



# Weeding 101<sup>2nd ed</sup>

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**Introduction:** The most important thing to know about weeding is that it is OK to weed.

Weeding (de-accessioning, unacquiring, deselecting, removing, discarding, trashing) library materials is not a crime against humanity. Sometimes it needs to be done in the dark of night but the doing is necessary to the health of every library collection except perhaps those that strive to be universally comprehensive and who are served by unlimited space and budgets.

Weeding does not necessarily mean absolutely and permanently depriving a library's users of the weeded materials. Interlibrary loan, neighboring libraries, and electronic resources all may fill any gap that appears. Instead of harm, weeding can assist users by making room for newer more useful materials and by hopefully making the remaining collection less muddled and more useable.

**Collection Development Policy:** Weeding actually starts with a collection development policy.

It is critical to define in a collection development policy what a library's collection should hold. The collection development policy assists in selecting items for purchase that fit a library's needs. It also helps in determining what items already in a collection do not fit a library's mission and that therefore should be removed.

Collection development policies should take into account the practical abilities as well as the goals of different libraries. The size of both a library's budget and facility will determine how

many items can be acquired and housed. A library's primary clientele will determine the types of materials to choose. A library's past circulation patterns will help to fine-tune the policy, but staff should be alert to new trends. Library staffs need to continuously scrutinize and update their collection development policies to adapt to user, institutional, and outside changes. It should follow as a matter of course then that changes in a library's collection development policy should be reflected in that library's weeding practices.

**What to Weed:** Anything and everything a library collects needs to be covered by a weeding policy just as all collections need to be encompassed by a library's collection development policy. Books, audiovisual items, and periodicals all have a place in weeding consideration. Not to be overlooked are newer types of materials such as hardware, software, and Internet resources. Books become dated and worn. Periodical runs become obsolete and physically deteriorate. Audiovisual materials and software also age, break, and become superseded by new technologies. Hardware such as computers, projectors, and sound equipment break and may no longer possess operable software. Internet website links may disappear. Websites may change content or institute restrictions on accessibility.

**Why Weed:** A primary reason to weed is often to create space. Space shortages can creep up on library managers, who are usually busy with day-to-day tasks. The cry of "there is no more room on the shelf to shelve these things" is often the spur to get busy and weed. Unfortunately, rushed weeding to free up space is prone to error. Library staff may come to regret a rushed weeding of still functional materials.

Weeding needs to be a regular part of almost every library's operation. A regular schedule needs to exist in libraries to check for materials that should be withdrawn. The primary focus does not have to be removing materials. Rather, the emphasis should be on evaluating the collection to determine what is needed as well as what needs to be withdrawn. Besides creating shelf space, weeding is critically important in keeping a library's collection current and in good condition.

**Why Not Weed:** There are lots of good reasons to procrastinate about this important library function. Excuses can include no time, no expertise, library materials are sacred relics, there could be a mistake, and someone may want to look at a withdrawn item someday. Answers to these excuses include:

As far as no time, if there is time to operate a library then there is time to evaluate a collection. Weeding is a library function and needs to be fit into a library's normal work routine. Just an hour here or there in problem areas can do wonders.

As to lacking expertise, we just have to do the best we can. By using objective and subjective standards, materials can be carefully weeded and the overall library collection improved.

Yes, library materials are sacred since they contain knowledge and pleasure for our users.

They are also a library's raw material and must be thought of that way when we weed.

Clothing stores always try to stock desirable merchandise for sale, but they often find that some pieces of apparel don't sell. Stores then take action to eliminate such items. Clearance clothing items all started their lives as top quality merchandise. Libraries like retail stores must cut their losses eventually. For library materials, some items lose their popularity quickly.

Others remain classics. Libraries need to keep their shelves stocked with desirable merchandise

just like stores and dispose of what is no longer useful to their clientele. Otherwise libraries risk becoming unused warehouses. Of course, a library whose mission is to be comprehensive may very well resemble a warehouse but hopefully a user-friendly one.

Mistakes will be made in weeding just like in every other library and human endeavor. Avoiding any errors by doing nothing is in itself an error.

Inevitably, someone will request something after it has been weeded. Fortunately, there are backup systems for such problems such as interlibrary loan, other libraries, and online resources. It is unlikely that a weeded item would be irretrievably lost to a library's users.

**Who Weeds:** Because many factors go into deciding items for withdrawal, weeding should be done by staff with broad knowledge of a library's collection. It is especially important for the weeding staff to understand the library's collection development policy. In addition, an understanding of a library's past procedures will help to sort through the data necessary to make wise weeding decisions. Those charged with adding materials to a collection would be the most knowledgeable about subtracting materials. The one caveat to this is that it may be hard for some selectors to withdraw something they themselves chose. It would seem like admitting a mistake.

