

What is a Taxonomy?

A taxonomy is a classification system that allows you to distinguish concepts, name concepts and put those concepts in order. It is used to index and access information about a subject in a systematic, unambiguous way. You use classification systems to find what you need in many everyday situations, perhaps without realizing it. When you use the card catalog in the library to find the topic you are interested in, you are using the Dewey Decimal Classification system, the taxonomy the library system has adopted to organize its books by their subject matter. When you look for a dry cleaner in the yellow pages, the headings the phone company uses to organize the information comprise another type of taxonomy. The Sunday edition of your paper uses yet another kind of classification structure to present their weekly calendar of arts and entertainment events.

When you open a directory of human services and look in the index for a list of all of the agencies that provide a particular service, the categories you look under (such as day care or counseling or case/care management), those terms, the wording that you use and the order in which they are listed—that's a taxonomy. In a human service context, a taxonomy is a classification system that allows you to index and access community resources based on the services they provide, and possibly the target populations they serve. It provides a structure for your information. Whether you have a rolodex, a directory or a sophisticated computer system, your taxonomy tells people what is in your information system and how to find it.