

Basics

Categorizing information is sorting ideas or objects into particular groups. These groups have a pattern or relationship. There are many reasons for categorizing information, but the aim is to understand it by looking at relationships between categories and by seeing how they are different or the same.

The academic context

In English-language writing you are expected to have good organization of your content. As a student, categorizing will help you to see the patterns and connections between pieces of information. This should give you a better viewpoint: organizing your ideas will give you new ideas. You will also understand ideas better as you think them through in the categorizing process. This will help you memorize the information too. Finally, you will be able to manage the information better because you will have a greater understanding of it. Thus, categorization can aid a student to learn, remember and use information effectively.

Key features

Types of categorization

- Information can be categorized by importance. If in your writing you want to persuade the reader to see your point of view, you can choose to use the most important point first to make your case. Alternatively, you can save it for last, if that will make your point better.
- Categorizing can be according to similarities or differences. This information can then be used in writing that compares or contrasts.
- Chronology may be the best category, if you want to show a process or a series of stages in time. Historical writing is usually chronologically based.
- Cause and effect are useful categories, too. For example, when reviewing a book, you may have the characters sorted into different categories according to how they impact the narrative.
- Some writing may involve discussing problems and solutions, so these can be categories, too.

Methods of categorization

- You can use mind-mapping. This is a visual way to group ideas into categories.
- Drawing up a table with categories is particularly helpful when there is a lot of information to organize and understand. It gives you tidy organization of your information, making it more accessible.
- A Venn diagram can also be useful, especially if you have categories which overlap.
- Other graphic organizers may help. For example, if you are studying nutrition, a food pyramid effectively categorizes a lot of information.

Challenges / difficulties

You will probably be categorizing information to make it easier for you to use in your writing, for a presentation or to learn for an exam. This may mean you have a lot of notes to collate, and the task may seem overwhelming. The truth is that by identifying categories to put your information into, you are already breaking it down, and you will find your notes become easier to deal with.

How can I develop this skill?

After a lecture or a piece of reading, try to think of two or three different ways of categorizing the ideas you have encountered. For example, if you have been to a lecture about the French Revolution, you might be able to categorize information:

- chronologically
- around important people or political groups
- around different beliefs or ideologies

Try to decide which way of categorizing you prefer for each topic. All the ways will have some strengths and some weaknesses. See if you can categorize the information in your notes.

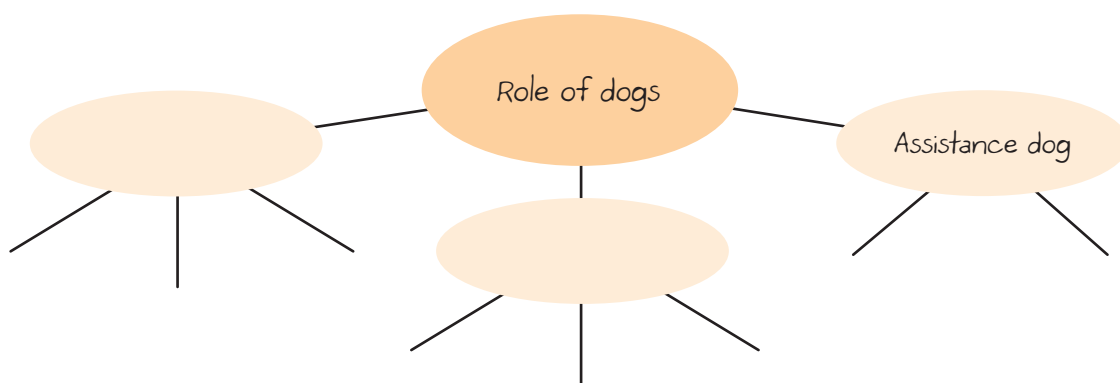
Learning outcome

- Students will find that categorizing their notes makes them more useful, as they can easily identify what they want to learn or use.
- Categorizing shows students the connections between ideas, making them easier to describe in their writing.

Theory to practice

Here is a paragraph a student has written after categorizing their notes on their subject (the role of dogs). See if you can fill in the mind map they made before writing the paragraph.

For thousands of years people have had dogs, and they have played an important role in our lives. Many people certainly seem to love their dogs, and it is possibly the animal most chosen as a pet. However, since dogs were domesticated they have been far more than just our companions and best friends. Indeed, dogs perform many services, several of which will be outlined here. Police dogs are trained to do a variety of tasks, such as tracking people, searching for drugs and attacking criminals. Therapy dogs provide a wonderful service: they are dogs which have been trained to give comfort to patients in hospitals, elderly people in care homes or children with autism. Finally, there are dogs which give assistance to people who have disabilities. These include guide dogs for people with sight problems and hearing dogs for deaf people. It cannot be denied that we owe a lot to our furry helpers!



Ways to get more practice

- 1 What other ways can you think of to categorize dogs?
- 2 Look around your classroom. What categories can you put objects you see into?