

# **Essential classification**

SECOND EDITION

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Vanda Broughton



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**Vanda Broughton**

# I Introduction

Classification is everywhere. We classify birds and animals, languages and ethnic groups, stars, volcanoes, minerals and clouds, wine and blood, and colours and roses. We classify diseases, occupations and social status; the size of notepaper (grand eagle, elephant and pott); the dimensions of icebergs (small, bergy bits and growlers); and brandy (mellow, pale and superior).

It is natural to the human mind to classify, and essential if we want to make sense of the world, which is full of unique creatures and objects. Each day we encounter hundreds of these which we might never have seen before, but the process of classification allows us to recognize a street lamp, a dog, a magazine, a train, sandwiches for lunch, bananas, music on the radio, and make sense of those things. We don't need to investigate and learn about every new event in our lives because most of them conform to other objects and phenomena in our personal experience; we know what to expect of a dog or a banana, since they are similar to dogs and bananas we already know.

Everybody can and does classify, and if we spend so much time and energy classifying the world about us, it is natural to attempt to organize our stores of information about the world. It's necessary, too, to have systems for managing stored information in a way that allows us to find it again – systems that use our human classificatory skills to organize, to match, to predict and to interpret.

This is a book about some of the systems which people have created for organizing information. It also examines the problems we face in sorting out the relationships between subjects, and imposing order on chaos. It's about the nature of knowledge as it is found in books and other information-carrying media. It is also first and foremost a book about *how* to classify. The emphasis throughout is on the activity of classification rather than the theory, the practical problems of the organization of collections, and the needs of users.

You don't need any knowledge or experience of classification to use this book. It's intended for beginners, for students, and for people working in libraries who have never had any formal education or training in classification or subject cataloguing. It is based very largely on the cataloguing and classification module of the MA in Library and Information Studies taught at the Department of Information Studies, University College London, although most of the practical exercises are new.

We'll proceed step by step through the basics of organizing a collection, the problems of linear arrangement, and the difficulties posed by complicated subjects and their interrelationships. We'll look at how to decide on the subject of a document, and how the needs of different groups of users can affect that decision. We shall learn how to apply those systems that are frequently encountered in libraries – the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) and the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), as well as Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH).

A major difficulty in writing a textbook about classification is that the book to be classified should always be to hand, and clearly the reader can't be expected to have access to every title mentioned. For the most part, therefore, the works chosen have titles that indicate plainly their content. The chapters on content analysis deal with less straightforward situations and provide a strategy for coping with these.

This book is principally distinguished from other current books about classification by the very large number of practical exercises and activities, but nobody learned to classify documents by any means other than doing it, and certainly not by reading about the philosophic principles of X or Y classification. If you work through all the exercises you should acquire a knowledge of the basic workings of the different schemes covered. No preference for any particular scheme is intended, but I hope readers will gain a sense of the characteristics of these classifications and of the different situations where each would be an appropriate choice as a subject access tool.

All of the titles included are real books, or occasionally journal articles or conference papers. They have been taken from the catalogue of the Library of Congress, and COPAC, the merged catalogue of 80 large UK and Irish academic and research libraries, including the British Library. The occasional article has been selected from Zetoc, the British Library's electronic table of contents. With a

very few exceptions the titles are all recent publications.

The great majority of the examples are books, but the techniques learned are equally applicable to non-book resources, to non-print materials, and to resources other than text. There is no difference in the analysis of subject content of different media, since the only thing under consideration is the ‘aboutness’ of the resource. On that basis classification schemes can be (and are) used to organize resources in any format, print and electronic, text and image, sound and vision and multimedia, objects and data, and representations or surrogates of all of these. Throughout the text I’ve used the terms book, document, item or work when referring to the things to be classified, but any sort of information carrier is always implicit in those terms.

Similarly, I have not made any great distinction between the print and electronic versions of the different schemes, and I’ve used the online versions throughout in compiling the book. For the most part, there is very little difference in the appearance of paper and online classifications, except that online you normally see only a limited section of the scheme. For that reason some of the figures are based on the print display, simply because it provides a broader view of the structure of the classification. The chapters on the individual schemes each contain a section on the electronic versions to explain the search mechanisms, and to cover any minor differences.