Non-library staff can be employed in assisting with the weeding process. Such helpers could be recruited due to subject expertise or just to have extra hands. Some caution needs to be used with non-library helpers to make sure they understand the library's criteria for weeding. In any case, the regular library staff needs to make final withdrawal decisions. Ultimately, decisions are always the responsibility of a library's permanent staff. A further complication to having

non-library staff weed is possible conflict over decisions. It is important that everyone involved in weeding understands and accepts the weeding process.

**Commitment:** If a library has not been doing weeding for a long time, it is important to establish with the staff and overseeing authorities why a weeding program is necessary and what it is attempting to achieve. Putting the process in writing and having everyone read and agree to it will help keep later disagreements from mushrooming into open conflict.

**Weeding Criteria:** The heart of weeding is to determine what constitutes a candidate for withdrawal. The exact procedures can vary from library to library depending on the way records are kept or the types of materials held. The following sections are presented independently but truly need to be tied together to make correct weeding judgments.

**Usage Records/Date Due Slips:** Good collection management requires good usage statistics. Having good usage records of any kind will greatly aid in weeding. Having date slips of some sort in books that show the year of last use is very helpful when making initial judgments in the stacks. Having the year included is critical to this process. Knowing that an item was last due Aug. 22 is not helpful if you don't know what year.

Besides date due slips, libraries with automated circulation systems may want to print lists of items that have not circulated for a particular time period. It would then be possible to selectively examine those items to see if they meet the necessary criteria for withdrawal.

Usage statistics need to be kept for all classes of materials as a gauge of their usefulness. Even website links can have click-usage measured.

**Usage:** If a library wants get the most use out of its collection, then logically it needs to house items that get used. Different libraries may set vastly different standards of usage for triggering a withdrawal. A large academic library may care little how much or how recently materials are used so long as the materials are available to support university programs. Different areas of a collection may also need to be treated differently.

Usage patterns can greatly assist the weeding process if records are intact. Some items will show fairly constant usage with perhaps a gradual drop off. Other items may show extreme usage during their first few years in a library with usage ending abruptly. It may be possible to discern from such patterns how rapidly various types of materials need to be updated or even what subjects may be under or over collected.

Noting how similar items have circulated can be very useful in making difficult weeding decisions. This works best when items on the same topic are maintained near to each other. Then it is a matter of comparing usage of one item to another. When there is a great discrepancy in usage between like items, it indicates that the low use item is not fulfilling the needs of the library's users and therefore is a likely candidate for withdrawal.

The great thing about incorporating usage into the weeding process is that a library's users get a voice in what to withdraw. Through their usage or non-usage of items, users are telling a library's staff what they want retained and what they do not. Of course, library staff must be the final arbiters in weeding and take many factors into account.

**Timeliness:** Some materials become out of date fairly quickly. It is important to keep materials current with changing times. A biography of George Washington will have a long shelf life

while a book on personal computers may only hold its timeliness for a few years. Weeding both identifies dated materials for withdrawal and calls attention to areas that need new resources.

**Relevance/Local Appeal:** Usage will help determine this, but careful scrutiny of gifts and purchases can alleviate later weeding. Every library has different needs due to its unique circumstances and clientele. Libraries in Hawaii need fewer books on skiing and maintaining snow blowers than do libraries in Vermont. Similarly, changes within a library or its parent institution may change its needs. The dropping or adding of programs in academic institutions should focus a library staff's attention on both the acquisition and weeding of the affected areas.

**Memorials/Gifts:** Memorials are especially sensitive items for weeding, but even they can become worn past the point of repair. A procedure needs to be in place to properly handle such discards. Certainly, putting memorial books in the garbage or the annual book sale with memorial plates intact will not win a library many plaudits. To ease the problem of weeding memorials, they need to be carefully chosen so that they may have many years of shelf life.

Gifts too can cause problems. Being able to identify who gave a gift to a library would be useful. Knowing when gift items were added could also explain usage patterns.

**Record Information to Aid Weeding:** Recordkeeping will vary from library to library. Various types of record information can aid in making weeding decisions. The ownership of various editions and copies of a work in various collections of a library is important to know when

weeding. So is the original source and acquisition date of materials. Donations from important persons might be handled differently as might items that look old but that were recently added. Any records that might show why something was added (to support a long gone program or the like) would be welcome. Once weeding becomes a normal library process, recordkeeping in support will improve.

