



An Overview of Collection Development

This document contains two communications created by MLA's Intellectual Freedom Taskforce. Part I concerns the collection development process and may be helpful when discussing how librarians make selection choices. Part II covers five topics that show up frequently in book challenges and discussion of censorship.

Part I - Collection development: how do librarians choose what to buy for the library?

When librarians choose what materials to purchase for their library, they consider a number of factors. What part of the collection (fiction? Nonfiction? Film and television?) are they buying for? What materials have already been purchased? How much space do they have on the shelf? How much money do they have in their budget? What materials will best inform their community? What materials will contribute to the variety of topics and perspectives that intellectual freedom standards compel a library to provide?

This process, with all the questions it involves, is called collection development. Collection development is a cornerstone of library services—if library workers did not do collection development, there would be nothing to lend the patrons!

Libraries have limited space, so librarians sometimes remove books from a collection based on condition (old books that are falling apart), low circulation (a book hasn't been checked out in a long time), or outdated information (such as science books written before major scientific discoveries). This process is called weeding, and it will be addressed more fully in a future newsletter.

When deciding what to purchase for the library collection, librarians consider whether a work has literary, political, artistic, and/or scientific value. They use a number of resources to help determine the answer.

One of the most important resources is reviews in trade publications. *Booklist*, *Kirkus*, and *Library Journal* are three of the most important and well-respected trade publications, as are *School Library Journal* and *The Horn Book*, which focus on materials for children and young adults. The people who contribute reviews for these journals are literary professionals who often do or have done library work. Reviews in these publications help librarians determine the merits of a work and judge how well it would serve the needs of their library collection and their community.

Librarians also check to see what other librarians are doing. If several other libraries in a given area own a particular book, that indicates a high level of interest. If only a few other libraries own a particular book, that could indicate a lack of interest, or it could indicate a gap in local information access that the librarian decides should be filled. Librarians have extensive professional training that helps them make these judgment calls.



If an item is checked out frequently at other libraries, a librarian might decide to purchase a copy for their library to help meet demand. High circulation often indicates that a resource has value to the library's community.

Awards also help librarians determine what materials should be in their library. Librarians look to a variety of resources when considering award distinction, and they have plenty to work with: over one hundred literary awards are announced each year by respected literary organizations. For example, the Association for Library Service to Children awards the Newbery Medal for distinguished contributions to children's literature and the Caldecott Medal for distinguished picture books. The Stonewall Award honors titles for "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience." Other well known accolades include the National Book Award, the Booker Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize. Since librarians consider artistic and literary merit when selecting books, awards are often a helpful guide.

Ideally, librarians would only need to consider their professional obligation to intellectual freedom when performing collection development. However, some librarians worry that if they purchase materials about certain topics—regardless of the merit those materials have—they will be threatened with censorship and loss of funding. Sometimes librarians choose not to purchase certain materials *specifically* because they are afraid of the repercussions. This is called self-censorship and is a response to a chilling effect in which the threat of bad consequences deters someone from exercising their legal right to free speech and meeting their obligation to build broad, diverse collections.

In our next communication, we will list some of the topics that frequently appear in challenged materials and may cause librarians to consider self-censorship. We will also discuss why materials with these topics belong in the library and how removing or restricting access to these materials violates intellectual freedom.

Part II - Commonly Challenged Topics

In our last communication, we explained collection development, or how librarians decide what to purchase for their library. In an ideal world, librarians would only need to consider their professional obligation to intellectual freedom when they did collection development. However, recent and ongoing censorship attempts across the country are targeting materials because they contain certain topics and perspectives that censors disapprove of.

It can be very easy to get side-tracked by arguments about justifying frequently challenged topics. Ultimately, every person has the right to moderate their own engagement with the materials in a library's collection. Any library patron may choose to stop reading a book or watching a film for any reason. However, these patrons are only responsible for themselves and may not dictate what other community members, including community members under the age of 18, may access.



Understanding what topics are most likely to be censored can help us be proactive in protecting intellectual freedom. Below are five topics that frequently appear in challenged and censored materials.

Sexual content

Some materials in library collections include sexual content. This content may be informational (such as a nonfiction book about sex education) or it may be part of a narrative (such as in a novel or a film). Library patrons may have varying degrees of comfort with this content and may choose not to engage or to stop engaging with a library item that includes sexual content. This does not mean that these materials should be censored, as restricting or removing the materials would violate the intellectual freedom rights of a library's patrons.

Some censors object to sexual content specifically because the sex and sexualities depicted are not heterosexual. Discriminatory removal of such content is a violation of intellectual freedom principles, which require librarians to select materials that represent a wide variety of experiences and perspectives.

Gender and sexuality

Censors may say that they object to books that reference gender and sexuality, but what they generally mean is that they object to books that reference genders other than "cis girl/woman" and "cis boy/man" and sexualities other than "heterosexual." A book that uses any gendered pronoun (such as "she" or "his") references gender, and a book about a cis girl and a cis boy falling in love references sexuality.

Nonfiction books about all genders and sexualities and fiction books that include characters from across the spectrums of gender and sexuality reflect the existence and lived realities of people all over the world. Libraries have a duty to provide materials on a wide variety of topics from a wide variety of perspectives; when librarians include materials about all genders and sexualities in their collections, they are fulfilling their professional obligation to foster intellectual freedom.

Critical race theory (CRT)

Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic theory applied to the study of law that draws on the work of Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Richard Delgado. It is studied by law school students and legal professionals. Unless the material in question is a law textbook, libraries are unlikely to have materials involving critical race theory in their collection.

Depictions and discussions of racism

Race is a socially constructed category that affects the lives of people around the world. Depictions and discussions of racism in both fiction and nonfiction materials belong in libraries because they reflect reality. Librarians uphold the principles of intellectual freedom by providing access to a wide range of perspectives in their collection. This includes the perspectives of people who experience racism and are otherwise socially marginalized or oppressed. While some patrons may find these



depictions and discussions upsetting, the inclusion of materials in library collections is not dependent on the emotional reaction that patrons may have upon engaging with those materials.

Social emotional learning (SEL)

Social emotional learning (SEL) is an educational method first developed at Yale in the 1960s. SEL focuses on teaching children how to be aware of their own emotions and the emotions of others, how to foster interpersonal relationships and communicate within those relationships, and how to problem solve and hold themselves accountable. Some publishers develop books, particularly for young children, that can be used to help children learn these emotional awareness and communication skills. Social emotional learning has been linked to improved social behavior in children and reduction in children's emotional distress ([source](#)).

Materials in a library's collection that contain these topics have been chosen because a librarian, who is a trained professional, has determined that the materials have artistic, literary, political, and/or scientific merit. Any patron is free to not engage, or to stop engaging, with library materials containing these topics, but that is a matter of personal preference, not professional decision-making.