

# Microform Retrieval: A Practical (i.e. cheap) Approach

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If you are into microforms to any extent, questions relating to their storage and retrieval have undoubtedly flitted through your mind on more than one occasion; most likely on those occasions when you could not locate one of the elusive rascals for an impatient patron.

One does not need to delve far into the literature on the subject before encountering the attractively simple idea of numbering each piece of microform consecutively and shelving it in numerical order (microform 1, 2, 3, . . .). If you are considering treating your microforms in this manner, heed the voice of experience. All is not as elementary as it sounds.

Having made the decision to retreat from the near chaos of an alphabetical arrangement, the staff at Duke University set to work with determination. Each of us felt a vested interest in changing the system because each had experienced once too often the problem of trying to shelve

or retrieve a roll of microfilm in an alphabetical arrangement with five or six titles filmed on it, a problem augmented by the fact that the public catalog seldom if ever specified which title had been chosen for the honor of being alphabetized. A further complication was that of locating a title which was part of a larger set. Had it been filed with the set or separately? A little imagination will provide further examples of the complications of an alphabetized system.

It did not require lengthy investigation to arrive at the conclusion that anything expensive in the way of reorganizing the department was undesirable. Due to fiscal limitations, classifying the several thousand pieces of microforms could not be considered. In this day of the tight budget one need not ask why. The consecutive numbering system was chosen to replace the old arrangement and the department's staff began what seemed

a monumental project by assigning the first dozen pieces of microform the numbers one through twelve. The main entry card (the only one in the department's catalog) was located, matched carefully to its piece of microform and given the number of the material which it represented. The number was written in pencil in the card in the upper, left-hand corner. Pencil was used in case we ever changed our minds about an individual item or the whole system. The number on the microform was printed in large, legible figures on an adhesive tag and affixed to the box of microfilm, carton of microprint, case of microfiche, or whatever. Everything was returned to the shelf in numerical order.

The problem of multiple titles on a single microform was solved easily since each main entry card carried the number of the item and that is all the searcher needs to find the material.

Sounds too good to be true, does it not? Alas, problems arose almost immediately. Problem Number One was posed by serial or continuation items. Only one main entry card exists for an expanding series such as a newspaper or magazine. Thus each new addition cannot be given a different number without cluttering up the main entry card rapidly. Also, room must be provided for growth of these items and this would quickly negate the advantages of economies of shelf space which consecutive numbering provides. The department's staff, alert always for the simplest method, chose to store continuation materials in a separate area under an alphabetical arrangement. Such a system is practical for serials and newspapers since they do not contain multiple titles on individual reels, cards, and the like. If and when a serial item ceases such as *LIFE* magazine did, it can be shifted as a set to the consecutively numbered section.

Problem Number Two which developed related to handling sets of materials. Most sets have their own system of organization. For example, *LIFE* magazine's reels are

dated. Other types of collections are numbered. Our department chose to give the entire set one number and let the collection's own system retain its integrity. The patron asks for the location number and the date or perhaps simply for the reel number of the particular piece of material desired. For example, the number 1300 brings the searcher to *LIFE* magazine's location. The date brings him to the individual reel.

Problem Number Three was what happens when a mistake is made and a set receives a number which everyone assumes is complete and then twenty more boxes of microfilm arrive. Since items have been shelved closely in order to save space there is no way to squeeze twenty more cartons into the right numerical space. The only workable solution we found was to pull the whole set from the shelf, remove the numbered tags, erase the pencilled number on the main entry card and cry. In order to avoid a gap on the shelf and in the numbering, the next step is to put some newly received or as yet unnumbered material in the vacant spot, giving it the old number.

What happened with the set that was pulled? Since the vast majority of our material is stored on shelves, the consecutive numbering system was well-suited to our department's needs. All types of microforms are interfiled. There are probably several ways of adapting the system to libraries whose collections of microforms are housed in cabinets. Since various types of cabinets are designed for specific types of microforms, interfiling is not too practical. Possibly each cabinet could be given a number and the materials placed in it in sub-numbered order. Catalog cards would read, for example: Cabinet 5, Item 235.

On the whole our department is pleased with the new system. The procedure went rapidly. Shelf space is being used more economically, and shelving and retrieving have been simplified greatly, thereby reducing the frustration level of staff member and patron alike.