I have a personal library of about 2,000 books. In the last 5 years I've often found myself thinking, "I remember reading about this topic in book X, and I'd like to footnote its discussion, and I know I own the book...now where is that book?" I look in the likely spots on my bookshelves without finding it, then tediously scan every bookshelf and pile of books, only to end up not finding the book. Frustrating.

When I worked under the Cataloger in the library at Westminster Theological Seminary , I found the solution. It was time to give up on constantly re-creating my own system of categories for ordering the books on my shelves and do what all academic libraries do: label the books with Library of Congress Call Numbers. It's the best academic book categorization system in the world, period. Why invent my own categories when I can access the combined wisdom of many thousands of trained academic librarians? And the automation tools exist to make it relatively easy. What doesn't exist is a description of the
process
for transforming bookshelves that hide your books from you into a refined, accessible personal library.

So, in the hope it will help you as much as it did me, I now unveil the process I use for labeling my books:

- Download Readerware ($40 or so) from www.readerware.com & install the program.
- Buy a CueCat ($5 or so--a cheap bar code scanner; it doesn't matter whether you get the "modified" or "unmodified" kind; both kinds work fine) from eBay, and plug it in to your computer (the keyboard port).
- Configure Readerware to store Library of Congress Call Numbers.
- - First, rename the c:Program FilesReaderwarescrapersuserexit_loc.py file to "userexit.py".
- - Second, under "Edit - > Preferences," under the "User Columns" tab, set "Column 1" to "active," and give that column the title "LOC Call No" or something similar.
- - Third, under the "Views" tab of this same window, you may want to define a "view" which displays only the following columns: Author, Title, ISBN, User1. That will make labeling the books go faster later.
- Scan the barcodes from all your books into a plain text file (Windows Notepad works perfectly). For the sake of this explanation let's call the file "scanned_books.txt".
- - If a book doesn't have a barcode, enter its ISBN or LCCN instead, each entry on its own separate line (press return after each ISBN). (Note that a LCCN is a Library of Congress CATALOG Number, and is NOT a Library of Congress CALL Number! You want to label your books with the CALL number, not the CATALOG number.)
- - If a book doesn't have any such numbers, use Readerware's online search forms to find the

book online (I find Amazon and the Library of Congress to be the two best places to search in this manner--Amazon has nicely-formatted titles, and the Library of Congress has the call numbers which you are seeking). (In Readerware, do this by using the menu entry named "Web - > Basic Search and Import...") Once you find a web page which describes this book, click on the small icon which is directly to the left of the URL in the URL bar at the top of your browser window, and drag that icon to the "Bull's eye" which is found at the top right of the Readerware window. Readerware will then automatically download the information for this book into its database.

- - If you can't find the book's Library of Congress Call Number in the above ways, you can often find it in our library catalog at www.wts.edu . You have to enter it manually, but this is better than having no call number at all.

- After scanning the barcodes (or entering ISBNs & LCCNs), go online and run Readerware's "Web - > Autocatalog" menu item. In the "ISBN/LCCN Input" screen, click on the "Load List" button, and select the "scanned_books.txt" file. Continue clicking "Next" and Readerware will automatically download the information you're looking for.

- Once all book information is entered correctly into Readerware, export the book information by clicking on "File - > Export" and selecting the "CSV" option.

- Open the CSV file which you just created. Open it in Microsoft Excel (or any other standard spreadsheet program.)

- - If the file does not open and display properly, try adjusting the settings for how it interprets the CSV file, or try exporting the file from Readerware as a "TAB-delimited" file instead of a "CSV" file.

- - Buy a package of Avery return address labels. I use Avery # 8167, 1/2" X 1 3/4".

- - Buy a roll of clear packing tape (2" wide is good.)

- - Sort the spreadsheet data alphabetically by book TITLE. If you don't sort by title now so that the labels are printed out alphabetized by title, later on it will be much harder to find the right label for the right book once the labels are printed out!

- - Use Excel's special function for printing out labels. (I don't use Excel; I use OpenOffice , which is free and works very well. So I can only give general instructions here which may not be precisely accurate.)

- - - Tell Excel that you are using Avery # 8167 labels (or the number of whatever other Avery labels you are using), and it will automatically format the size and margins of the labels for you.

- - - Tell Excel which columns of data you want it to print on each label, and place that data in the locations where you want it to appear on each label.

- - - - I prefer to place the Library of Congress Call Number at the top of the label, and the title of the book at the bottom of the label.

- - - Print the labels.

- Stick the labels on the books.

- - I find that it works well to put the label vertically on all books regardless of whether they have skinny or wide spines, and to put them all about the same distance from the bottom edge of the spine. This makes it easier to scan across multiple labels on the shelf.

- - If a book has a cover to which the label may not continue to stick for many years into the future (if the book's cover is dusty, rough cloth, or otherwise not very easy to stick to), then after putting the label on the book, I cover the label with clear tape to hold it on more securely.

That's all! I hope this idea is helpful to you! Once you use Readerware to label your books in

this way, you can use it again in the future to find a book on the shelf by searching for its title or author (or other details) in Readerware, just like an electronic library catalog. You can also update the information about any book stored in Readerware, or add new books. You can record who borrows books and when those books are due to be returned in Readerware, too.

The main benefits for me of using Readerware in this way is that I now have a well-thought out method for organizing my books into logical categories (the Library of Congress has already done that thinking for me!), and I also have an easy way to find books quickly on the shelf when I need them.

You can also use Readerware in an identical fashion to label your books with their Dewey Decimal System numbers, and to organize them on the shelves using the Dewey Decimal System. So far as I understand, though, most academic libraries prefer the Library of Congress System, so that's what I've decided to use.

You may find that the academic footnoting/bibliography software called EndNote or Nota Bene could provide similar functionality.