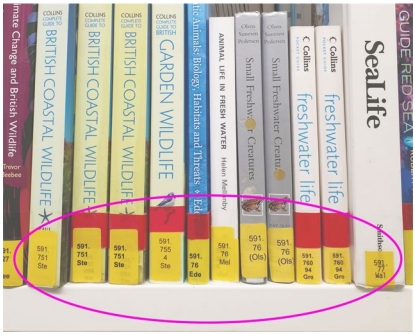
An Introduction to the Dewey Decimal System

1. How does the Dewey decimal system work?
The Dewey decimal system is a classification system libraries use to organise books.

Each book is issued a **shelfmark** based on its subject matter, which can be found on the spine of the book. These are the yellow or white labels you see on the spines of all our books.



Let's look at an example of a shelfmark:

371.384 Mar

The first three numbers refer to the **subject area**. There are ten main subject areas assigned between the numbers 000-999:

The ten main subject areas in Dewey Decimal Classification
000-099 computer science, information & general works
100-199 Philosophy & psychology
200-299 Religion
300-399 Social Sciences
400-499 Language
500-599 Science
600-699 Technology
700-799 Arts and recreation
800-899 literature
900-999 History and geography

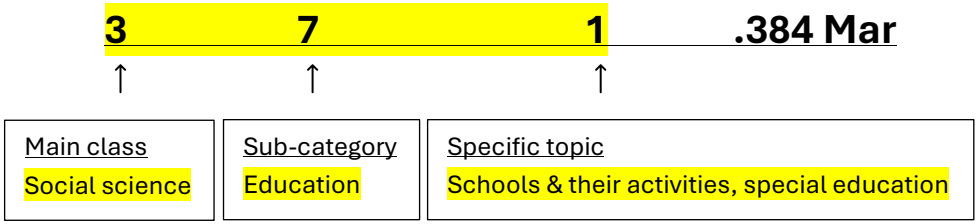
Each main subject area is then divided into ten **sub-categories**. For example:

Sub-categories 360-380
360-369 Social problems & social services
370-379 Education
380-389 Commerce, communications & transportation

Each sub-category is then also divided into ten specific **topics** – for example:

Topics 370-372
370 Education
371 Schools and their activities, special education
372 Primary Education

So, going back to our example shelfmark, looking at the first three numbers, we can see that:



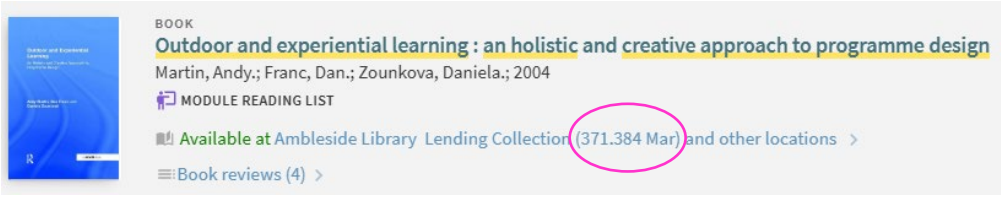
The numbers *after* the decimal point refer to an *even* more specific subject area. In the case of our example: .384 means 'methods of instruction & study – Laboratory method'

Finally, after the numbers are three letters. This is called the **suffix** and it usually refers to the name of the book's author or editor. In our example it refers to Andy Martin, the book's principal author.

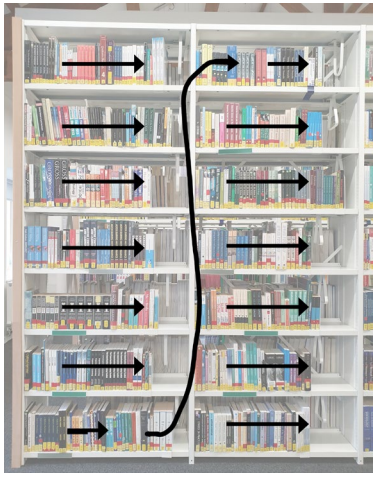
If this all seems a bit complicated don't worry, it's not necessary for you to be able to decipher what a shelfmark actually means. You just need to know how to use them to locate the book you want. Read on!

2. Finding a book on the shelves using the Dewey decimal system

Find the book you are looking for using Onesearch, and take a note of the shelfmark:



Now go to the shelves.
The books are arranged in alpha-numerical order according to their shelfmarks. This is done left to right, top to bottom within each bay in the row.



- The shelfmarks are arranged from smallest to largest first by the **whole number** (the first three numbers), e.g. 371
- Then, if there is more than one item with the same whole number, by the **decimal number** (the numbers following the decimal point), e.g. .384
- Finally, if the decimal number is also the same, they are arranged alphabetically by the **suffix (or three letters)** e.g. Mar

The shelfmarks below are correctly sequenced. You can see our example in its correct position:

371.334467 Ric
371.38 Wat
371.384 Mar
371.384094 Bar
371.39 Lei

3. A note on decimals

An important thing to remember is that the numbers following the decimal point are **decimal numbers** NOT whole numbers, meaning they are *fractions* of a whole number. This affects how they are sorted.

For example:
If we look at the two shelfmarks below

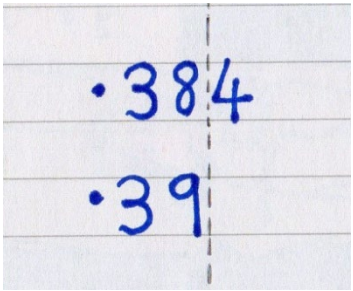
371.384

371.39

It is tempting to look at these two shelfmarks and think that this one is the greater number, e.g. 'three-hundred-and-eighty-four is bigger than thirty-nine'. However, this is incorrect. These are decimal numbers (fractions as opposed to whole numbers), and .384 is actually smaller than .39. Therefore it comes first in the sequence.

If you find this confusing, when you get to the decimal numbers, try working through them digit-by-digit.

Going back to the example, working through these decimals digit-by-digit it becomes clear that: .384 is *less* than .39 (see below)



If you compare these decimal numbers digit-by-digit it becomes clear which is the greater number e.g. .39 is bigger than .38

More questions?
If you have any questions about this leaflet or the Dewey decimal system, please ask at the library desk – a member of our team will be happy to help!