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Museums have tried many numbering systems over the years. The most important thing about a number, either permanent or temporary, is that it be unique. It must be the key between the object and the documentation about the object.

Sequential numbering (1,2,3,4) is simple and has been used by many museums, but over time it will not adapt and expand with a collection. Systems with alphabetical prefixes become cumbersome if the prefix refers to a collection category, a geographical location, or a department. All of those categories may become obsolete or inaccurate with the renaming or reorganization of the referenced categories. A prefix may be useful for temporary numbers or for subsidiary collections used for teaching purposes but is not recommended for permanent collections.

Museums with several numbering systems may find their record filing complicated and the systems confusing. Some museums have found it helpful to retire old complicated systems and implement a single standard system, although there can be no attempt to re-number a large permanent collection. A single system applied from a certain date forward will simplify record keeping for current and future activity. Computerization can overcome the difficulties caused by varied early systems if every number used by the museum is unique.

It is important for a museum to be consistent in its numbering systems. Systems must be used for both temporary and permanent holdings, and each system must have its own sequence. If several departments use different systems, they must communicate and make certain that their systems do not overlap. Computerized collections systems often

use the assigned number to identify a record about an object, and duplicate numbers lead to confusion.

TEMPORARY HOLDING NUMBERS

A temporary number system helps track objects until they are accessioned and given a permanent number or are returned to the owner. The temporary number may be structured the same as an accession number, as described below, but with a T (Temporary) or other prefix (L for loan, E for exhibition, etc.) to distinguish it; or it may be structured as an accession number in reverse, that is, "16.1996" instead of "1996.16."

PERMANENT ACCESSION NUMBERS

The most common accession numbering system now used is a compound number separated by a point or hyphen. The first number indicates the year the object is accessioned and may be the whole year: 1995; or a part: 995, 895, 001 or 95, 34, 76. The whole year is recommended; if it was not used in the past, it should be started with the year 2000.

The second number indicates in sequence the transaction by which the object(s) was formally received or purchased: 1995.1, 1995.2, 1995.3. If there is only one object in the transaction, the two-part number typically suffices. If title to more than one object passes to the museum in a given transaction, a third number is assigned to each item in the group: 1995.4.1, 1995.4.2, 1995.4.3. If an object is a set or portfolio of objects, the accession number for each individual part within the whole can be 1995.4.3.1, 1995.4.3.2. An object may be one item with component parts, such as a box with a lid, a chest with removable drawers, or a sculpture that can be disassembled. The whole object is

assigned an accession number, such as 1995.5.2, and each part of the whole is given a letter suffix: 1995.5.2a, 1995.5.2b, 1995.5.2c.

In this system, each separate item has its own distinct identification through the accession number. The accession transactions for each year can be accounted for and the years noted separately from each other. The system allows for growth but does not demand it; each year starts with 1 and ends with the last transaction. Parts can be identified with wholes. Future research that changes the intellectual classification of objects will not interfere with an identification system based on when and in what order the museum acquired them.

Subsidiary or departmental number systems that refer to a systematic classification of the objects, the archaeological site of origin, or some other information useful in research may be used within a museum. Cross-reference lists to and from the accession numbers are useful for identification of the correct object, for rapid retrieval of stored information or object location. These different numbers should be maintained separately, using the cross-reference lists to move back and forth.