Banned Books Week Librarian Toolkit
A Guide for Librarians
Preparing for and Facing
Intellectual Freedom Challenges

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## Contents

About This Guide 2  
Complaint vs. Challenge vs. Ban 3  
Preparing for Challenges 4  
Working with the Media 7  
Useful Resources 9
About This Guide

Book challenges and bans are often thought of as a practice of the past, but as librarians we know that even today, some individuals want to control what types of materials are offered in their public, school, or academic libraries. Many of these individuals hold the belief that they are protecting others from corrupting influences. Sometimes their arguments for removing a book or movie might even sound sympathetic. The important thing to remember is that a book which is banned becomes unavailable to not only the challenger but also to every other person who uses that library. Library patrons have the right to control what enters their homes; they do not have the right to determine what others take home.

This guide is intended to help librarians prevent and manage challenges. It is not intended to take the place of legal advice. After reading this guide, we hope you will feel more comfortable identifying and navigating complaints and challenges. Furthermore, we want you to feel like you are not handling this issue alone. As an Iowa librarian you are part of a network of individuals who want to help their patrons access information and approach intellectual pursuits without impediment. With that in mind, please take special note of the additional resources section. This information packet will not answer all of your questions, but hopefully it will provide enough information to help you decide where to go next!
Complaint vs. Challenge vs. Ban

A **complaint** is an expression (verbal or written) from a person or organization that a specific item or program in the library is inappropriate. This is an opportunity for the library staff to start a dialogue and provide information about library collection policies. As long as the complaint remains at this stage, no further action is required by the library staff. However, once the complaint escalates to an attempt to remove or restrict access to a resource it becomes a **challenge**. A challenge begins the library’s formal process to evaluate a particular resource. Usually the patron will submit a **Request for Reconsideration** or a similar form to start the challenge process. A **ban** is the actual removal of the challenged materials.

It is important to remember challenges reflect the spectrum of perspectives and values held in the community a library serves. Challenges provide an opportunity to discuss the essential role libraries play in our democracy and share how the Library Bill of Rights influences collection development procedures in libraries across the United States.

Challenges often result in a difficult process, but they also have to potential to enable rewarding opportunities to better understand the patrons we serve. Likewise, challenges permit library philosophy to enter public discourse as we communicate our respect for personal choice and discretion. This enabled us to share our respect for the power of caregivers (i.e. the parents and others who take care of children), which is why libraries do not serve *in loco parentis*. 
Preparing for Challenges

Having a strong collection development policy as well as a prepared staff and Library Board are the best initial steps toward keeping the library’s relationship with the public amicable when concerns arise.

Building a Collection Development Policy

It is essential for a library to develop a collection development policy before any challenges emerge. A collection development policy should include:

- The types of materials collected by the library
- Information about how the library handles donations, particularly regarding subject matter
- Description of how the library participates in interlibrary loan (if applicable)
- Definition of the term “weeding” and how it differs from attempts at censorship; also, how the library staff weeds materials in terms of age, frequency of use, availability, etc.
- Definition of staff positions, particularly in terms of their roles in selecting materials
- For academic libraries, information about how the library processes course reserves
- If the acquisition process is demand-driven, description of how that process works
- ALA Freedom to Read Statement
- Library Bill of Rights

Here is an example of a public library’s collection development policy and here is one for an academic library.

Remember to make your collection development policy publicly available both online and at the circulation desk. Often a complaint will not escalate into a challenge if the library’s collection policy is shared.

Preparing Your Staff

Your staff can be your best resource when handling complaints. Concerned patrons may feel most comfortable talking to a member of staff with whom they have interacted in the past. Arguments against censorship can seem impersonal, so the relationships your staff have built with patrons are crucial.

