Creating and Using Classification Keys

In constructing keys, keep the following in mind:

    A. Start with the most general characteristics and progress to increasingly more specific characteristics.

    B. Use constant measurements, not ones that are highly variable.

    C. Use measurements when possible, avoiding descriptors like large or small if possible.

    D. Use characteristics that are found year-round, not seasonal if at all possible (sometimes the point of a key is identifying organisms based on seasonal characteristics, such as flowers). If your key is seasonal, indicate it in the title of the key.

    E. Always provide two choices or a couplet.

    F. After each choice in a couplet, tell the user where to go or the name of the specimen.

When using a key, keep the following in mind:

    A. Read both choices in a couplet carefully. Although the first description may seem to fit your sample, the second may apply even better.

    B. Keep notes telling what sequence of identification steps you took. This will allow you to double-check your work later and indicate sources of mistakes, if they have been made.

    C. If you are unsure of which choice to make in a couplet, follow both forks (one at a time). After working through a couple of more couplets, it may become apparent that one fork does not fit your sample at all.

    D. When you have keyed out an organism, do not take your effort as the final result. Double check your identification scheme, using your notes. Find a type specimen (if available) and compare your unknown to the type specimen. If a type specimen is unavailable, find a good description of the indicated taxonomic group and see if your unknown reflects this description.

- The ultimate check of identifications is a comparison of the unknown with an authentically named "Type Specimen".