Finding It On The Shelf: How to Read Library of Congress Call Numbers

To be able to efficiently read Library of Congress (LC) call numbers is quite a skill. This tutorial was created to help library users uncover the mysteries of call number reading. Let’s start with a sample call number:

QE534.2.B64

Call numbers can begin with one, two, or three letters.
- The first letter of a call number represents one of the 21 major divisions of the LC System. In the example, the subject "Q" is Science.
- The second letter "E" represents a subdivision of the sciences, Geology. All books in the QE's are primarily about Geology. Most other subject areas will have call numbers beginning with one or two letters.

Numbers after letters.
- The first set of numbers in a call number help to define a book's subject.
  - "534.2" in the example teaches us more about the book's subject. The range QE 500-625 are books about "Dynamic and Structural Geology."
  - Books with call numbers QE534.2 are specifically "Earthquakes, Seismology - General Works - 1970 to Present"
- Journals are also given call numbers based on the specific subject.
  - For example, QE531.E32 is the call number for the journal Earthquake Spectra as QE531 is the class number for periodicals about "Earthquakes, Seismology"

Cutter Number
- The cutter number is a coded representation of the author or organization's name or the title of the work (also known as the "Main Entry" in library-lingo).
- In our above example, QE534.2.B64, the B64 is taken from the two-number table and represents the author's last name, Bruce A. Bolt.
- The book is Earthquakes.
- Some books have two Cutters, the first one is usually a further breakdown of the subject matter.
  - For example, QA 76.76 H94 M88 is a book located in the Mathematics section of the Q's.
    - QA 76 is about Computer Science.
    - The ".76" indicates Special Topics in Automation.
    - "H94" tells us that this is a book about HTML.
    - "M88" represents the last name of the first author listed last name, Musciano.
    - The book is HTML: The Definitive Guide

Shelving and Locating
Items are shelved by call numbers - in both alphabetical and numerical order. The letters at the beginning of the call number are alphabetical. The numbers immediately following are in basic numerical order, i.e. 5 then 6, 50 is after 49 and before 51, and 100 is after 99. Thus,

```
QD 1 A3
QD 2 A 31
QD 3 Z 4
QD 29 C 3
QD 30 A 2
```

The cutter numbers (A3, A31, Z4, C3, and A2 in the above example) are sorted first by the letter and then by the number as a decimal. For QD 1 A5 think of it as being QD 1 A 0.5, for QD 1 A332 read QD 1 A 0.332. Therefore,

```
QD 1 A3
QD 1 A 31
QD 1 A31
QD 1 A 4
QD 1 A 41
QD 1 A 415
QD 1 A 42
```

Dates, volume and issue numbers, copy numbers, and other annotations are like an additional cutter number but are shelved by basic alphabetization (numbers alone come before letters):

```
Q 10 C 3 1933
Q 10 C 3 1990
Q 10 C 3 1996 copy 1
Q 10 C 3 1996 copy 2
QD 1 A 5 Vol. 1
QD 1 A 5 Vol. 2 Plates
QD 1 A 5 Vol. 2 Supplement
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