It is important that your staff understand their roles during a challenge. Talking about how they will react in the event of a challenge before one occurs can stop staff from being taken by surprise. In each exercise below, staff members will be confronted with a complaint from a member of the public. One person should read the scenario to the staff members. Staff should discuss how they would respond if the scenario happened at their library. Afterwards, review the Response Clues provided for general ideas of what could be included in their response. Of course, every library is different, so do what is best for your institution!
Exercise #1 (Public Library)

_Scenario:_ A woman approaches the circulation desk with her two young children. They are regular attendees at story time. She says: “I have been attending this library for the last five years, and I am outraged that you have _And Tango Makes Three_ [by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell] in the children’s section! Why do you have to bring politics into the library?”

_Response Clues:_ It is not your job to convince this woman of any particular viewpoint or opinion. Furthermore, it is her right to refuse to bring that book into her home. Offer her a copy of the library’s collection development policy. Emphasize to her that she is in charge of what her children read, not the library. However, tell her that you also respect the right of other parents to give their children books that reflect their own beliefs. At this point, this problem is still a complaint and not a challenge. Hopefully, she will recognize your respect for her authority over her children and will be satisfied with the outcome of the conversation.

Exercise #2 (Public Library)

_Scenario:_ The same woman from Exercise #1 returns to the circulation desk. This time she brings her husband. They have a stack of children’s books with them. The woman says, “We went through the children’s section and found all of the books that contain anti-family values. You need to get rid of them.” You start to explain to her that while you respect her right to choose for her family, the library is committed to providing the same level of access for other families. She cuts you off and says angrily, “You’re just repeating what you said before.” The man then says, “We’ve spoken to our local representative. He was also shocked that you keep dirty books in the children’s section. Either get rid of them or we are going to go to the newspapers about you.”

_Response Clues:_ This is verging on a challenge. At this point, bring in the reinforcements. Refer the couple to your library director. If they agree to a meeting, the collection development policy should be explained, and other supporting documents should be offered and explained. If they still want to make an objection, give them the form to file an official challenge and contact your Library Board. The director may also wish to reach out to their local council and the representative to explain the library’s policies and procedures, so that they can be informed as they may receive complaints or questions from the community.

Exercise #3 (Academic Library)

_Scenario:_ A professor approaches you at the reference desk with a copy of A.R. Butz’s _The Hoax of the Twentieth Century_, an academic work denying the existence of the Holocaust. She says that she was shocked to find this book in the library and wants it removed because it contributes to an unsafe atmosphere for Jewish students.

_Response Clues:_ You do not have to pretend that all of the viewpoints expressed in the library are worth equal consideration. Inform the professor that a material’s inclusion into the library collection is not an endorsement by the university or its staff. Remind her that books can be used for research in many different ways. For example, perhaps a student or faculty member is researching Butz’s book to better understand and therefore counter its arguments. The conversation might provide a perfect
opportunity to strengthen relationships with faculty. If this professor has ties with the Jewish student community on campus, you could suggest a collaboration with them on a book display or other project.

Exercise #4 (Academic or Public Library)

*Scenario:* A patron sends you an email requesting that the library purchase Milo Yiannopoulos’s *Dangerous*. He cc’s on the email a well-known alt-right demagogue. You suspect that he thinks you will refuse to purchase the book and that he will then reply with accusations of censorship.

*Response Clues:* Would your library’s collection development policy support the purchase of this book independent of a patron request? Is your acquisition process request-driven? If the answer to one or both of these questions is yes, buy the book. If your policy does not support purchasing this book—for example, if you are an academic library serving medical students or the majority of your funding goes to YA materials—respond with a detailed explanation of why the purchase cannot be made for your library’s collection. Include links to your collection policy and information about alternative sources for the book such as Interlibrary Loan services when applicable.

Exercise #5 (Public or Academic Library)

*Scenario:* A member of the community starts publishing op-eds in the local newspaper in which they claim your library censors books. Their evidence is provided in the form of a former library employee’s statement that the library gets rid of books that are not popular.

