

## Why we arrange books as we do

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“Why must we do these things just so?”  
Young catalogers want to know.  
“There are good reasons,” I reply.  
“So listen, and I’ll tell you why.”

Old Melvil Dewey, clever lad,  
Once said, “The state of things is bad.  
There is no order to the way  
That books are shelved. I’ll start today.”  
And after days of thought and toil,  
And nights of burning midnight oil,  
He cried, “Oh yes! I’ve got it now!  
It’s easy. Let me show you how.  
You take nine hundred ninety-nine,  
Then break it down. This plan of mine  
Will revolutionize our work.”  
Then Melvil, never one to shirk,  
Created, in a careful frame,  
The system that still bears his name.

But LC kept collecting books.  
They sat on shelves. They hung on hooks.  
They covered tables, chairs, the floor—  
Arranging them was quite a bore.  
So LC said, “I guess it’s true.  
Nine hundred ninety-nine won’t do.  
These categories cannot grow  
As we expand the things we know.  
Though once the decimal was fine,  
The numbers can’t fit on the spine.  
It’s all those numbers—that’s the worst.  
So let’s use letters. They’ll come first.  
We’ll use this way in every college  
To classify the world of knowledge.”

Said OCLC, “Hold the phone!  
Why do we always work alone?  
We work through winters, summers, springs,  
To catalog the same darn things.  
And though we’re working day and night,  
Our backlogs still are out of sight.  
If we could just communicate,  
Then we could all stop working late.  
And, since we have computers now,  
Let’s work together. Here is how:  
We’ll catalog from east to west,  
From north to south. It’s really best  
To let us guide you.” So they did.  
We still are doing as they bid.

“And so you see, there is no mystery.  
It’s simply cataloging history.”

calling for single fact information or short answers. It is a type of ready reference which doesn’t strictly adhere to the definition of ready or quick reference. Some questions are not readily answerable and must be researched extensively, and the patrons don’t receive a quick answer in the sense that they receive the answer immediately...they must wait for the answer to be posted. Since new questions and answers are posted every two weeks, it could be a wait of two days or two weeks depending on when the question was submitted.

Finally, despite everyone’s best efforts, it is virtually impossible to answer every question submitted. As one staff member put it, “The more we answer, the more they ask.” Graduate assistants and a librarian spend a combined total of thirty hours per week answering questions, probably the maximum number of hours this library can afford to devote to the service at this time. In order to alert users there is a sign posted on the Board which explains that due to the number of questions received we have been unable to answer every question, and encourages use of the services available at the reference desk should the answer not appear within two weeks time. It may be worth noting that our goal is to answer or at least respond to every question submitted.

### Conclusion

It is apparent that students and other users of the library prize this service that has become something of an institution since its inception in the early 1970s. One can observe students continually perusing the Board. The campus newspaper has featured the Question Board in a number of articles; at one time it ran a series featuring interesting questions answered each week on the Board. Students often write their own comments or suggestions on posted questions and answers. As one patron, a visiting public librarian, noted, “The questions and answers are interesting, but it is the interaction between staff and students and among students themselves that is especially appealing.” Perhaps because of the anonymity, the interaction—like the questions—tends to be lively and uninhibited. Students don’t hesitate to critique or expand on answers or give their own suggestions. It may be this aspect more than any other that library users find the most captivating. While not a service which is typical of academic libraries, it has proven to fit in well in the academic setting, especially in a library designed for and used primarily by undergraduates. Despite its limitations, provision of this service in conjunction with conventional reference service meets a broader spectrum of needs than would the reference desk alone. The Question Board provides students with a place to ask silly, curious, trivial, consuming, nagging, important questions...and provides the answers as well.



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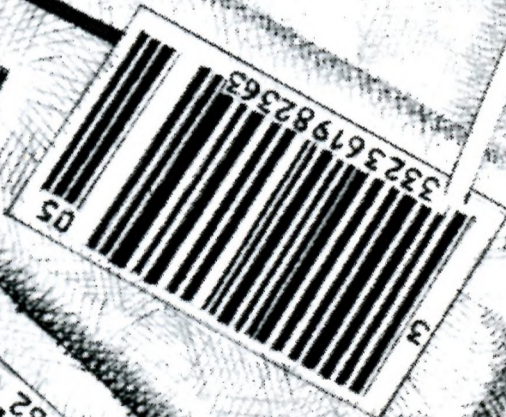
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