Understanding Call Numbers

Most high school and public libraries organize their books using the Dewey Decimal Classification system. SPU, like most colleges and universities, uses the Library of Congress (LC) classification system. You will need to know how to read LC call numbers in order to be successful as a university student. This part of the tutorial will help you unlock the secrets of the LC system.

In the online catalog, call numbers will read in a single line like this:

HF5387 .H663 2007

However, on the book they will look like this:

HF 5387 .H663 2007

Call numbers can begin with one, two or three letters.

For example.

N	TR	KFW
33	9	249
.O93	.094	.A437
2004	2005	A2
	,	2002

Library of Congress Classification System

The first letter of the call number represents one of 21 divisions in the LC system (labeled A-Z except, I, O, W, X and Y).

- A General Works
- B Philosophy, Psychology, Religion
- C Auxiliary Sciences of History
- D History General and Outside US
- E History United States
- F History United States Local and North America
- G Geography, Anthropology, Recreation
- H Social Sciences
- J Political Science
- K Law
- L Education
- M Music
- N Fine Arts
- P Language and Literature
- Q Science
- R Medicine
- S Agriculture
- T Technology
- U Military Science
- V Naval Science
- Z Library Science/Information Resources

The 21 categories may then be further divided by adding one or two additional letters and a set of numbers.

For example:

B represents Philosophy, Psychology and Religion

BF - Psychology

BR - Christianity

BV - Practical Theology

For most subject areas, the single letter represents books of a general nature for that subject area.

Example:

- Q General Science
- D General World History

Reading Call Numbers

When reading a call number, the guiding principle is that letters come before numbers.

The first letters are a broad subject designation.

The first set of numbers in the call number more narrowly defines the book's subject.

The next level specifies a unique title or author.

Let's look at this example, a book about Methodism:

BX Methodism 8495 Biographies .W5 Susanna Wesle

W5 Susanna Wesley (topic of book)

C774 Author code

1987 Date of publication

Shelving Order

Items with LC call numbers are shelved first alphabetically and then numerically. They read from left to right, top to bottom.

Books are arranged on the shelf first by their letter (broad category) and then by a number (narrow subject). Notice the order of these call numbers, paying special attention to the first two lines:

D	D	DA			DB
7					2811
.T6	.B893	.H57	.D8	.A8	.E8
2004	2002	2002	L43		S9
					1989

Then, there is a letter/number combination that relates to the title or author. This line further sorts the books by letter (alphabetically) and then by number (decimally). Notice how this plays out in the following call numbers:

BV	BV	BV 15 . W384	BV	BV	BV
15	15	15	15	15	15
.T67	.W38	.W384	.W385	.W4	.W42
1997	1991	2001	1998	1982	1996

If there is another line with a letter/number combo, it will shelve in alphabetical and decimal order.

Publication dates at the end sort books by date. These call numbers are for different editions of Moby Dick:

PS	PS	PS -	PS	PS
2384	2384	2384	2384	2384
.M6	.M6	.M6	.M6	.M6
1948	1952	1980	1988	2004

To practice putting books in the proper LC order, try these online shelving games from the University of Pittsburgh:

Basic:

http://www.pitt.edu/~ford29/SatchLCall/BASIC/guizonly.html

Advanced:

http://www.pitt.edu/~ford29/SatchLCall/COMPLETE/quizonly.html