

Library of Congress Classification: How books are organized in Academic Libraries

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1 – Learning Outcomes

In this tutorial you will learn the history, purpose, and deciphering of the Library of Congress Classification to be able to efficiently find books for your research.

2 – History of LC

[Picture of Herbert Putnam with speech bubbles]

The classification was developed by Herbert Putnam and designed specifically for the National Library of Congress to replace the original classification system developed by Thomas Jefferson.

And like the Dewey Decimal System, it is a way to organize materials. However, the Dewey Decimal System is commonly used in Public Libraries, whereas the Library of Congress Classification System is used in most Academic Libraries.

3 – How Classification is Assigned

[Transparent book image in background, pull specific book examples for inverted pyramid]

A Library of Congress call number is comprised of letters and numbers. Each letter has a subject associated with it, for example the letter Q encompasses the sciences. A second letter is added to define a more specific area of study within that subject, for example QK designates botany within the sciences. Numbers are used to refine the subject even further. For example, in the call number range QK900 through QK989 you will find books about vertebrates.

4 – Browsing

[Book picture background becomes foreground]

With this system of classification it allows books on similar topics to be shelved together. So when you retrieve a book on the shelf you can scan the other books beside, above, and below your book to find more good books on your topic.

5 - Classifications

[Demonstrate navigation of classification from LC website]

Call numbers are not randomly assigned, but created using the Library of Congress' prescribed subject areas. Taking a brief glance at all of the subject areas included in LC you can see that this system brings order to the plethora of resources available.

6 – Reading Call Numbers

[Highlight each part of call number on a single book example while explaining what it is]

Call numbers are read line by line. We know that the first group of letters and numbers pertain to the books subject. Usually there is a decimal point with another alphanumeric sequence which designates the cutter number. This cutter number is used to differentiate the work from others on the same subject, and to allow for easy retrieval of the book. The cutter number is treated as a decimal. For example, .Q833 is shelved before .Q84.

7 – Reading Shelves

[image showing the direction of reading call numbers on shelves]

When browsing the stacks, book shelves are read left to right, top to bottom, and at the bottom of a section you would go to the top of the next section.

8 – Call Numbers Provide Context

[image of books with different call numbers about the same topic]

Major concepts in a book designate the call number assigned to that book. Topics are multifaceted and books on a topic may be shelved in multiple call number ranges. For example, when doing research in social media you may find books in H's, P's and R's for social sciences, language and literature, and medicine.

9 – Interactive Element

Can you find a book that answers this riddle?

“What goes on 4 legs in the morning, on 2 legs at noon, and on 3 legs in the evening?”

Q (Sciences) – QA (Mathematics) – TRY AGAIN

QP (Physiology) – QP38 .L74 2014 “The Story of the Human Body: Evolution, health and disease”

J (Political Science) – JS (Local Government) – TRY AGAIN

JC (Political Theory) – JC585 .P444 2013 “Our Bodies, Whose Property”

H (Social Science) – HG (Finance) – TRY AGAIN

HQ (Family, Marriage and Women) – HQ1061 .A42725 2013 “The Aging Body”