

"Reduce, Reuse, Recycle": Managing Library Print Collections

by Ann Acheson

ABSTRACT

Libraries strive to maintain print collections that are current and useful through both acquisition and removal of materials. Removal, often called "weeding," is guided by factors that include accuracy, usage (circulation), physical condition, currency, relevance, and availability of materials elsewhere. Because of space limitations, smaller libraries and school libraries have more stringent weeding criteria. Ideally, weeded print materials are reused through various means if they are in good condition and not outdated or inaccurate. This article describes the various ways libraries handle their weeded books including book sales or bookstores, donations to local or national nonprofits, or online resellers. Materials that are not candidates for reuse may be sent for recycling, or, as a last resort, disposed of in the regular waste stream.

includes acquisitions, cataloging, and circulation. MUSTIE is an acronym for six negative factors that frequently make print materials prime candidates for weeding: *misleading* or factually inaccurate; *ugly* (worn and beyond mending or rebinding); *superseded* (by a new edition or a better book on the subject); *trivial* (of no discernible literary or scientific merit; usually of ephemeral interest at some time in the past); *irrelevant* to the needs and interests of the community; *elsewhere*—as in the material or information may be readily obtained elsewhere (e.g., through interlibrary loan, reciprocal

borrowing, or in electronic format) (Larson 2012).

Although space limitations may be an obvious trigger for libraries to engage in weeding, ideally libraries continuously evaluate their collections based on relevance, accuracy, physical condition, circulation, community needs, alternative means of access, and other factors depending on the type and size of the library. The best practice is to use multiple factors in making decisions about weeding.

Physical condition is the most obvious criterion for removing books from a library's collection, e.g., those that are worn, moldy, water stained, defaced, or damaged beyond repair. Usage, as measured by circulation, is another measurable criterion but is more complicated. It may be based on the last date an item was checked out (e.g., materials are weeded if they haven't been checked out in a defined number of years), and how many times it was checked out. Libraries may purchase multiple copies of the latest best sellers or works by popular authors, but after a year or two as the demand lessens, duplicates can be weeded. School libraries and small public libraries often set more stringent circulation criteria than larger public libraries and academic libraries. The availability of computer-based circulation data has provided librarians with an improved means of understanding collection usage in support of the weeding process.

Accuracy, currency, and relevance of materials are criteria where librarian judgment and expertise come into play. Many academic libraries and larger public libraries

Library print collections are dynamic entities and managing them involves both adding and removing materials. Decisions about collection additions are based on the type of library (school, public, academic, specialty) and its size; relevance to community and user needs and interests; and, of course, budgets and space availability. The process of removing materials from library collections is referred to as "weeding," "deselection," or sometimes "deaccessioning." Once print materials are weeded, the next part of the process is what to do with them.

Why is it necessary for libraries to weed print materials? It's important to understand that libraries are not repositories. A library evolves and adapts over time to have the most current and useful information for its users. A repository, by contrast, may seek to preserve as much print material as it can, for example, the British Library or the Library of Congress. Another more limited type of repository is the US Federal Depository Library Program, which has 1,150 libraries in the United States designated to retain government documents, including the Raymond H. Fogler Library at the University of Maine.¹ These documents are not subject to local weeding decisions.

The American Library Association (ALA) recommends that every library have a comprehensive written policy that guides selection, deselection, and reconsideration of library resources.² Such policies may be based on the CREW model (continuous review, evaluation, and weeding), where weeding is the last step in a cycle that

have librarians with specialization in certain areas, e.g., sciences, arts, or children and teen collections, and decisions about weeding in those areas are made by those individuals. In academic libraries, there is often faculty involvement in collections management, including both acquisitions and weeding. Small libraries and school libraries do not have the benefit of specialists, and some small public libraries in Maine do not have professional librarians or are run by unpaid volunteers.

Maintaining accurate, current collections in the sciences and medicine/health is particularly problematic due to rapid changes in these fields. For example, when Pluto was designated as no longer a planet, librarians had to remove any science books that listed Pluto as a planet. (The CREW method recommends that general science books, as well as books about outer space and paleontology, be weeded and replaced with newer sources when they are five years old.) Relevance is a weeding criterion that is based on the library's mission and the needs and interests of its stakeholders and community: Is the book's subject matter still of interest or use? Will removing it create an unwanted gap in the library's collection? Does it address a topic or subject important to the library's focus areas (if the library has these)? Is there still interest by users in the author's work? For academic libraries, is the material still relevant to the curriculum and research of the institution?

Libraries make exceptions to weeding criteria. For example, there may be local interest materials that are retained that do not have high circulation, such as works by local authors, local history, or genealogical resources. There may be special collections that are exempted from weeding. Older works that are considered to have historical or intrinsic value may be retained, as are award-winning children's books.

The availability of interlibrary loans, various shared collection or shared catalog strategies, and alternative media formats (e-books and other electronic publications, audiobooks), have affected library print material weeding a great deal. For example, a public library may opt to weed a print edition that is in low demand, but retain access to the e-book. Academic libraries remove bound journals—and save valuable shelf space—when they become accessible in electronic format via library subscription.

Interlibrary loans have been around for a long while in academic libraries, but more recently, the development



Set up for Portland Public Library's used book sale.

