

# Weeding Policy

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## **Introduction**

Weeding (also known as deselection) is an essential element of collection development that ensures the library's materials are useful and accessible. Every library's collection is limited by the space available to house it, and collections should change over time to reflect changes in the community, society-at-large, and the library's goals. Weeding is a periodic or continual evaluation of resources intended to remove items that are no longer useful from the collection.

This section discusses the importance of having a weeding policy, the rationale behind weeding, some reasons individuals might find it difficult to weed, practical information for use in planning or conducting weeding, and options for the materials you remove. When considering weeding in your library, keep in mind that every library is different; every library has unique priorities and problems. Not every suggestion or guideline for weeding in this section will fit your library, so feel free to adapt as necessary. Remember that guidelines are not rules and still require intelligent and informed decision-making for each individual item. And always remember that;

**“SOMETHING IS NOT BETTER THAN NOTHING” and that outdated, wrong, or poorly presented information is not better than empty space!**

## **The Importance of a Weeding Policy**

Weeding can be one of the most controversial aspects of collection development, and a carefully prepared and fully documented policy on weeding (as part of your overall collection development policy) can lessen or alleviate some misunderstandings. A weeding policy can't replace individual judgment or common sense, but it will make your actions more understandable to the public. Knowing what is wanted and needed by your customers makes it easier to decide what should or should not remain in the collection.

## **Why Weeding Is Necessary**

When libraries do not weed regularly or consistently, customers have trouble finding interesting and relevant materials. Removing outdated or worn-out items makes the collection more visually attractive and more inviting to users. Patrons trust the library to supply information that is easy to find and up-to-date. All of these are positive factors from the customer's point of view. For the librarian, weeding has additional advantages. It finds the gaps in your collection so that you can make new purchases with confidence and creates space for those materials. Paradoxically, weeding is a good way to increase circulation by drawing attention to materials that had previously been overlooked.

In today's world where we and our library users are overwhelmed by the glut of information and the rate of publishing, weeding is far more likely to be understood as a necessity for all libraries. There is not enough bricks and mortar in the world to expand libraries to accommodate the number of new books that become essential for our collections each year. The solution is to withdraw those things that have been "loved to death" or have truly outgrown their popularity and/or usefulness in an environment where last week is considered "old" by many. Although some do not weed as much as they should, most librarians do de-select or weed their collections on a regular basis.

The weeding analogy is a good one. You cannot find the vegetables that are ripe for picking or even see the pretty flower blossoms if you do not do timely weeding in your garden and the same is true for the library. The good things become obscured by the overwhelming old, worn, outdated, and just plain inappropriate material if the weeding is not done regularly. For public libraries, use or lack thereof, is the most often reason for withdrawing materials such as fiction and audiovisual items. If it is not being used, a public library cannot afford to let it take up "real estate" and

shelving in the library. The following section provides more detailed information about the decisions necessary to weed your collection.

### **Planning Your Approach**

Probably the most well-known weeding method for public libraries is the CREW method: **C**ontinuous **R**eview, **E**valuation and **W**eeding. Most of the information contained in this discussion of weeding is drawn from this method or modifications of it. **CREW Manual** is available via the Web so that you can have a PDF or HTML version of it for the cost and time of printing it.

A precursor of the CREW method was the research done by Stanley Slote beginning in the 1970s. The fourth and last edition of his well-known work, *Weeding Library Collections* was published in 1997. Slote's work was initially based on research indicating that the best predictor of future use is past use. Libraries typically measure most use by circulation statistics. Slote's methodology included formulas to indicate the likely future use based on past use patterns. His research also documented the increase in use reported in libraries where weeding was done. The CREW method also takes into account the past use patterns and gives guidelines for both the age of the information or contents as well as the length of time since something has been used.

You should keep the following in mind when you are planning your approach to weeding:

### **Schedules and Records**

If the library collection has not been systematically weeded in recent years, you may find that it is essential to do a "quick and dirty" weeding by going through the collection quickly and withdrawing the obvious but without examining every item. The obvious can be spotted on the shelves: worn, dirty, unattractive, binding that is older than you are, dust on the top of the book, unnecessary duplicates, etc.

Another quick method, is to run a systems report asking for a list of every item that has not circulated in the last three or more years. Then have someone put these items on a book truck and you can review just these for potential weeding.

