

The Collection: *Or, Do You Have Something for Everyone?*

There is only one way to learn about your library's collection. You have to use it. The longer you work in your library the better you will know your collection. There are some ways to quickly learn what you have.

First “walk” the collection. Begin a slow tour of the library by observing how your collection is arranged. Here are some questions to answer:

- ***Where is the reference collection, and how big is it?*** (Reference books are not designed to be read through; instead, they are used to answer questions in the library. They are normally not checked out.)
- ***How is the non-fiction section arranged?*** Usually, nonfiction works public libraries are arranged according to the Dewey Decimal System. However, sometimes special sections, such as biographies or Idaho materials, are placed in a section that is out of order. Be very aware of these special sections, as they are usually separated for a reason.
- ***How are fiction materials arranged?*** If they are on racks, do different racks contain specific kinds of books, or are they all intermixed?
- ***Is there a separate section for children's nonfiction works?*** Many small libraries interfile children's and adult nonfiction together so patrons can readily find all the information on a subject in one place.
- **How are children's fiction books divided?** Most libraries have a separate section for “picture books” for younger children. These books may be kept in bins, so they are easier for children to see. In general, they are very difficult to keep in any order, although some libraries use colored tape to identify authors in broad alphabetical categories. Many libraries mark these books with the letter E, for *easy reader*.
- ***Fiction for older children is usually shelved in alphabetical order.*** Typically, they have a special call number designation, such as J or JF to indicate they are juvenile books. A few libraries still try to divide children's books according to grade level. This is not recommended, as it may discourage good readers from reading “above” their grade and it may embarrass less advanced readers when they have to choose books below their current grade level in school.
- ***What magazines does the library receive?*** How long does it keep back issues? Are current and back issues kept together? Most libraries have space constraints,

so it is no longer common to keep several years' worth of magazines. The good thing is that back issues of many magazines are available online.

- ***What kind of audiovisual materials does the library have and where are they kept? Are there special precautions to prevent theft of these materials?***
- ***Are there sections that look very strong and that have a lot of newer books?***
Are there section that look weak, that is have few or no books or the books look old or dilapidated? From what you know of your community, do these strengths and weaknesses make sense?
- ***Are new books kept in a special section? If so, how long are they kept there?***

While you are walking the collection, you should also look at the condition of the materials. Does the collection look new and vibrant, or is it made up of books that look worn and dilapidated? Are the shelves crowded or are they half filled? Are you using the top and bottom shelves to store materials?

In general, you should probably not make major changes in the way the collection is arranged until you have been on the job a year. For one thing, it can be very time-consuming and you will have plenty of other things to do the first year on the job. Making major changes right away will not allow you to know why things were done the way they were before you took up the reins. While something may look foolish on the face of it, you may discover the previous director had a very good reason for doing it that way. (Make sure the very good reason has to do with convenience for library users, not just the convenience of the library staff.) Lastly, major changes can be very disconcerting to your patrons and staff. It is best to establish a good trusting relationship before stirring the waters too much.

This doesn't mean you can't begin planning for changes in the first year. Discover why things are the way they are, then plan a new arrangement if you find it to be necessary. Get your collection development policy in order. Make sure your weeding policy is ready to go and discuss the value of weeding with your board.

During the first year, you may want to begin a formal collection-assessment process in a few parts of the collection. For help in doing this, you will want to:

1. Contact your ICfL Area Field Consultant, and
2. Take the [ABLE Collection Development Sequence](#).

Censorship and Intellectual Freedom

Unfortunately, we cannot talk about library collections without also talking about censorship. As a librarian, it is your duty to provide as much information on as many different subjects of interest to your community as possible. Because some of these subjects are controversial, people may occasionally become upset because your library contains certain opinions or materials. This situation becomes particularly difficult for people when it involves their children.

As a library director, it is your professional responsibility to support the cause intellectual freedom. No individual or small group in your community should have the power to tell other people what they cannot read. Because of this, it is vitally important that your library board write a Collection Development Policy which includes a strong statement of support for intellectual freedom and procedures about how such challenges are to be handled. All staff members should know this policy and know exactly what they are supposed to do if the challenge is brought to them. The typical procedure is to ask the person challenging the material to fill out a form, which states their objections. If the person refuses to put his objection in writing, then the matter goes no further. If he does fill out the form, the director then composes a written response. If this does not satisfy the patron, the matter is then taken to a hearing at a board meeting. The board's decision at this point is final.

People who challenge library materials are people who care about their children and their community. Treating these people with respect will often help avoid a major confrontation later. In most cases, you will find simply hearing people out will be enough. In a few cases, the challenge may go to your board. It will then be important that they understand the principles of intellectual freedom that they are called upon to defend.

Giving in to censorship will only lead to more challenges and it is not just “dirty” books that are attacked. Among books most frequently subjected to challenges are *The Bible*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Silas Marner*. In a real sense, then, when you and your board are defending one book in your library, you are defending them all.

If you or your board would like to learn more about censorship, intellectual freedom, and challenges to library materials, contact your ICfL Area Field Consultant. Check the [Consulting Map](#) for contact information.