


A call number is the combination of letters and numbers on each book spine. A call number acts as the book's address by indicating exactly where it should be put on the shelf. Medical libraries usually use the National Library of Medicine (NLM) system, and general academic libraries usually use the Library of Congress (LC) system. Shelving is the same for both systems, the only difference is that the letters QS-QZ and W-WZ are used in NLM libraries, while the LC system uses all the letters but those. Therefore, a book marked QP is from the NLM system, and a book marked A or RC is from the LC system.

There are 7 simple steps of sorting by call number order:

1. Go from top to bottom. Shelve by increasing alphabetical and numerical order.

QS
130
C156
1998



2. Go in alphabetical order by the first line. In this example, WB goes before WP, which goes before WX.

→	WB	WP	WX
	68	1	455
	C17	Q99	A32
	1951	2000	1997

3. If the letters in the first line are the same, go in numerical order of the second line. Look at the second line as if it were dollars. In this example, \$3 goes before \$4, which goes before \$300.

	WB	WB	WB
→	3	4	300
	A68t	E55	E57b
	1991	1971	2000

4. If the numbers in the second line are the same, sort by the first letter of the third line.

	QH	QH	QH
	17	17	17
→	B4	C21c	D1
	1999	1999	1998

5. If the first letter in the second line is the same, sort by the numbers on the third line.

WX	WX	WX
4	4	4
B103	B93	B94
1997	1999	1998

However, look at the numbers on the third line like it has a decimal point. In order to compare decimals, give the numbers an equal number of places. For example, B103 has three places and B93 has two places. Add zeros so they will both have the same number of places: B103 and B930.

Now, look at these numbers as if they were pennies. As you can see, 103 pennies goes before 930 pennies.

Sometimes, the numbers are followed by a lower-case letter. Just as zero goes before one, no letter at all goes before a letter.

WX	WX	WX
4	4	4
B103	B103r	B103t
1997	1999	1998

6. If the letter and numbers of the third line are the same, sort chronologically by publication date.

QS	QS	QS
4	4	4
S17a	S17a	S17a
→ 1961	1999	2000

7. Sort chronologically by volume numbers and/or copy numbers, if given.

WG	WG	WG	WG
901	901	901	901
T53	T53	T53	T53
2000	2000	2000	2000
→ v.1	v.1	v.2	v.2
→	c.2	c.1	c.2

If an item does not have a copy number, it is assumed that it is copy number one.

That's all there is to it. Sorting by call number order may take a little getting used to, but I've found it much easier when looking at it in terms of dollars (on the second line) and cents (on the third line).