*Response Clues:* Library patrons may not fully understand collection weeding. Some believe librarians simply yank books away if they are controversial, unpopular, or old. If you can contact the member of the community, explain your library’s weeding and collection development policies. Emphasize the variety of factors weeding encompasses: circulation, timeliness (such as in the case of textbooks or technology related material), relevance to the specific collection and community, and physical condition.
Working with the Media

You may receive questions from the media when a patron elects to follow the official process to challenge a program or material in your collection. Staff need to be aware of the library’s policy on media relations and fielding questions regarding challenges. Staff should fully comprehend who is permitted to speak to the media and when to refer questions to the Director, Library Board, or University Board of Trustees as applicable.

Common questions may include:
- “What is your policy on this?”
- “What is the title?”
- “Why are they challenging it?”

You may be asked to take a strong position or share your personal feelings on the topic. Because one of the main tasks of librarians is providing information to our patrons, regardless of what they ask or why, it can be difficult to decline to answer. However, you may decline to comment (or choose to answer off the record) questions about information that is not considered public, information that is protected by your privacy and confidentiality policies, or requests for your personal opinion. Refer to library procedure when fielding calls from the community or the media. Answer the questions with which you feel comfortable, but do not let the feeling of discomfort lead you to do something you later regret, that does not benefit your patrons, or that hurts your institution.

Prior knowledge or preparation for Intellectual Freedom issues are most important at this stage of a challenge. Determine which documents and organizations to refer to in order to save time and energy.

Direct those with inquiries to review the Freedom to Read Statement from the American Library Association (which has likely been adopted as part of your policy). Instead of offering an explanation or personal interpretation, point to particular interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights that are relevant to the situation. While you may not always have a ready resource for the specific challenge it is best to provide supporting documentation when possible. Gauge the support of your city, library board, staff, and community as well as yourself when deciding which questions to answer or how thoroughly to answer.

Do not hesitate to reach out to others! Your state library association may have an Intellectual Freedom Committee with knowledgeable members eager to support you during your challenge and provide insight and additional resources. The American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom supports libraries as they navigate challenges across the nation and may provide in-person assistance when required. Additionally, the members of the Freedom to Read Foundation and American Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Committee frequently offer their time and experience to guide librarians and library boards in these matters.

You also may receive Open Records or Public Records requests. An Open Records Request is a request seeking information about a city or county government, a public school district or a state or federal agency. An Open Records request may seek information about budgets, meeting agendas, vendor contracts, emails written on government computers, and many other documents. Confer with your city attorney about whether to comply and what information to release based on Open Records laws and your policies. Due to differing policies on privacy and confidentiality between libraries and
other public entities, the requester, as well as your city administration or legal counsel, may not be clear on what records are or are not subject to an Open Records Request. Confer with your State Library staff or other professionals who can help you determine the best way to move forward. The Iowa Public Information Board is another resource for questions about Open Records Requests.

Maintain a positive and professional relationship with your media. You do not have to answer every question, but remain professional. View questions about the challenge as another way to inform your community. The more time you spend ensuring that the media understands the situation, your policies, and your perspective, the less time you will have to spend correcting and counteracting misinformation.
**Useful Resources**


**General Assistance**

These organizations provide a wide variety of support and resources tackling everything from laying the foundations for solid collection development policies to finding promotional materials. Particularly helpful pages and documents within the websites are listed as well.

American Library Association (ALA): [http://www.alaland.org](http://www.alaland.org)
Banned Books: [http://www.alaland.org/advocacy/bbooks](http://www.alaland.org/advocacy/bbooks)
First Amendment and Censorship: [http://www.alaland.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship](http://www.alaland.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship)
Iowa Library Association (ILA): http://www.iowalibraryassociation.org
Intellectual Freedom Committee:
https://ialibraryassociation.libguides.com/intellectualfreedom

Banned Books Week: https://bannedbooksweek.org/

Programming, Promotion, and Display Ideas
The resources below provide examples of how real libraries have incorporated Banned Books Week into their programs and displays.


Sample Documents
Below are real examples of documents used by libraries.

Collection Policies


Request for Reconsideration