Most libraries will benefit from a complete weeding conducted on a regular schedule over a period of 3 or 4 years. To create a reasonable schedule, first estimate the total number of shelves and equivalent storage units (audiovisual display units for example) and divide that approximate number by 36 months. This will give you a

target amount to review for potential weeding during each of the months of the three year period. Once through the collection at the end of the three years, you start over again. Keep records of your progress to reduce overlap and use this data (number of items withdrawn per call number or collection) for future collection development decisions, to adjust current inventory figures, and for your annual report. A concrete measure of your progress also helps to keep morale high and to encourage further work on the project.

### **Setting Goals and Priorities**

Have a monthly or even a weekly goal for weeding that can be easily managed. You will still need to decide where to begin the project and which areas to tackle first. Some areas are obvious targets. When your shelver says, "I just can't get one more book on that shelf," weed it soon.

Tackle one small section at a time and complete it before you start the next one. Do not weed the 200s or the 800s first. Those are areas that reflect peoples' values and can make weeding more difficult. Do those near the end of your project when you and the staff are more comfortable with the concept of weeding. By this point in your project you will have all gained confidence in the process and you will have seen how weeding improves use.

If possible, share the weeding responsibility with other members of your staff. Some librarians also find it useful to weed in teams of two so that you can learn from each other and can keep each other from straying too far from your established criteria. If you choose to do this, someone of a different generation is most helpful as they will bring a much different viewpoint to the endeavor. You will weed more effectively, move more quickly through a section, and avoid frustration by doing it together. Keep in mind that weeding is a process but be aware that weeding is best done in short periods so do not attempt to weed for more than one hour at a time. After an hour everyone starts to apply criteria in new and creative ways!

### **Weed as You Go**

Another way to keep current with the need for weeding is to examine materials as they are returned to the circulation desk. Set aside damaged and obviously outdated materials so that they can be evaluated. When doing selection, it is often useful to look to see what you already have on the subject or by an author.

Is it used? Does there seem to be a demand for materials on this subject, in this format and/or by this author? No one has time to do this for each new item under

consideration but when in doubt, use the existing collection as a guide and take the opportunity while in the stacks to identify things that you want to withdraw.

### **Using Computers to Weed**

If your library is automated, the computer system can aid in the weeding process. The system must be used for circulation for at least two years before you can use it as an aid in weeding. You can then generate a list, in call number order, of all items that have not circulated. Ideally, the period for such a list should be at least two years but three is probably more realistic. You only need to print the call number, the author and title on your list. Then you or someone else should gather the items in order on a book truck for you to review with the list in hand. If there are multiply copies of an item, then all copies should be put on the truck for review.

### **Getting Down To Business**

After you have planned your approach, you can start your weeding project by completing final preparations, gathering materials needed for the weeding project, and defining your weeding criteria.

While it is ideal to have each section of the collection in exact call number order, it is not necessary to shelf-read before weeding. You will put the shelves in order as you handle the books or other material. Try to choose a time to weed when the library is closed or likely to be empty so that you are not in the way of the customers.

Since weeding involves reaching and stooping, comfortable clothes will maximize your efficiency.

A prepared form that allows the person weeding to merely check appropriate options (weed, mend, replace, etc.) can save a great deal of time and eliminate the need to re-evaluate items when you can no longer recall what you thought when you first handled something. A sample of such a “book flag” is provided below.

Make your own version to fit your situation. Put the form on colored paper (a different color for each person?) and making it long enough (11 inches) to stick up out of most books makes the whole process easier.

You can easily get four or five “flags” on each piece of 8 ½ by 11 paper.

WITHDRAW \_\_\_\_\_

MEND \_\_\_\_\_

REPLACE \_\_\_\_\_

CHECK FURTHER \_\_\_\_\_

TRANSFER TO \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

NOTES:

### **Gathering Materials**

Using a book truck, gather some weeding supplies, including:

Prepared “book flags” (see above simple example)

Some sort of place marker - a piece of cardboard or a book wrapped in bright paper.

A notepad or post-it notes and a pen or pencil to record your stopping place, ideas for displays, thoughts about new purchases and any other wild idea that comes your way.

### **Defining Your Criteria**

The following criteria should be considered for each item in your collection. You will probably make many decisions based on some combination of these criteria. In some cases, you will find that just one of these “MUSTIE” guidelines is sufficient reason to withdraw an item. Remember that they are guidelines and not rules.

