Nova’s Guide to Classification Keys

Unlock the secrets of the natural world, one question at a time!

■ What is a classification key? It is a tool used by scientists to sort living things into groups based on their specific physical features.

■ How does a branching key work? You start with a large group and ask a 'Yes' or 'No' question to split the group into two smaller, more specific branches.

■ Why do we use characteristics? We look for observable traits, such as whether an animal has fur, feathers, or a shell, to help us tell different species apart.

■ What is the difference between a vertebrate and an invertebrate? Vertebrates have a backbone, while invertebrates do not. This is a common starting point for many keys.

■ Can a key be used for anything? Yes! Classification keys can be made for plants, rocks, or even household items, as long as they have clear, defining features.

Did you know? Did you know? Scientists have identified over 1.2 million species of animals on Earth, but they estimate that millions more are still waiting to be discovered! Using a classification key is like being a detective; you follow a path of clues to find the exact identity of a living thing.

Key vocabulary: Classification · Organism · Characteristic · Branching Key · Invertebrate · Vertebrate · Identification