How do Library of Congress call numbers work?

What is a call number?

A call number is the group of letters and numbers found on the spine or front cover of a book. This number helps you find the book among all of the others in the library’s collection of materials. It also helps to keep material on the same subject in the same place in the library.

The Halle Library uses the Library of Congress (LC) system, which is different than the Dewey Decimal system. You may be familiar with Dewey call numbers, as public and school libraries typically use them to organize books.

Each book has a unique call number, like an address, which is used to locate the book. Call numbers appear on the spines on books (read top-to-bottom) and in the online catalog (read left-to-right).

How do I find the call number for a book?

To find out a book’s call number, you need to consult the online library catalog (http://portal.emich.edu). The catalog will list the book’s call number at the bottom of the record (all of the information about the book), along with the book’s location within the library (1st level, 2nd level, etc.).

What does the call number mean?

The letter(s) and numbers in a LC call number represent different things. To “read” a call number, read from left to right. As you move along the number toward the right, you go from the general subject area to the specific. For example QA 76.76 .H94 M88 1997 (HTML: The Definitive Guide) is a book located in the Mathematics section of the Qs:

- Q represents Science, QA represents the Mathematics portion of Science
- 76 represents the Computer Science portion of Mathematics
- .76 indicates ‘Special Topics in Automation’ (a subtopic of Mathematics)
- H94 means that the book is about HTML
- M88 indicates the author, Musciano
- 1997 indicates the year the book was published

As you see, the subject gets more specific as you read the call number (or, as the number gets longer.)
How do I locate a book using a call number?

1. Locate the first letter of the call number. For example, with the number we used earlier, QA 76.76 .H94 M88 1997, you’d want to find the Qs.

2. Once you have found the Qs, look for the QAs. Each letter of the alphabet is usually further subdivided by another letter.

3. Once you have found the QAs, look for the numbers on the next line. In the case of our example, you would look for 76.76. Remember to think of this number as a whole number with the point (.) acting as a decimal point.

4. If the first two lines of the call number are the same, books are then shelved by the third line, which begins with another letter. In the case of our example, you’d then look for H, and after that, for .94. The point (.) before the H acts as a decimal, so .H94 would come after .H342, for example.

5. The next set of letters and numbers are done the same way, except notice there is no decimal point, so the numbers after the M are considered whole numbers. For example, M88 would come before M342.

Putting call numbers in order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q 123</th>
<th>QA 76.758.T87</th>
<th>QA 76.76.A65</th>
<th>QA 76.76.B3</th>
<th>QA 76.76.C154</th>
<th>QA 76.76.C65</th>
<th>QA 76.76.L68</th>
<th>QA 76.76.M35</th>
<th>QA 76.76.D47</th>
<th>QA 76.76.K78</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Q before QA 76.758 before 76.76 .A before .B .154 before .65 L before M 1999 before 2000