The CREW method uses an acronym, MUSTIE, to indicate when an item should be removed from the collection. MUSTIE stands for:

**Misleading and/or factually inaccurate:** (this includes items that fail to have the substantial periods of time not represented because of the age of the material)

**Ugly** (worn out beyond reasonable mending or having been poorly repaired in the past):

**Superseded by a new edition or a better source;** (keep in mind the use of the Web as a better, more up-to-date source in many cases)

**Trivial** (of no discernable literary or scientific merit & without sufficient use to justify keeping it);

**Irrelevant to the needs and interests of your community;** (not used even though we may find it “interesting”!)

**Elsewhere** (the material may be easily borrowed from another source or found on the Web)

Additional weeding criteria usually include:

**Condition:** If a book is in poor condition, it may be considered for removal depending on your ability and willingness to mend it. Mending, even if done by volunteers, is not cheap. Supplies are expensive and the management of volunteers in addition to the amount of time an item is out of the collection and therefore unavailable for use both argue against mending rather than withdrawing things that are well past their prime. Problems to watch for include a broken spine, fragile or brittle paper or bindings, bent corners, torn or missing pages, defaced pages or covers, insect or mildew infestations and books that are just plain worn-out.

**Age:** Evaluating an item’s usefulness based on its age is a tricky issue, especially for books. In truth, most old books hold very little value (monetary or otherwise) in a public library. Library customers generally prefer new books, regardless of content.

Some questions to ask when considering age as a reason to withdraw an item: Is the book so fragile that it can't withstand normal library use? Does this item have local historical value and therefore should it be transferred to the local history collection or the historical society? Does the age of the book mean that there are large periods of time not covered by its contents thus making it very incomplete? Remember that public libraries and school libraries are interested in the "intellectual content" of the materials and do not collect books and other materials as "historical artifacts". Such items belong in museums or rare book collections.

**Frequency of Use:** When was the last time an item circulated? How often is it used in the library? If you want to keep the item, perhaps it could be moved to a more visible or attractive location.

**Multiple Copies:** You may have more copies of an item than current usage demands. Multiple copies of a book might sit on the shelf a good part of the year but are in high demand every end of year examinations and therefore justified. On the other hand, best sellers (both fiction and nonfiction) that are no longer being put on hold and are actually sitting on the shelf do not need to be kept. Keep the best copy and let the rest go.

**Currency/Accuracy:** When evaluating currency, the key issue is relevance. History books may not be especially current, but if they are still relevant they should be kept. Materials on computers, law, science, technology, health, and travel on the other hand, need to be current to be useful. It is becoming increasingly clear that there are some areas of our collections that should be diminishing in size as the use of the Web for the most current information becomes the obvious choice.

Such areas include medicine (drugs, disease, nutrition, etc.), finance (investments, real estate, taxes) and colleges are but a few examples. Other items likely to be out of date quickly are travel guides, atlases, subjects that change frequently such as college entrance exams, guides to elected officials and anything related to fashion or fads.

Fiction can become outdated, too. Bobby Goes to the Sock Hop will probably not set afire the hearts of today's teenagers.

Another issue to consider is appropriate coverage. Since society is constantly changing, what was an accepted view years ago might be considered inappropriate today. Your goal should be to offer balanced coverage while preserving Intellectual Freedom.



In addition to using MUSTIE and the weeding criteria stated above, additional weeding considerations have been added for each section of the *Dewey Decimal Classification* and other typical collection categories. For extensive coverage by Dewey numbers including formulas for evaluating use and condition, consult the *CREW Manual*.

### Dewey Decimal Classification

**000s - General:** Do not keep any general encyclopedia set that is more than 5 years old. Many libraries now rely on an electronic version of a standard encyclopedia and the Web in general to fulfill the basic “starting point” and definition functions which were once the purpose of a general print encyclopedia. Materials on computers are seldom useful after three years and library science books should either be current enough to be used by you or they should be withdrawn.

**100s - Philosophy and Psychology:** Popular psychology and self-help books can quickly become outdated. More scholarly works on psychology and philosophy should be kept if they are by important authors (Aristotle, Freud, etc.). In general, psychology should be considered for withdrawal after five to eight years.

**200s - Religion and Mythology:** There can be a high turnover in books by popular religious leaders. Does your collection reflect the interests of your community? Try to have something current on each of the major religions. Like almost everything else, religious writings are subject to changes in society and reflect the period in which they were written.

