

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 A 311	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	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	QD 1 A 5 Vol. 2 Plates	QD 1 A 5 Vol. 2 Supplement
-------------	---------------------	---------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------------------	-----------------------	----------------------	---------------------------------	-------------------------------------

Williams Library, Texas A&M University at Galveston, May 26, 2010
 Adapted from: <http://geography.about.com/library/congress/blhowto.htm>, May, 2010
 Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial – Share Alike 3.0 United States License