

Restricted Access to Library Materials: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

Libraries are a traditional forum for the open exchange of information. Restricting access to library materials violates the basic tenets of the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Some libraries block access to certain materials by placing physical or virtual barriers between the user and those materials. For example, materials are sometimes placed in a “locked case,” “adults only,” “restricted shelf,” or “high-demand” collection. Access to certain materials is sometimes restricted to protect them from theft or mutilation, or because of statutory authority or institutional mandate.

In some libraries, access is restricted based on computerized reading management programs that assign reading levels to books and/or users and limit choice to those materials on the program’s reading list. Materials that are not on the reading management list have been removed from the collection in some school libraries. Organizing collections by reading management program level, ability, grade, or age level is another example of restricted access. Even though the chronological age or grade level of users is not representative of their information needs or total reading abilities, users may feel inhibited from selecting resources located in areas that do not correspond to their assigned characteristics.

Physical and virtual restrictions on access to library materials may generate psychological, service, or language skills barriers to access as well. Because restricted materials often deal with controversial, unusual, or sensitive subjects, having to ask a librarian or circulation clerk for access to them may be embarrassing or inhibiting for patrons desiring the materials. Even when a title is listed in the catalog with a reference to its restricted status, a barrier is placed between the patron and the publication. (See also “[Labels and Rating Systems](#).”) Because restricted materials often feature information that some people consider objectionable, potential library users may be predisposed to think of the materials as objectionable and, therefore, be reluctant to ask for access to them.

Although federal and state statutes require libraries that accept specific types of state and/or federal funding to install filters that limit access to Internet resources for minors and adults, filtering software applied to Internet stations in some libraries may prevent users from finding targeted categories of information, much of which is constitutionally protected. The use of Internet filters must be addressed through library policies and procedures to ensure that users receive information and that filters do not prevent users from exercising their First Amendment rights. Users have the right to unfiltered access to constitutionally protected information. (See also “[Access to Electronic Information, Services, and Resources](#).”)

Library policies that restrict access to materials for any reason must be carefully formulated and administered to ensure they do not violate established principles of

intellectual freedom. This caution is reflected in ALA policies, such as "[Evaluating Library Collections](#)," "[Free Access to Libraries for Minors](#)," "Preservation Policy," and the ACRL "Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians."

Donated materials require special consideration. In keeping with the "Joint Statement on Access" of the American Library Association and Society of American Archivists, libraries should avoid accepting donor agreements or entering into contracts that impose permanent restrictions on special collections. As stated in the "Joint Statement on Access," it is the responsibility of a library with such collections "to make available original research materials in its possession on equal terms of access."

A primary goal of the library profession is to facilitate access to all points of view on current and historical issues. All proposals for restricted access should be carefully scrutinized to ensure that the purpose is not to suppress a viewpoint or to place a barrier between users and content. Libraries must maintain policies and procedures that serve the diverse needs of their users and protect the First Amendment right to receive information.

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