gotten up early so that she would be wide awake for class. Having a bit of extra time, she walked outside to see her neighbor, who was cutting some wood. She called out to him, and he waved back to her with the saw. Wouldn’t you know it, the safety catch wasn’t on or was broken, and the blade flew right out of the saw and across his lawn and over her fence and across her yard and severed a tendon in her right hand. So she was calling me from the hospital, where she was waiting for surgery. Luckily, she reassured me, she had remembered to bring her paper and a stamped envelope (in a plastic bag, to avoid bloodstains) along with her in the ambulance, and a nurse was mailing everything to me even as we spoke.

That wasn’t her first absence. In fact, this student had missed most of the class meetings, and I had already recommended that she withdraw from the course. Now I suggested again that it might be best if she dropped the class. I didn’t harp on the absences (what if even some of this story were true?). I did mention that she would need time to recuperate and that making up so much missed work might be difficult. “Oh, no,” she said, “I can’t drop this course. I had been planning to go on to medical school and become a surgeon, but since I won’t be able to operate because of my accident, I’ll have to major in English, and this course is more important than ever to me.” She did come to the next class, wearing—as evidence of her recent trauma—a bedraggled Ace bandage on her left hand.

You may be thinking that nothing could top that excuse, but in fact I have one more story, provided by the same student, who sent me a letter to explain why her final assignment would be late. While recuperating from her surgery, she had begun corresponding on the Internet with a man who lived in Germany. After a one-week, whirlwind Web romance, they had agreed to meet in Rome, to *rendezvous* (her phrase) at the papal Easter Mass. Regrettably, the time of her flight made it impossible for her to attend class, but she trusted that I—just this once—would accept late work if the pope wrote a note.