Understanding LC Call Numbers

The call number you find on the spine of a book is a unique number given to each item in the library.

Most public and school libraries use Dewey Decimal call numbers. Blackwell Library, like most academic libraries, uses Library of Congress (LC) call numbers, which is better for larger collections.

HELPFUL TIP: Books are arranged on the shelf by subject, in call number order. Similar subjects will be grouped close together, so you should always make a habit of checking nearby books.

Each LC call number starts with one, two or three letters and a whole number combination, which identifies the basic subject area in which the book is grouped.

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Let’s deconstruct a call number using the following example:

**TITLE:** An inconvenient truth: the planetary emergency of global warming and what we can do about it  
**AUTHOR:** Gore, Albert, 1948-  
**CALL NUMBER (From the online catalog):** QC981.8.G56 G67 2006

This is how the same call number appears on the spine of the book:

 QC  
 981.8  
 .G56  
 G67  
 2006  

← Broad Subject Line: Physics  
← Narrow Subject Line: Climatology and Weather  
← Author Initial Line: G = Gore  
← Additional Field Line: Varies  
← Year Line: Publication date

To find the book on the shelf, read the call number line by line:

1) **First**, go to the alphabetical shelf range of books starting with Q, then QA, QB and finally QC. All the QC books will be grouped together.

2) **Second**, narrow using the second line, which is a whole number (sometimes with a decimal).

3) **Third**, continue narrowing using the third line (by letter and number), fourth line, fifth, etc.
Finding the book on the shelf – **FOLLOWING THE RULES**...

Suppose you are looking at the shelf where the Al Gore book is located and you see the following:

|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|

At first glance, the call numbers may seem out of order, but take another look...

**THE FIRST LINE** of each begins with a **QC**, so we know they all belong grouped together.

**RULE 1**: Place letters in alphabetic order

**THE SECOND LINE** is in **whole number numeric order** as you read across the books; 981.2, 981.8 and 982, so we know that these are in correct order so far.

**RULE 2**: Place whole numbers in numeric order from 1 to 9999

Right now, we have four books that begin with QC981.8 and two with QC982. To determine if these are in the right order, we must move to the third line in the call number.

**THE THIRD LINE** is a **decimal in alpha-numeric sequence**; .B87, .C5, .G56, .W6, etc.

**RULE 3**: Place in letter, then decimal order

So now we have three books that begin QC981.8 .G56 and still two with QC982 .W6. To determine if these are in the right order, we must move to the fourth line in the call number.

**THE FOURTH LINE** can be the **publication date**, an additional **letter/number** combination or a **volume number**.

**RULE 4**: Place in order by number, letter/number or by volume number

If there is a **FIFTH** and/or **SIXTH** line, **RULE 4** applies.

As you see, these call numbers are in correct sequence on our imaginary bookshelf.