Understanding Call Numbers

Welcome to Understanding Call Numbers.

This presentation is for those of you who are beginning to do research and want to find out how to locate books in the library or simply want to understand the call number systems.

Call numbers are the combination of numbers and letters on the spine of the book or journal.

As you see, we’ll look at the three call number systems separately. All three are used in this library. When you understand how the call numbers look and work, you’ll be able to find material in the library more quickly.

Call numbers are the result of a library cataloger’s use of a classification system. There are three classification systems that we’ll discuss.

The Library of Congress classification system, also called the LC system, the Dewey Decimal Classification system, and the SuDoc system, which is used only for government documents.

All of these classification systems have one thing in common: they are all used to organize material so that books on specific topics are shelved near each other.

From a practical perspective, the call numbers are like an address for the book. They allow library personnel to shelve books in a specific order and, more importantly, they allow you to find materials you’re looking for.

Library of Congress Classification System: Most of the Library’s Collection

The LC system is used to create the call numbers for most of the library’s materials. This system is used by most larger libraries because information can be grouped within 21 categories. In this Library, LC call numbers are used for books and journals in the MAIN collection on the 3rd and 4th floors. Call numbers beginning with the letters A-L will be found on the 4th floor, and those beginning N-Z on the 3rd. This system is also used in the Music Listening Room on the 1st floor and in the Reference department on the second floor.
In the Library of Congress Classification System, the first letter of the call number is the *class*. The class indicates the broadest subject area.

So, for instance, all of the science books will have call letters beginning with the letter Q. General science books and journals will have only one letter at the beginning of the call number.

Books and journals on specific aspects of the area will have a second letter following the letter that designates the class. That second letter is called a *subclass*. So, books about chemistry will have the call numbers QD indicating science generally and chemistry specifically.

Each subclass is then broken down into divisions. Divisions are numeric and indicate even finer distinctions among aspects within the same class and subclass. So a book that contains discussion and formulas for organic chemistry would have a different call number than a book about inorganic chemistry.
The second part of the call number is called the cutter. It’s used to identify a specific book.

The cutter always follows a decimal point and is alphanumeric – a combination of letters and numbers. The division of the class also contains a decimal point. In the cutter, though, the decimal point is always followed by a letter.

Now that you have an idea of how the LC system works, let’s look at how the books are shelved. The call numbers are counting numbers, so you’d find them in the same order you would if you were counting 538, 539, 540,… and so on. The cutter .R5 comes after .R268. The cutters are decimals, so you read them digit by digit. So, 5 comes after 2.

Dewey Decimal System: Juvenile Non-Fiction

The Dewey Decimal Classification system is used for the LS collection, which is this library’s juvenile or young adult literature. This section is located on the 3rd floor.

The Dewey Decimal system organizes knowledge or information into only 10 categories. These categories are not used in this library for works of fiction although the library does use a modified form of Dewey for fiction as you’ll see later.

All of the books or journals about social sciences will have call numbers in the 300s. Looking at non-fiction, each broad category or class is divided into 10 divisions. So, within the social sciences, books and journals about business will have the call numbers of 380 to 389. The call number of 390 begins with works about customs, etiquette, and folklore. Like the LC call numbers, different parts of the call number will give you different pieces of information.

In this library, the LS stands for the Library Science Collection, simply because the collection was begun to support the classes in the Library Science Department. The numbers after the LS are the class.
The decimal point followed by a letter begins the cutter. In this case, the letter following the decimal point is the first letter of the author’s last name. The following number is a standardized number for a specific author. And the last letter is the first letter of the first word in the title of the book.

The non-fiction books are placed in a specific order using this classification system. And you’ll be able to find a book you want by knowing how the books are put in order.

**Dewey Decimal System: Juvenile Fiction**

Fiction in the juvenile/young adult collection have call numbers that look very differently than those for the non-fiction.

As in the non-fiction, the LS at the beginning of the call number tells us that this is in the juvenile/young adult section on the 3rd floor. Following the LS and the decimal point, the letter or letters are the first part of the author’s last name, like in the cutters of the non-fiction call numbers. The following numbers are the numbers assigned to a specific author. The last letter or letters designate the first letter of the title.

On the shelf, then, all works of fiction by Martha C. King will be together and will be put in order by the first letter of the title. So, if the library had her works First Chair Drummer, The Magic Whistle and Smugglers Island, they’d be in that exact order because of the first letter of the title.

**Dewey Decimal System: Juvenile Biographies**

The call numbers of biographies in this library within the juvenile/young adult section look a bit different than do the call numbers for either fiction or non-fiction. All of them begin with the letters LSB. That indicates that it’s a juvenile/young adult and that it’s a biography.

With biographies, the letter after the decimal point is the first letter of the last name of the person about whom the book is written. The number following the letter is the number assigned to a specific subject, that is, the name of the person about whom the book is about. That’s followed by a letter. And that last letter, or occasionally 2 letters, is from the author’s last name.

**SuDoc System: U.S. Government Documents**

The SuDoc system is used only for documents produced by the United States federal government. SuDoc stands for Superintendent of Documents. Material with SuDoc call numbers are very different from both LC and Dewey call numbers.

There are symbols in the call number that you’ll never find in either LC or Dewey. Things like slashes and colons are very common in SuDoc call numbers.
While books and journals are categorized by subject matter in both Dewey and LC, SuDoc categorizes information by the governmental department that authors the work. Let’s look at a fairly typical SuDoc call number.

The 1st letter will tell you the government department that authored the work. One thing to remember is that which department is responsible for an area or subject of publishing sometimes changes over time. There are often reorganizations within government. So if you’re researching a specific policy area, you may need to know the history of that area so you know what the 1st letter will be.

For example, if you’re researching education policy from a historical perspective, you’d need to know that education was part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the 1960s and 1970s. So, the first letter would be an H.

The 2nd part in the example is a number which is the designation for the agency within the department. The 3rd part of the call number is a period. It simply indicates the end of the agency information. After the period is the publication series information followed by a colon, which indicates the beginning of the information about the publication itself. The slash separates the publication number from the edition number. And the last number will always be the edition number itself.

**Tips for Finding Material on the Shelf**

Sometimes you know where to look for a book or journal but you can’t find it where it seems to belong.

These are some tips about what to do when you can’t find the material you’re looking for.

1. Make sure the call number you’ve written down is correct.
2. If it is, what numbers have you found on the shelf where you looked. For example, were the books on the shelves 3 hundreds or 3 thousands?
3. Check the Stacks Maintenance Office on the 3rd floor. That’s where the books go before they’re put back on the shelves. You’re welcome to go into the office and look around for the book you’re looking for.
4. Also check the Copy Room on the 1st floor. Often someone else has taken the book or journal down to make photocopies and left it there.
5. Finally, if none of the above work, go to the Circulation Desk and request that someone search for the book or journal for you. It is not likely to be done right that minute, but if you fill out the form, Circulation personnel will start searching as soon as possible and will notify you if it’s found.

If you have any questions this presentation did not answer, please feel free to ask at the Reference Desk, which is located on the 2nd floor.