

Why Do Libraries Weed...Even in Times of Reduced Budgets?

Q1. What does “weeding” mean in terms of a library?

A1. A library—any library, whether public, academic, or even personal—needs to undergo regular evaluation and maintenance of its contents if the collection is to remain healthy and valuable. “Weeding” is the removal of materials that are judged by professional librarians to be in poor physical condition or to have become inaccurate due to changes in knowledge.

Q2. What constitutes “poor physical condition”?

A2. Among the characteristics that can cause a piece of library material to become a weeding candidate are:

- food and drink stains that would attract insects or which obscure content
- water damage caused by immersion of material in baths, hot tubs, or bad weather
- melted plastic parts caused by exposure to excessive heat
- mildew or mold
- vandalism such as heavily marked or sliced pages
- failed bindings that cannot be repaired
- broken parts that cannot be mended

Q3. Are the contents of such severely damaged materials then no longer available to library users?

A3. Books with contents that are still useful are replaced. The test of physical condition is just that—physical condition. The library budgets money specifically to address replacement needs because many items eventually do wear out physically while continuing to have intellectual value.

Q4. Besides poor physical condition, why else are library materials weeded?

A4. Library materials intended to provide timely and factual information—particularly in areas where users need current and accurate guidance in order to survive, such as law, medicine, economics, and directories—should be kept up to date in the collection. Older materials the dated information of which provides now incorrect information must be weeded if library users are to rely on the collection as reflecting good information.

Q5. But what if I want to look at dated materials like that for historical purposes?

A5. You can always get an interlibrary loan of material from a library whose mission is to retain dated factual information for researchers. You can apply to borrow the material here at Berkeley Public Library, and then both pick it up and return it here. This is one of the services our library offers you.

Q6. In your big new Central building, isn't there room to keep everything, no matter how out of date its information might be?

A6. No library has yet been built that can continuously add material without weeding, even if everything it adds were to stay in perfect condition. While the new Central has enough shelf space to accommodate a collection appropriate to our community's needs, where shelving is located informs the size each subcollection can grow to be. For

instance, the magazine shelves can hold only so many back issues and the picture book area can hold only so many volumes. Dated material that has been replaced with currently accurate information would require continually increasing storage space.

Q7. Is it true that if some material doesn't get used, it gets weeded, that only "popular" materials are safe from weeding?

A7. No, that isn't true. Librarians charged with weeding are doing this part of their job on a regular and ongoing basis, just as they are selecting new materials on a regular and ongoing basis. These professionals do their work using many tools that help them to evaluate the possible and likely future usefulness of materials that seem currently to be sitting unused on the shelf. A significant part of the library's role in the community is to be a reflection and repository of culture, and culture has less as well as more popular aspects to it!

Q8. But wouldn't it make better economic sense to put off weeding in times of reduced budgets?

A8. No. The library's collection is meant to be useful. Materials that are worn out are not as likely to be used as materials that appear to be in satisfactory condition. Some physical problems—including mold—can devastate an entire collection if not noted and removed quickly. Information that is dated can be, at best, a curiosity, and, at worst, dangerous. Keeping a collection stagnant is not a service and can do economic, physical, and intellectual harm.

Q9. What happens to weeded library materials?

A9. Materials weeded because of substandard physical condition are at the end of their lives. Some dated materials, as well as materials weeded because they are excessive duplications no longer deemed necessary (such as the tenth through fifteenth copies of a bestseller from five years ago), are given to the Friends of the Library after they are deaccessioned. The Friends sell these, as well as book donations from the community, to raise money which they generously give to the library for public programs and other services for which tax money can't be spent.

Q10. Can I arrange to be given materials the library is weeding?

A10. No. California law prohibits the transaction of public property (that is, materials in the collection) to an individual.

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