

The **Dewey Decimal Classification** (DDC), or **Dewey Decimal System**, is a proprietary [library classification](#) system first published in the United States by [Melvil Dewey](#) in 1876.^[1] It has been revised and expanded through 23 major editions, the latest issued in 2011, and has grown from a four-page pamphlet in 1876 with fewer than 1,000 classes to a four volume set. It is also available in an abridged version suitable for smaller libraries. It is currently maintained by the [Online Computer Library Center](#) (OCLC), a library research center. OCLC licenses access to an online version, WebDewey, for catalogers, and has an experimental linked data version on the Web with open access.

The Decimal Classification introduced the concepts of *relative location* and *relative index* which allow new books to be added to a library in their appropriate location based on subject. Libraries previously had given books permanent shelf locations that were related to the order of acquisition rather than topic. The classification's notation makes use of three-digit [Arabic numerals](#) for main classes, with fractional decimals allowing expansion for further detail. A library assigns a classification number that unambiguously locates a particular volume in a position relative to other books in the library based on its subject matter. This makes it possible to find any particular book using the number, and to return it to its proper place on the library shelves.^[notes 1] The classification system is used in 200,000 libraries in at least 135 countries.^{[2][3]}

The major competing classification system to the Dewey Decimal system is the [Library of Congress Classification](#) system created by the [U.S. Library of Congress](#).

History



[Melvil Dewey](#), the inventor of the Dewey Decimal classification

Early development (1873–1885)

Melvil Dewey (1851–1931) was an American librarian and self-declared reformer.^[4] He is best known for the Decimal System that he created, but he also was a founding member of the [American Library Association](#) and can be credited with the promotion of card systems in libraries and business.^[5] He developed the ideas for his library classification system in 1873 while working at [Amherst College](#) library. He applied the classification to the books in that library, until in 1876 he had a first version of the classification. In 1876, he published the classification in pamphlet form with the title *A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library*.^[6] He used the pamphlet, published in more than one version during the year, to solicit comments from other librarians. It is not known who received copies or how many commented as only one copy with comments has survived, that of [Ernest Cushing Richardson](#).^[7] His classification system was mentioned in an article in the first issue of the *Library Journal* and in an article by Dewey in the Department of Education publication "Public Libraries in America" in 1876.^[8] In March 1876, he applied for, and received copyright on the first edition of the index.^[9] The edition was 44 pages in length, with 2,000 index entries, and was printed in 200 copies.^[10]

Design

The Dewey Decimal Classification organizes library materials by discipline or field of study. Main divisions include philosophy, social sciences, science, technology, and history. The scheme is made up of ten classes, each divided into ten divisions, each having ten sections. The system's notation uses Arabic numbers, with three whole numbers making up the main classes and sub-classes and decimals creating further divisions. The classification structure is [hierarchical](#) and the notation follows the same hierarchy. Libraries not needing the full level of detail of the classification can trim right-most decimal digits from the class number to obtain a more general classification.^[38] For example:

- 500 Natural sciences and mathematics
- 510 Mathematics
- 516 Geometry
- 516.3 Analytic geometries
- 516.37 Metric differential geometries
- 516.375 Finsler Geometry

The classification was originally enumerative, meaning that it listed all of the classes explicitly in the schedules. Over time it added some aspects of a [faceted classification](#) scheme, allowing classifiers to construct a number by combining a class number for a topic with an entry from a separate table. Tables cover commonly used elements such as geographical and temporal aspects, language, and bibliographic forms. For example, a class number could be constructed using 330 for economics + .9 for geographic treatment + .04 for Europe to create the class 330.94 European economy. Or one could combine the class 973 for United States + .05 for [periodical](#) publications on the topic to arrive at the number 973.05 for periodicals concerning the United States generally. The

classification also makes use of mnemonics in some areas, such that the number 5 represents the country Italy in classification numbers like 945 (history of Italy), 450 (Italian language), 195 (Italian philosophy). The combination of faceting and mnemonics makes the classification *synthetic* in nature, with meaning built into parts of the classification number.^[39]

The Dewey Decimal Classification has a number for all subjects, including fiction, although many libraries create a separate fiction section shelved by alphabetical order of the author's surname. Each assigned number consists of two parts: a class number (from the Dewey system) and a book number, which "prevents confusion of different books on the same subject."^[6] A common form of the book number is called a [Cutter number](#), which represents the author and distinguishes the book from other books on the same topic.^[40]

Classes

- [000](#) – General works, Computer science and Information
- [100](#) – Philosophy and psychology
- [200](#) – Religion
- [300](#) – Social sciences
- [400](#) – Language
- [500](#) – Pure Science
- [600](#) – Technology
- [700](#) – Arts & recreation
- [800](#) – Literature
- [900](#) – History & geography

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