An Overview of the Library of Congress Classification System

Most university and research libraries in North America use the Library of Congress (LC) Classification System. The LC Classification System organizes library material according to 21 branches of knowledge. The 21 categories are labeled A-Z (the letters I, O, W, X and Y are not used) and are further divided by adding one or two additional letters and sets of numbers.

An Outline of the Library of Congress Classification System Annotated for CMRS Students:

A – General Works
Includes: museums and collections, newspapers, yearbooks, almanacs, directories, encyclopedias

B – Philosophy, Psychology, Religion
Includes: religious history, doctrinal theology, patristics

C – Auxiliary Sciences of History
Includes: history of civilization, archaeology, seals, technical chronology and calendars, numismatics, inscription, epigraphy, heraldry, royalty, chivalry and knighthood, Crusades, genealogy, biography

D – History: General and Outside the Americas
Includes: Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania—all historical periods

E – History: North America
Includes: discovery and exploration

F – History: The Americas, including Canada, Mexico, Central and South America
Includes: discovery, exploration, and colonization

G – Geography, Anthropology, Recreation
Includes: folklore, costume, mythical places, manners and customs, festivals, holidays, ceremonies

H – Social Sciences
Includes: social history and conditions, societies, women’s history and gender history—all historical periods

J – Political Science
Includes: political theory of ancient, medieval and early modern states

K – Law
Includes: history of law and legal practices, including the history of canon law

L – Education
Includes: history of education, history of universities—including medieval European learning and scholarship

M – Music
Includes: music history—all historical periods

N – Fine Arts
Includes: art, artists and art history—all historical periods

P – Language and Literature
Sub-class PA includes: Greek language, classical, medieval, and byzantine literature and historical writing; Latin language, classical and medieval literature and historical writing; classical philology
Call numbers: An understanding of Library of Congress (LC) classification is vital for efficient library research. Understanding the LC classification system means the understanding of call numbers. The call number is a unique code, which provides valuable information about a title and is, in effect, the “address” of the title both on the shelf and in the online catalogue.

How a call number is read: On the spine of a book, the call number can be read line by line. In the online catalogue the call number will appear on a single line and, therefore, needs to be read in sections.

Read the first section or line, the letter or letters, in alphabetical order. Read the second section or line, the number or numbers following, as a whole number. The third section or line is a combination of a letter and number: read the letter alphabetically; read the numbers as a decimal. The last section or line indicates the year in which the title was published. An example is:


LOCATION: CALL NUMBER: STATUS:
Murray Library-4th Floor BT701.3.B87 2005 IN LIBRARY
Murray Library-4th Floor BT701.3.B87 2005 c.2 DUE 09-30-17
Special Collections-Univ. Authors BT701.3.B87 2005 IN LIBRARY
St Thomas More Library-Stacks BT701.3.B87 2005 DUE 11-25-16

Call numbers can begin with one, two or three letters: Generally they begin with one or two letters, as above. The first letter of a call number represents one of the 21 major divisions of the Library of Congress system—outlined above.

- In the example, the major classification is B, which includes Philosophy, Psychology, and Religion.
- The second letter – T -- represents the general subdivision for Doctrinal Theology.
- The first set of numbers in a call number helps to further define a title’s subject. The 701, of the example, indicates that the book is generally about Creation and the .3 is specific to Augustine of Hippo.
- The system of letters and numbers after the period is called the “cutter number.” (This is after Charles Ammi Cutter, who first developed that coding system.) It is a coded representation of the author’s or organization’s name or the title of the work. In the example, the B87 refers to this particular title.
- The final number after the space refers to the year of publication, which, in the example, is 2005.

Shelving and locating: Items are located by their call numbers, both on the actual shelves in the stacks and within the online catalogue, in both alphabetical and numerical order, as follows:

- The letters at the beginning of the call number are alphabetical. The numbers immediately following are in basic numerical order. For example, BT701 is after BT700 and before BT702.
- The “cutter numbers” after the period [the .B87 in the example] are sorted first by the letter and then by the number as a decimal.
- Date, volume, and issue number, copy number, and other annotations are treated like additional cutter numbers, but are shelved by basic alphabetization.

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