Although the main stress is on things practical, it’s impossible to understand the rationale behind classifications without some introduction to the theory, and the early chapters provide an outline of the principles of bibliographic classification. This, and the practical application of schemes, uses a technical vocabulary which you need to be familiar with. Technical terms are explained in the text, but for convenience they are also gathered together in a glossary. Terms included in the glossary are in **bold** typeface in the text, at least on the first few occasions of their appearance.

After reading the book and trying the exercises, you should have all you need to carry out basic classification, but I’ve included a brief bibliography, should you become interested and want to find out more, as I did as a student over forty years ago. I still find it the most intellectually stimulating part of the professional curriculum, and also the most intriguing and the most entertaining. I hope you will be stimulated and intrigued, and at least a little entertained by it.

## 2 The need for classification

When you go into a library you usually have one of two purposes in mind. In some cases you may be looking for a particular book or journal, report or recording. You know that you want the latest Jeffrey Archer novel, an article about global warming in last week's *New Scientist*, or the film version of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Zeffirelli. Generally you have enough information about the author, title or source of the item for the library staff to help you locate it. Even if you are lacking some details, you know that you don't want the latest Barbara Cartland novel, a piece on global warming in last week's *Woman's Weekly*, or the film version of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Luhrmann. Finding what you want in this case is called **known item retrieval**, because you already know about the specific work that will meet your needs. Normally the item can be traced using the author's name or the title of the work, or some combination of elements from these.

In many other cases you don't want any particular item, but you do want *some* information about global warming, or 17th-century drama, or how to grow petunias. You're not bothered who wrote the book or article, what it is called, or who published it, as long as it contains relevant information. The library may have lots of material that will meet your information needs, but none of it can be retrieved using an author, title or publisher, because these are not known.

In order for anyone to find material about a given topic it is essential that the individual books and other items in the collection have had their subject content identified and recorded. Looking for information based on the content of documents is known as **subject retrieval**, **subject searching**, or **subject access**. In the majority of libraries and information services this formal identification of the subject content, and subsequent searching, is done by using a **classification scheme** and/or a system of **subject headings**.

In this book we shall be looking at some of the problems that arise when we try to organize documents by their subjects, and how

classification schemes and subject headings are applied to the items in a collection in order for readers (and library staff) to find what they want in the most effective way.

Until the last quarter of the 19th century libraries did not use classification schemes in the way that we do today. Certain sections of the library (or certain bookcases or shelves) might be assigned to particular subjects, but this was usually in a fairly broad system of subject arrangement, and the notations, if any, that were applied to books related to their position on the shelf rather than to their subject content. At that time it was more common for libraries to operate on the basis of **closed access**: that is to say readers were not permitted to browse among the stock, but had books fetched for them by library staff. Identifying books on a particular subject would have depended on the librarian's knowledge of the book stock, and there was usually no systematic means of searching for a book by subject.

Around the end of the 19th century libraries increasingly moved towards systems of **open access**, where users were able to go to the shelves and select books for themselves. It then became necessary to have ways of organizing the collections that were clear and understandable to users. Librarians at the time decided that the most helpful way to arrange their books was by subject, and this has remained the basis on which almost every library is managed to this day.

At about the same time, librarians became increasingly interested in the theoretical problems of the organization of knowledge and in the development of standards for cataloguing and classification. Within a period of about 40 years from the first publication of Melvil Dewey's Decimal Classification in 1876, all the general schemes of classification that are widely used today, as well as the major system of subject headings, came into being. Nowadays the majority of libraries use one of the major schemes of classification (or a subject specialist scheme in the case of special libraries) to organize the materials physically in the collection: in other words, the classification is the means by which we arrange books on shelves. The classification scheme may also be used to organize the results of searches on the library catalogue, to arrange printed bibliographies or lists of new books, or even to structure the content of library intranets and online directories. Classification is a fundamental tool in the process of organizing a collection and in the complementary process of searching for and retrieving information.