

# LC Classification System Gets the Heave-Ho

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In one of the most unexpected turns in its 200-year history, the Library of Congress announced today its intention to scrap its eponymous classification system in favor of arranging books in the library by size and color. Plans are to have the change in place and fully functional by July 4, 2000.

"One of the easiest—and most dangerous—things for a cornerstone institution to lose is the ability to admit that a revolutionary change hasn't worked out," said Library of Congress spokesman Angelo Sciocco. "In all the years the LOC system has been in operation, it has never really fully met the needs of staff and patrons. The Board has decided that, rather than muddle through the next century, it is infinitely more responsible to correct this misstep now and find a new system that really works."

"The existing classification system tries to place books together on the shelf based on topic," explained Georgeanna Dworkin, head of the Library Cataloging Division. "While that's a laudable goal, we find that it leads to very inefficient use of space, a commodity in increasingly short supply." With budget constraints making it unlikely that new space could be built, library managers had to do some creative thinking about storage problems. "We referred to it as thinking outside of the book box," said Dworkin.

Dworkin indicated that once librarians were able to let go of the idea of arranging books by subject, other benefits to the size and color scheme became apparent. According to Henry Schnellenberger, Library of Congress facilities manager, "In addition to space efficiencies, it will be very pretty, and will have a uniform look that is strangely appealing. Let's face it, every librarian—and every book owner—has had the urge to do this. It's like buying a painting because the colors go with your couch. We're just taking it to a scientific level."

In order to meet the very ambitious implementation date and to minimize

public expense, the recataloging work will be done by specially trained inmates from local prisons. "We see this as a huge win/win situation," said Fritz Narr of the DC Department of Corrections. "The Library of Congress is getting a great deal in that they're going to be able to pay our guys a pittance compared to what regular catalogers would make, but our guys will be getting a really decent job skill. They'll be able to walk out of here—well, some of them, anyway—and walk into libraries all over the country." Beginning this week, 150 inmates will get six weeks of training and then work in 14 hour shifts, from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. each day, Narr said.

In enacting the new system, library catalogers will now enter as many relevant descriptive words as possible into each book's record on the library's computerized catalog. Once cataloged, prisoners will measure the color of each book with a special color analyzer and books will be placed on the shelf according to size, and within a given size by color. Colors will be arranged across the spectrum using the industry standard CIE color description system. "Size and color have the advantage of being able to be scientifically measured. This will result in a very exact book placement," said Sciocco. "Luckily our catalog records already include size, so once we get a color reading we can start moving books around."

Some staff members, who would not

allow their names to be used, expressed concerns about the future employment prospects for catalogers. Dworkin agreed that it was an issue that would have to be explored. "Let's face it, once cataloging is reduced to measuring size and color, well, a trained chimpanzee could do it. Or a prison inmate."

When asked for comment, AALL Vice President/President-Elect Margie Axtmann said, "It's always some damned thing, isn't it?"

AALL Spectrum wishes to thank **Tere Mathieu** and **Tracey Hudson** for their diligence and attention to detail in preparing this news item.

