

## How to Use a Dichotomous Key

A dichotomous key is a tool used for identifying an unknown item or organism. “Dichotomous” means, “**divided into two parts.**” A dichotomous key always gives **two** choices in each step. In each step, you must make a decision based on characteristics of the item. If you decide correctly every time, the name of the item will be revealed at the end.

Always read and consider both choices, even if the first one seems to be appropriate. Jumping to conclusions may lead to the wrong classification of the item.

You must understand the meaning of the words used in each choice before you can decide correctly. If you are not sure of the meaning of a term used in the key, look it up in a dictionary or use appropriate resources available to you. Find examples of other things that share that characteristic. For example, if the key is used for classifying trees and asks you to decide if the leaf margin is “lobed” or “not lobed”, make sure you know what lobes are and look for examples of other leaves that are lobed and not lobed. Then you will better be able to decide with certainty. Never guess. Take your time. Never guess, as this could lead to the wrong classification of the item.

When there are measurements given in the choices, use the appropriate measuring tools to measure your item. If the measurements are given in centimeters, use a centimeter ruler. Do not approximate and do not guess. Measure carefully.

Once you have identified all of your items, carefully read the description of each item to make sure they match. If you are left with two possible answers, read the description of both and decide which one seems to fit your item best.