What to Weed: General Guidelines

More detail will be offered about weeding specific areas of the collection, types of materials, and Dewey areas later in this manual, but some general guidelines pertain to the entire collection. Some criteria are objective, but most include some degree of subjectivity that will require the professional knowledge of the librarian in making the final decision about a particular item. Keep in mind that these criteria can be used as a ‘rule of thumb,’ but for some criteria, recent use may be an important factor in deciding to retain an item that you might otherwise remove from the collection. If the item is outdated or contains erroneous information, weed the item and replace it with a newer title on the same subject.

For all items, consider the following problem categories and related issues:

Poor Content:

- **Outdated and obsolete information** (especially on subjects that change quickly or require absolute currency, such as computers, law, science, space, health and medicine, technology, travel)
- **Trivial subject matter**, including topics that are no longer of interest or that were dealt with superficially due to their popularity at a specific point in time, as well as titles related to outdated popular culture
- **Mediocre writing style**, especially material that was written quickly to meet popular interest that has passed
- **Inaccurate or false information**, including outdated information and sources that have been superseded by new titles or editions
- **Unused sets of books** (although you may keep specific volumes if they meet local needs and are used)
- **Repetitious series**, especially series that are no longer popular or that were published to meet a popular demand that no longer exists
- **Superseded editions** (in general, it is unnecessary to keep more than one previous edition, discarding as new editions are added)
- **Resources that are not on standard lists** or that were never reviewed in standard review sources
- **Material that contains biased, racist, or sexist terminology or views**
- **Unneeded duplicates**, especially if they are worn or tattered
- **Self-published or small press materials that are not circulating**, especially if they were added as gifts

Materials/Books of Poor Appearance:

- **Worn out, ragged items**
- **Poorly bound or poorly printed editions**
- **Rebound editions that are worn** and shabby or have torn pages
• **Items that are dirty**, shabby, warped, bug infested, or otherwise marked up, mutilated, or ‘edited’ by patrons

• **Books with very small print or poor quality pictures**

• **Scratched CDs or DVDs**, brittle film or magnetic tape (in the case of video and audiocassettes)

• **Media that is beaten up** from wear or has broken or missing parts

• **Books with yellowed, brittle, torn, taped, or missing pages**

• **Books with dust jackets or cover art that is dated**, especially on children’s and young adult books

**Unused Materials:**

• **Items that have not circulated within the past 3-5 years** and not actually used for reference or in-house research

• **Duplicate copies** that are no longer needed, regardless of condition

• **Periodicals that are not indexed**

• **Periodicals that are available** in full-text databases

• **Unused volumes** in sets or series

• **Unneeded titles** in subject areas that are less frequently used

• **Materials on the ‘hot topics’ that were popular more than five years ago**

• **More books than are needed** on any single subject

• **Formats that are no longer popular** in your community, especially if the technology needed to use the format is no longer owned by people in the community

• **Material that is no longer important** to the collection because of changes in local demographics, school curricula, or other factors

**Checklist of Weeding Factors**

For all materials, consider:

• **Date**—when was the item published? When was it added to the collection?

• **Author**—is the author still read or likely to be read in the future? Is the book a lesser work?

• **Publisher**—was the book self-published or published by an ‘instant’ press that may not have taken care in editing and printing?

• **Physical condition**—are there any factors that make the item unattractive?

• **Additional copies**—are more copies available that may be in better condition?

• **Other books on the same subject in the collection**—if this book is discarded, what else is available?
• **Expense of replacement**—can the item be replaced? Was this an expensive item that might benefit from rebinding or refurbishing rather than replacement?
• **Shelf-time**—how long has the item sat on the shelf without circulating?
• **Relevance of the subject to the community**—is the material of interest to anyone in the community?

**For juvenile and young adult materials, also consider:**

• **Format**—paperbacks are preferred by many young adults; board books get a lot of wear in tiny hands.
• **Reading level**—is the level too high or too easy for young patrons who would be interested in the item?
• **Current interest in the subject matter**—are young people interested in the subject? Is the treatment of the subject engaging?
• **Visual appeal**—are the illustrations in color? Are photographs clear? Is the layout of the book open (white space) and inviting?
• **Jacket art (contemporary vs. outmoded)**—does the book look like something your great-grandmother read?
• **Use in school curricula**—are books available for the grade level where the subject is studied? Are teachers assigning specific titles?

**For periodicals, consider:**

• **Current use**—few periodicals are used five years after the publication date
• **Interest in circulating older issues**—does the library permit older issues to be borrowed? Does the community want to borrow older issues?
• **Indexing available**—is the periodical included in standard indexes?
• **Full-text availability in online databases**—will patrons find the articles needed for research in the library’s online databases?
• **Space available**—does the library have space to store older issues that are not used on a regular basis?

Retain local history except when the item is shabby and beyond repair. Retain writings by local authors during their lifetime and materials with local settings unless they have not circulated within the previous five years (or if a major milestone celebration is coming up that would allow for these items to be put in the spotlight).

Sets and series often have one or two volumes of special merit or that are regularly used even when other volumes are not. Retain these volumes even though the rest of the set is discarded. Some older reference volumes, such as quotation books, should be kept unless they are in poor condition, because later editions augment rather than supersede prior editions.

It is a good idea to include in the selection policy a list of items that should not be weeded without careful consideration and deliberation (e.g., genealogy, local authors,
Caldcott and Newbery Book Award prize winners, etc.). Except in very special situations, usually related more to public relations than to collection development, there are very few books or other items that should be retained if not used by library patrons.

If you can’t bear to let go of a beautiful book that is in good condition, consider whether it is classified properly. Browsers might be missing an item because it is in the wrong Dewey area. Perhaps the subject headings are not correct so it is not being found during catalog searches. It is perfectly acceptable to recatalog a book to make it more accessible to patrons.

Remember that guidelines are not intended to act as a substitute for professional judgment calls and common sense. For example, a sixty-year-old National Book Award Prize winner that has not circulated in more than ten years is simply taking up valuable space and should be discarded even though the library policy may encourage the retention of books that have won awards. (It will be available through ILL if someone wants it, or it will be released in a new paperback edition if Oprah or some other book club discovers it or it is made into a movie.)