**300s - Social Sciences:** Buy a new general almanac every year. It is still one of the few essential reference tools. In the past, many small libraries kept their older almanacs because they were inexpensive reference sources but today the Web can usually fulfill the same ready reference function.

Law, government and education materials are often used for school reports and debates, so they may have a somewhat historical value although err on the side of withdrawing them if there is little evidence of such use. Be certain that any law material contains the actual currently in force laws, statutes or regulations. Be sure your collection is balanced and current, especially for controversial topics.

**400s - Languages:** Foreign language and English materials may wear out very quickly; you may need to replace books in this category frequently. In general, a fairly current dictionary for each of the major languages other than English (Spanish, French, German and then whatever other languages are spoken in your community)

is sufficient and putting them in the circulating collection makes more sense than letting them gather dust in a non-circulating reference collection.

**500s - Pure Sciences:** Basic, historical works on science such as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* should be retained. However, new science discoveries, theories and techniques can make an outdated collection look very strange and will destroy your credibility with technophiles. Scientific materials are continuously being updated. The materials on animals, including dinosaurs, are likely to remain the most popular part of the 500s.

**600s - Applied Sciences:** Medical information in books is outdated before it reaches your shelves. Keep the 610s to a minimum and rely on electronic information to provide the most current and reliable health information. Older materials may be very misleading or even dangerous. Because popular culture thrives on fads, dieting, cookbooks and business practices are all areas where what's hot is popular and what is not, needs to go.

**700s - Arts and Recreation:** Histories of art and music may be kept until they wear out. However, be aware that general surveys are falling behind each year that they sit on your shelves. A history or survey of modern music, art, architecture, that was published 25 years ago is already missing a quarter of a century of that history! Other areas should be evaluated for their currency including sports and games.

**800s - Literature:** You probably have multiple copies of classic literary works. Keep the most recent edition that is in the best condition and move any fiction to the regular fiction stacks where it is likely to be used. Another useful strategy in the 800's is to buy a few standard anthologies of both American and British literature. These contain all of the major writers, biographical sketches, good notes and a selection of the best known or most important works of each. For less than \$1400 you can purchase a two-volume set that covers American literature in all formats and a British set that does the same. You are then free to withdraw those awful editions of the "works of Longfellow" or whatever. Keep only one edition of "the complete works of Shakespeare" and purchase current paperback editions of the most popular plays.

**900s - History, Travel and Geography:** History books should be evaluated for demand, factual accuracy, and interpretation. A balance of perspectives is ideal. For travel and geographical materials, do not keep anything older than two years unless it has a significant amount of background or history information that you cannot get anywhere else. An outdated travel guide is less useful than current periodical

information or materials from the Web. Travel films are always popular but they also become dated quickly.

**B - Biography:** It's easy to accumulate multiple copies of popular biographies and autobiographies. As with other types of materials, once the demand and popularity are past, keep only one copy. Keep up with new releases on enduring personalities (especially political and historical figures) and keep biographies with literary value but weed biographies as you do fiction. If it has not been read by more than one person in the past three years, consider withdrawing it. When trying to decide the best biographies to keep about a single president or other well-known historical person, the bibliographies in at the end of encyclopedia entries can be useful.

**Adult Fiction:** This is another area prone to multiple copies that are good for book sales. Works with enduring appeal should be kept, along with single copies of past best-sellers. Titles not being checked out are subject to withdrawal depending upon available space, place in a series (official or unofficial), and importance of the author. Older works by an author who is still alive and writing popular works may be read by new readers.

**Young Adult and Children's Fiction:** Watch for outdated topics, oversimplified or abridged classics when the original is appropriate for age and reading level, and multiple copies of series books. Replace worn out "classics" but define classic in terms of authors' as much as individual works. For example, it is not necessary to keep everything that Louisa May Alcott wrote but you would want to have a decent copy of *Little Woman* even if it is only occasionally checked out.

Young adult fiction should be in paperback almost exclusively, less than five years old and/or popular. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are examples in recent history of high demand older titles. With so many varieties of picture books on the market, your collection should be chosen on the basis of good stories and illustrations.

The *CREW Manual* advises against flimsy bindings and trite cartoon-based books but sometimes these are popular and the only bindings available are paperback. Use is more important than durability. Award winners are not sacred and should be withdrawn when they are not being read by your customers. If in doubt, try featuring them in some way to see if you can generate interest. If not, then withdraw them.