Photo: Ann Acheson

of shared collection strategies and shared catalogs have reduced the need for libraries to individually retain print materials. Cundick and Jackson (2024) describe the growth of library collaboration in Maine through shared catalog systems. For example, the Minerva group, which has 62 members and caters to the needs of medium- to larger-sized libraries, has a shared catalog and open lending, which requires that libraries share their collections with other member libraries for requesting and lending.

Sharing of print collections, which is different than a shared catalog, allows collaborating libraries to reduce their individual collections by ensuring that at least one print copy is retained by a library in the group and is available for borrowing. In Maine, in 2013 eight of the largest public and academic libraries in the state founded the Maine Shared Collections Collaborative (MSCC) (Revitt 2024). The membership has since grown to 40 member libraries that have committed to retaining 1.5 million print books and serials in their collection for 15 years; retention selection criteria include rarity in Maine and the United States, circulation history, and Maine connections. Revitt notes that there are now over 300 libraries in the US and Canada participating in shared print programs and that the trend has been to expand to regional and not just state-based programs.

What becomes of print materials removed from library collections? Ideally, they are reused and find new homes. In the circular economy, reuse is considered to be environmentally and economically beneficial since it

replaces purchase of new products and avoids disposal of old ones (Thomas 2011; Isenhour et al. 2022).

Libraries will pass on some of the books removed from their collections to be sold, along with donated books, at annual or periodic book sales or in facilities (separate rooms or buildings) dedicated to used book sales in support of library fund-raising. Book sales and library-affiliated “stores” are generally run by, or involve, volunteers, e.g., friends of the library groups. Alongside the economic benefit, these kinds of activities have social benefits, including promoting community involvement with and support for the library. By encouraging book donations for resale, libraries earn extra funds for their own support, but libraries also have a more general role in the reuse economy by providing a venue for individuals to weed their own book collections.

Most books removed from Maine library collections are not disposed of through book sales or at local volunteer-run sites. Libraries may have books on free shelves or bookcases for their patrons. Donating to organizations such as Good Will, Salvation Army, prisons, shelters, schools, nursing homes, or other organizations is another option. Some libraries send books to organizations such as B-Logistics, Better World Books, or Baker and Taylor’s sustainable shelves program. B-Logistics is the library service division of Discover Books, a large buyer and seller of good-quality used books withdrawn from libraries. Better World Books is a large online seller of new and used books that donates books and raises funds for nonprofit literacy organizations, schools, and libraries. Boxes are provided by Better World Books, and they pay for shipping. Saleable items may generate funds for the library, a nonprofit literacy partner, or both through a percentage of net sales. Both Better World Books and B-Logistics specify types of publications they won’t accept, e.g. encyclopedias, yearbooks, or textbooks older than 10 years. Some libraries send books to the distributor Baker and Taylor’s sustainable shelves program. This program requires

PORTLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Portland Public Library serves Maine’s largest city with a large downtown library, three neighborhood branches, a book-mobile, and a collections annex. It is one of the state’s largest public library systems and the most visited cultural institution in the state. The library lends over 300,000 books (print and digital), magazines, audio and visual materials, and archival materials.

The library’s collection development policy includes a section on withdrawals that calls for regular evaluation of the collection.³ Professional staff use industry-standard resources to determine relevancy of materials, as well as the following criteria for withdrawal from the collection:

- items are worn, stained, or damaged beyond repair
- items are out of date, contain inaccurate information, or are not historically significant
- new, more current, or more comprehensive resources are available
- duplication
- low circulation
- space considerations

Weeding is done by single librarians who specialize in particular subject areas or age levels, e.g., sciences, arts, youth. Criteria vary somewhat from department to department. Condition is a big factor: books that are moldy or falling apart are trashed. Use level is another important consideration. In small branches, the criterion might be books that haven’t circulated in a year, while in the large downtown library it would be five years.

A small number of weeded books go to the library’s annual book sale. However, the library sends the majority that are in good condition to Better World Books, along with any donated books remaining from the book sale. The library earns a small amount from books sent to Better World Books. The Portland Public Library also has a free shelf near the front desk at the downtown library and donates weeded books to places such as the Preble Street shelter and senior centers.

As Sarah Skawinski said, “Collections need to be clean, modern, accurate and useful.... Access is at the heart of everything. If the library doesn’t have something, we can get it.”

(Information from library’s website and from interview with Sarah Skawinski, Associate Director, Portland Public Library and Vice-President, Maine Library Association)

libraries to send lists of books they are weeding. Baker and Taylor values and categorizes the listed books into two groups, resale or recycle, before the library sends them. Shipping is free of cost to libraries, and the library is credited for the resaleable books sent.

Print materials that are in a condition that is too bad for sale or donation, or for which there is no market (e.g., old encyclopedias, reference works or textbooks, or out-dated science books) are either recycled or, as a last resort, disposed of in the regular waste stream. Some towns accept both hardback and paperback books in their single-stream recycling. In other towns, hardback books need to have bindings removed because the materials used in the binding process can cause problems so the books would not be accepted by the company taking the mixed paper for recycling.

Ann Acheson was a faculty associate in anthropology at the University of Maine and a research associate at the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center where she was managing editor and then editor of *Maine Policy Review*. She recently coedited (with the late Howard Segal) *Becoming Modern: The University of Maine, 1965–2015* (University of Maine Press, 2024).

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.gpo.gov/how-to-work-with-us/agency/services-for-agencies/federal-depository-library-program>
- 2 <https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit/weeding>
- 3 <https://www.portlandlibrary.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Collection-Management-Policy-2022.pdf>

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