Understanding Call Numbers

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***What is a Call Number?***

 A call number refers to the location of a book on the shelf. It may be helpful to think of a call number as a book’s address: finding a book on the shelf is comparable to finding a house on a street.

Figure 1: Breaking Down the Call Number

 The figure below is the call number for a book of plays by Oscar Wilde. Before we look at a specific example, let’s discuss a few of the elements that make up a call number.

1. The classification number: in our library, we catalog our items using the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system. This is the series of numbers in **blue** within the call number. For a more in-depth explanation of the DDC, please refer to Figure 2 below.
2. The first letter of the author’s last name: in this case, it is “W” for “Wilde”.
3. The Cutter number: Cutter numbers are named for Charles Ammi Cutter and are a useful way for librarians to alphabetize books by author’s last name. For the patron, however, these numbers aren’t as important as the Dewey Decimal numbers.
4. First letter of the title: in this example, it is “p” for plays. Note: articles, such as “A”, “An”, or “The” are skipped when an item is cataloged. For instance, Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* would have “i” for “Importance” in the call number.

**Example**: Call number for *Plays* by Oscar Wilde:



Figure 2: Understanding the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system

The DDC, created by librarian Melvil Dewey in 1876, catalogs items by sorting them into ten main classes or areas of study. The classes are as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 000  | Computer science, information & general works |
| 100  | Philosophy & psychology |
| 200  | Religion |
| 300  | Social sciences |
| 400  | Language |
| 500  | Science |
| 600  | Technology |
| 700  | Arts & recreation |
| 800  | Literature |
| 900  | History & geography |

From there, each main class is broken down into ten *more* subclasses. For instance, the 800 class (literature), has the following ten subclasses:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 800  | Literature, rhetoric & criticism |
| 810  | American literature in English |
| 820  | English & Old English literatures |
| 830  | German & related literatures |
| 840  | French & related literatures |
| 850  | Italian, Romanian & related literatures |
| 860  | Spanish & Portuguese literatures |
| 870  | Latin & Italic literatures |
| 880  | Classical & modern Greek literatures |
| 890  | Other literatures |

Each subclass can then be broken down into ten more subclasses, but it is not necessary for the purposes of this tutorial to keep going. To continue with the address analogy, think of each class as a neighborhood, the subclasses as streets, and the entire call number as a house. In this example, we could say Oscar Wilde’s book of plays resides in the “800” neighborhood on street “20”, and it lives in the second house on the street (because the call number is 822).

Sources:

“Dewey Decimal Classification.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 Feb. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Dewey-Decimal-Classification>

“Dewey Decimal Classification summaries.” *OCLC*, n.d., <http://www.oclc.org/en/dewey/features/summaries.html>