



## AT THE LIBRARY

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***“Dewey numbers divide humanity’s knowledge, ideas, and artistic creations into ten major categories spanning a range from 000 to 999”***

-from “How the Dewey Decimal System Works”,  
Duke Library *Guide to Library Research*

I recently had a discussion about the Dewey decimal classification system with one of my co-workers at the Albany Library. The discussion actually started because I was feeling frustrated about being what I would call Dewey Decimal-challenged, meaning that out of the vast number of possible numbers, or even the limited number of general categories, there are two numbers I know for sure: 811 for poetry and 398 for folk and fairy tales.

When I first started at the Albany Library, more than six years ago, my excuse was that I hadn’t really needed any numbers, because all of the direct library service I had done was in the jails, using paperback books on racks or carts. And I am proud to say I knew the cover color and size of every one - a system that unfortunately doesn’t readily adapt itself to the reference desk of a public library.

Now that I am going into my seventh year, that excuse

has worn a little thin and I’m actually not sure why I have this problem. In fact, what’s interesting to me is that I am a person who normally remembers any number - better than names, usually. But somehow the link between a book and a number has been out of my reach. I can, of course, find books for library patrons, either by looking them up on the computer or using the handy Dewey sheet we give out. I have also come to recognize where a section of books is - which aisle, which shelf - just by having looked for them so many times. For instance, I know where to find the origami books, the mission books, the magic books and the history books, and sometimes I can walk directly to the pet books, although not always.

The Dewey system - which was invented by Melvil Dewey in 1873 - seems like an excellent idea. Because each volume has a specific number, it is easy to find a book on any

subject – as long as you know the Dewey decimal call number. And, according to the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), it is the world’s most widely used library classification system.

In case you would like to know more about this system, here is an example: 500 is the Dewey number for natural sciences and math. Under that heading are various topics like physics (530), and astronomy and allied sciences (520). Astronomy is further broken down into 523: Specific celestial bodies. And under 523 come topics like: 523.6, comets, and 523.7, sun. Furthermore, if you wanted to know about eclipses of the sun, you would go to 523.78. The Duke library website ([library.duke.edu](http://library.duke.edu)), by the way, has a great explanation of the Dewey system.

Since information is always changing, evolving or being reexamined, this system

is constantly being updated. There is also what one might call an old-fashioned American bias built into it. For instance, the numbers from 230 to 280 are about some aspect of Christianity – Christian theology (230), Christian moral and devotional theology (240), Christian orders and local churches (250) – while 290 encompasses all other religions.

But according to the OCLC website – OCLC has owned the Dewey Decimal system since 1988 – changes are being made. So, I’ll keep working on my Dewey skills and hope that some day I will be as comfortable with those numbers as I once was with all those paperback books.