

Applying the Feminist Library Classification Scheme

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Background

The Feminist Library Classification Scheme was originally devised in 1978 by Wendy Davis, a professional librarian.

These notes have been derived from some typescript instructions found in the catalogue room in 2005, but which clearly date from much earlier (we assume from the 1980s, when the Library had paid employees to maintain its collections).

I have recently keyed the Feminist Library Classification Scheme into an excel spreadsheet in order to analyse it for a study I have been conducting on the use of feminist vocabulary in classification schemes. I've made the spreadsheet available from

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/anne-welsh/training/> along with the pdf copies from which I input it. These pdfs consist of images of a typescript and annotated copy of the classification that former volunteer Helen XXXX made for us in 2007. You may find the excel spreadsheet easier to search, but N.B. It is not complete - I have not included geographic or form headings as these are not currently relevant to my study, so at the moment, you will need to consult the hardcopy or pdf auxiliary tables.

The relationship between subject headings and classmarks

The instructions from which these notes are derived make little distinction between applying subject headings and assigning the classmark. While this is confusing conceptually, in practice many librarians conflate the two processes, since they are performing the two tasks simultaneously.

In the Feminist Library instruction sheet, we are advised to think about subject headings first. This is good advice, since the classmark is built by applying letters and numbers from the schedule to indicate the subject, and these letters and numbers are assigned from most important to least important. Thinking about the subjects covered in the book and then arranging these into an order from most important to least important helps us to do this.

Assigning classmarks

N.B. Classmarks are only applied to GENERAL NON-FICTION. The following material is *not* classified, but shelved by author:

- **FICTION**
- **POETRY**
- **DRAMA**
- **CHILDREN'S BOOKS**

1. Think about the subject(s) covered in the book.

Apply the subject headings for the book, if this helps you to think about the subject(s) (see above).

e.g. Dale Spender's book *The namer and the named* (1978) is about the use of sexist language.

2. Where there are more than one subject, think about the order of importance.

What do we mean by "importance"? In classification, we really mean how much of the book is concerned with a particular subject.

e.g. Jonathan Rose's book *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (2001) is chiefly concerned with the working classes, but has a substantial amount of information on the history of reading.

This is more complex than the Dale Spender example. It might be helpful to think of Cutter's reasons for choice:

Among the several possible methods of attaining the OBJECTS, other things being equal, choose that entry:

- 1. That will probably be first looked under by the class of people who use the library;*
- 2. That is consistent with other entries, so that one principle can cover all;*
- 3. That will mass least in places where it is difficult to so arrange them that they can be readily found, as under names of nations and cities.*

It would be fair to say that we want it to appear on the shelves in the "working class" section, but alongside other books that deal substantially with the **history of reading**.

"History of reading" is a compound concept. Which comes first – the "reading" or the "history". A clue is provided by our use of the word "of": **reading** is the primary concept, with **history** secondary to it. If we think about why this is the case, we might say that people looking for books on reading are quite likely to be interested in the history of their subject, while people interested in history in general are less likely to be specifically interested in reading.

3. Consult the classification schedules (either the hardcopy in the Library, or the excel spreadsheet online) and identify the appropriate letters.

If we think about our Dale Spender example:

M	COMMUNICATION		
MB		NON VERBAL	
MBC			BODY LANGUAGE
MBF			FACIAL EXPRESSIONS
MC		VERBAL	
MCB			LANGUAGE
MCD			SEXISM IN LANGUAGE
MCF			CONVERSATIONS
MCH			DOMINANCE DIFFERENCES
MCJ			SILENCE

We find and assign the classmark MCD

Our Jonathan Rose example is slightly more complex, but taking the subjects he covers in order we find:

AK	CLASS		
AKE		WORKING CLASS	
AKM		MIDDLE CLASS	
AKS		UPPER CLASS	

and

NLU			
NM		LITERATURE	
NMB			DRAMA
NMC			ESSAYS
NMD			FICTION
NME			NOVELS

and

AVZ		ABORIGINAL	
B	HISTORY		
BAB		PREHISTORY	
BAC		ANCIENT	
BAE		MATRIARCHY	
BAF		DARK AGES	
BAG		MEDIAEVAL	
BAK		RENAISSANCE	
BAN		SEVENTEENTH CENTURY	
BAQ		EIGHTEENTH CENTURY	
BAS		NINETEENTH CENTURY	
BAX		TWENTIETH CENTURY	

4. Is the book about a particular place? Or in a particular form? Or expressing a particular view?

The auxiliary tables (currently only in hardcopy or pdf) outline numeric codes that you can add to your number to denote a particular aspect:

- Time
 - Seems to have fallen out of use.
- Place
 - Important for users – but N.B. example and discussion below on UK
- Language
 - A later addition to the tables, but useful for users so worth recording
- Views
 - Fell out of use – an example on the instruction sheet showed the Revolutionary Feminist Group’s *Women and the public sector cuts* (1975) using the classmark KCD:41. The “41”, indicating “observations on” has been scored through in red ink (in all three instances), indicating, I believe that “views” were no longer recorded in this way.
- Form (including a separate list at 7XX for “ephemera of the women’s movement”)
 - Used inconsistently, but important for users
- Men (to be applied to books that discuss *solely* men)
 - Rarely used

Of these, the most important from a user’s perspective are place and form.

Looking at our Jonathan Rose example, we should really include the code for the UK:

213	FINLAND
214	NORWAY
2001	U.K.
215	SWEDEN
216	ICELAND
2161	NORDIC COUNTRIES
217	SPAIN

However, if you look on the shelf, you will see that originally, books were assumed to be about the UK *unless a number was assigned to indicate otherwise*. The use of a 4-digit code also indicated that “UK” was added to the schema at a later date (as, we can see from the screenshot above, was “Nordic countries”).

We really need to look and see what the situation is with regard to the use of “2001”. Conceptually, there are arguments both ways – do we look parochial by not including a designator for our own country? Or do we have so few books about non-UK countries that it’s not worth worrying about? Ironically, this is a task that will be simplified by the use of the computerised catalogue.

As late as 2001, which is the earliest time that the example cards for the Rose book could have been prepared (the book was published in 2001), we were *not* assigning the designator for the UK. Personally, I think this is indicative that most of the books in the collection dealing with the UK have probably *not* been assigned the designator. So, personally, I would not assign it, citing consistency as my rationale.

Certainly, though, if you have a book about a non-UK country, assign the appropriate designator from the auxiliary table.

e.g. you will see we have many books whose classmark ends 278:

275	AMERICAS
276	NORTH AMERICA
277	CANADA
278	AMERICA
279	MEXICO
280	CENTRAL AMERICA

From the auxiliary tables, we can see this is because they are about the USA.

5. Combine, separating each component of the classmark using a colon (:).

At some point, it appears that classmarks have been assigned using full-stops to separate the elements, but the original format was to use the colon.

For our Jonathan Rose example, we assign the classmark AKE:NM:B

6. Write the classmark inside the front cover or top right-hand corner of the flyleaf and on the spine label; enter the classmark in the catalogue.

Summary

Classmarks are assigned only to GENERAL NON-FICTION. Do *not* classify

- **FICTION**
- **POETRY**
- **DRAMA**
- **CHILDREN'S BOOKS**

1. Think about the subject(s) covered in the book.

2. Where there are more than one subject, think about the order of importance.

Most important : less important : even less important

3. Consult the classification schedules (either the hardcopy in the Library, or the excel spreadsheet online) and identify the appropriate letters.

4. Is the book about a particular place? Or in a particular form?

Consult the auxiliary tables

5. Combine, separating each component of the classmark using a colon (:).

e.g. Dale Spender's book *The namer and the named* (1978) is about the use of sexist language.

MCD

6. Write the classmark inside the front cover or top right-hand corner of the flyleaf and on the spine label; enter the classmark in the catalogue.