**Young Adult and Children's Non-fiction:** Consider these materials using adult criteria, but look for inaccuracy and oversimplification. "Something" is not better than nothing if what you have is outdated or inaccurate.

**The Reference Collection:** In today's library world, the trend is towards very lean and mean print reference collections. Libraries are redefining reference and recognizing that allowing things to circulate and be used makes better sense in our rich information environment.

While tracking the use of non-circulating printed materials is more difficult, condition and your own memory is often a fair indicator of how much a book or set is used. In the past, long lists of "essential reference titles" encouraged librarians to place many things in restricted reference collections. We now know that few things need to be in the library at all times.

Changing our definitions of "reference" and recognizing that allowing something to be used to death is a better fate than having to withdraw and destroy a pristine book because its contents are now totally out of date. Many reference works are issued in revised editions, and previous editions can usually be removed. At least one unabridged English language dictionary should be kept as a reflection of past usage but our language is changing daily and a new dictionary every few years is essential.

**Audiovisual Materials:** Non-print media should be weeded on a regular schedule just like print materials, although it can be harder to judge content and quality without spending a great deal of time watching or listening to each item. Other issues to consider when evaluating non-print materials include format and condition.

**Local History Materials:** This is one area where you will probably want to weed lightly, with an eye for new editions or updated information. Keep as much as you can, depending on the scope and size of your library. Local history, materials by local authors or with local settings, memoirs, directories and oral histories should generally not be weeded.

**Vertical Files:** It is especially important for vertical file materials to be current; be sure to date all items as they are added to the file and weed thoroughly at least once a year.

**Magazines and Newspapers:** With the availability of periodical databases that contain the fulltext of thousands of articles, libraries are no longer maintaining backfiles of most magazines. Many paper periodical subscriptions are for current browsing purposes and only the current year or current 12 months need be kept. If the holding period is current 12 months then as each new issue is added, the oldest issue is withdrawn. This has the added advantage of keeping the backfiles the same size at all times.

## **Now What?**

Once you have completed weeding a section, you will have to decide what to do with the items you are withdrawing.

### **Keep, but Mend First**

Mending an item may be a good choice if it would be difficult or expensive to replace or if it has some unique value to the collection. However, repairing a book requires an investment of time and money. Some questions to ask yourself before you mend or rebind include: Would it be more cost-effective to buy a new copy? Keep in mind that you can even buy a used copy off the Web that will be in much better shape than the copy in your hand. Do I really need to keep this item? How much time and money will it cost to repair it? Do I have the resources and skills to repair it? Resources include money, time and materials.

### **Replace with New Copy**

Before going to the expense and hassle of trying to locate a replacement for an item that may be out of print or not truly useful in your library, decide if it is really worth it.

### **Don't Keep**

If you decide to discard an item, you must go through what is typically called “out processing” for each item. In general, this includes stamping each item with a “withdrawn” or “surplus” stamp that is usually placed over the library’s ownership stamp and dealing with any catalog (card file or electronic) records that apply to the item.

Use a wide permanent black marker to line through the barcode and the spine label and rip out any cards and pockets in the book. You then have to decide how to dispose of these weeded items. Your weeding policy must address the disposal issue clearly and confidently. There are really only three options: destroy it, give it to someone else, or sell it.

***Sell It:*** This is the best option for useable items. Clearly mark all discards.

***Give It Away:*** This option has the advantage of allowing the community to “recycle” materials. Use common sense and tact when choosing this method. If it’s too badly damaged for your library, will someone else appreciate receiving it? If the information is outdated and even dangerous, be sure to destroy the item rather than giving it away

***Destroy It:*** This option should be reserved for items that are unsalvageable and cannot be sold or given away. If you must choose this method, be discreet. Even though you have established a weeding policy, carefully evaluated the item’s status and made a considered judgment, it still looks bad for customers to discover “perfectly good” books in the dumpster behind the building. Be prepared to calmly explain your reasoning (and be able to back it up with policy and examples) if this should happen.

### **Updating the Catalog**

Don’t forget this essential step! It would be very frustrating for a customer to find the “perfect” item in the catalog and then discover that you no longer have it.

### **Further Information**

Larson, J. (2008). ***CREW : a weeding manual for modern libraries*** (Revised and updated.). Austin, TX: Texas State Library and Archives.

Slote, S. (1997). Weeding library collections: Library weeding methods (4th ed.). Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.