

# Tom's Rules of Thumbing

By Ben Davis

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RAZORFISH REPORTS

a publication of the razorfish science department | 11 august 2000 | report 030

How to gather, store, and access information about hardware and software innovations, problem solutions, and corporate memory are serious concerns in the new digital business world.

This kind of "library" preoccupation has deep roots going back to the great library of Alexandria in antiquity. No need to go that far back, though. There is another example closer to our own times.

## In 1814, British troops burned the United States Library of Congress.

### Life, Liberty, and Indexing

Thomas Jefferson had bills to pay. He also had the largest private book collection in the country. To make ends meet, he sold all 6,487 volumes for \$24,000 to Congress to rebuild its library in 1815. And that, in three sentences, is the story of the Library of Congress.

Jefferson's library was a working library, not unlike yours or mine. We buy books to employ them for relaxation, for our jobs, for school, to

keep up and get ahead. Most of us don't throw them away. They stack up next to the bed, on the crowded shelves, on the coffee table, next to the computer. We are going to need those books one day because we have written in them, underlined them, dog-eared the pages, and otherwise filed them in our mental card catalogs.

One day we will make a database of them, put them in order on the shelves, make them the obedient servants of our intellectual bidding - we will organize them! Some day, but not this weekend. Most of us don't have 6,487 books - although when you move it feels like that many.

So what did Thomas Jefferson do before the Dewey Decimal system was invented by Melvil Dewey in 1873?

### Shelves of Knowledge

Thomas Jefferson was a hacker. He liked to tinker with things. He built and rebuilt his home, Monticello, a half-dozen times, he invented weather vanes, made a machine to duplicate his correspondence, created tables for crop development, wrote history, sent Lewis and Clark out to make maps for him, and managed to die on the Fourth of July, 1827.

He liked to read - politics, science, literature, classics, art, agriculture, poetry, rhetoric, humor, dictionaries, manuals, almanacs, encyclopedias, pamphlets, newspapers, maps. His prized pages on education, shorthand, gardening, accounting, strategy, bee-keeping, and brewing were all full-text thumbable.

He described his method of organizing books as "sometimes analytical and sometimes chronological, and sometimes a combination of both". To be sure, like us, it was also a combination of neither.

Jefferson had a secret principal for cataloging his books. He modified a version of Sir Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) organization of knowledge (Novum Organum, 1621). Jefferson divided his books into three categories: Works of imagination which he interpreted as fine arts, works of reason equated to philosophy, and works of memory which were histories.

## The system is simple and elegant -very Jeffersonian.

Imagination, reason, memory - of course he further parsed these into 44 "chapters" that allowed him fast access to his interests in everything from intellectual pursuits to practical matters. From his copy of "Angela's Ashes" to his Word manual, so to speak.

This simple construction allowed him to compile his Summary View of the Rights of British America (1774) and then deconstruct it into a little essay called the Declaration of Independence.

### Cross Referencing Genius

By combining imagination, reason, and memory he got the inspiration for the design of Monticello, the techniques for being a farmer, the engineering expertise for his inventions, and no doubt the required philosophical ambiguity needed to run a plantation with slaves in a



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country where all men were created equal. But let's not dwell on that one.

Now for something that you can try at home.

**Your Own Monticello**

Take a look at your books. Works of imagination, for instance. All those novels and Harry Potter books now neatly fit together. Alphabetizing them by author can wait. But do the art books go in there too or are they works of memory? How do you relate to art? Did you get those books because of an interest in history or an interest in the imagination of the artists?

And the science books - we all have a couple - The Tao of Physics? Einstein's biography? Are those works of reason? What did you get out of them - a sense of how amazing order can be or a sense of how creatively scientists solve problems?

**Treat yourself to a beverage and read something depending on whether you're feeling imaginative, reasonable, or nostalgic.**

When would you need to find those books - when your trying to remember what a theorem is or when Einstein got divorced? Up to you.

Put the philosophy, psychology and self-help books in the reason section too. Consider it the "problem solving" area. Reference books go here too.

Non-fiction history books - put them all under memory - keep it simple.

**The Library of Me-Ness**

The process of doing this will tell you some wonderful things about yourself. First of all you will discover, just like Thomas Jefferson, you buy books to use them. You read them to refer to them - which is why you have so many of them still lying around. How you refer to your books is just as important as their contents.

You'll know where to find the right book and when you are done with it you can still leave it anywhere you like with the full confidence that when you get around to shelving it, you'll know right where to put it.

If you get really excited about the process, you can shelve it next to the book it seems to naturally belong next to. Or you can shelve it next to the book you bought around the same time, or next to the book you never thought of it being quite like - but now that you have a system you see it is obviously part of an interest you have.

You have now crossed the threshold from casual reader to librarian or "knowledge manager" if you want to feel more contemporary. You are now empowered to understand the pattern of how you acquire knowledge.

**Jefferson Undo**

In 1851, a terrible fire struck the U.S. Capital on Christmas Eve. Two thirds of Jefferson's original collection was gone. Imagine, the founding father's operating manuals were not backed-up. Lost forever, deleted.

There is something very profound about losing books that have been literally touched by the hand of a genius - books that were lovingly placed on the shelves (he shelved them according to size - probably put the heavy ones on the bottom shelves just like you) according to the master plan.



**Jefferson's Library Catalog**  
(courtesy US Library of Congress)

Fortunately, many of the works were not one of a kind. The Library of Congress (LOC) has found copies now and has re-created the original Jefferson library, 185 years later. Drop by sometime and thumb through it.

**for more information:**

**Thomas Jefferson Exhibit**  
<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/>

**Council on Library and Information Resources**  
<http://www.clir.org/home.html>

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