**Editions:** A fast approach to keeping a collection timely is to remove older editions of works when newer ones are added. In weeding, it is possible to come across two or more editions of the same work. Unless there is reason to keep older editions in a library, they should be withdrawn in an effort to keep a collection up to date. It is logical to assume when evaluating an older edition of a work that if it were still current, the author and publisher would not have gone to the trouble of producing a newer edition. This principle can be applied even if a library does not own a newer edition of a work being evaluated. Just knowing that a more recent edition of an item being considered for withdrawal has been published, makes it more likely that the older edition has been made obsolete and can be discarded. Sometimes publishers produce new editions for the sole purpose of making new sales. Such stratagems need to be weighed in making weeding decisions based on editions.

The principle of replacing older editions can be extended to unrelated works too. An order for a recent history of Russia could be marked to replace a dated history of the Soviet Union. While the new book may not actually be a later edition of the older one, its updated information serves the same purpose. An approach like this will help to keep a collection current and will save weeding later.



**Age:** The publication date of materials can be a useful beginning point in weeding. A library could look at all books published before a certain date or break the collection down by subject. Health science books ten years old could be candidates for weeding while only twenty-five year old history books would be evaluated. Age should be combined with other factors such as currency and usage to make a complete weeding decision.

**Format:** Good materials may not be usable any longer because of their physical format.

Libraries that own filmstrips, microcards, eight-track tapes, 5 ¼ inch computer discs, and the like without the necessary reading/viewing/listening devices need to weed. Other formats that may be replaced in the future include current library staples such as videotapes and audiocassettes. Libraries need to evaluate such materials on both the basis of content and technological usability.

**Size:** Some items will by their physical size become potential targets for weeding. Long runs of periodicals now available online are likely candidates as are obsolete reference sets. If a library has a critical space problem, looking closely at very large physical items for weeding may make sense so long as they can be justified under other criteria or be replaced with space-saving substitutes. Some smaller libraries purchased the voluminous *National Union Catalog* only to find it made obsolete by online sources. Such libraries would find space relief through weeding.

**Condition:** It is relatively easy to withdraw items in terrible condition. The ones falling apart are easy to spot. Printed items heavily laden with highlighting, underlining, or choice four letter

words need to be searched out as do unreadable computer disks and the like. Before discarding, each item should be evaluated as to the value of its potential repair, replacement, and loss.

There will be instances where the popularity and value of an item to a collection overshadows its condition such as works of local or historical significance. In such cases weeding from a general collection and placement in an archival or storage collection may be the logical outcome.

**Duplicate Copies:** A less intense decision in weeding is whether or not to eliminate duplicate copies. This is still not an automatic decision. One must consider the original reason for holding duplicate copies of specific works before proceeding. Perhaps a library has multiple copies of a previously best selling novel or a previously taught popular textbook. By the time such works are looked at for weeding, demand probably has fallen off considerably. Most of such copies are also probably showing considerable wear and tear. Now the question is how many copies to keep? If a work still shows some usage, it may be safest to keep two or more copies to insure availability in case one or more copies become lost or deteriorate past the point of repair. Otherwise, extra copies can be withdrawn to save space without eliminating such an item completely from a collection.

A slightly different approach is to see if duplicates may be readily available outside the collection being weeded. Copies could be in another collection of the same library or in a neighboring library. The final decision comes down to determining if user access to an item can be assured after withdrawal. Otherwise, the decision should not be based upon duplication alone.

**Content/Balance/Feedback:** Careful acquisition decisions will help make sure materials are balanced and reasonable for a library's clientele. Sometimes, though, items may be found in a collection whose content brings them into question. Works on controversial subjects may be found to have strong biases. Some items may have explicit sexual content. Library staffs need to resist attempts at censorship, but they also need to maintain a collection for their local clientele. When complaints are made about an item's content or balance, a library's staff needs to consider whether the offending item needs to be removed.

**Weeding Checklists:** It is useful after selecting an item for further weeding consideration to have a list to check it against for possible retention. Staff members do not often have the necessary knowledge in all subjects to decide what is a classic. Having one or several accepted lists provides a useful last check in the weeding process. Using a checklist is a quick way to establish the possible importance for retention of a candidate for weeding. The various editions of *Books for College Libraries* have been and will continue to be important for determining the value of books for college libraries. Other sources need to be employed depending upon the library and type of collection. *The Strange Death of Liberal England* by G.H. Hardy, c.1935 may not be familiar to all librarians, but sure enough it is No. 82 on the Modern Library Top 100 Best Nonfiction book list.

**Disposing of Withdrawn Materials:** Once physical items such as books, journal runs, or audiovisual items are withdrawn, something has to be done with them now that their physical presence is no longer welcome. It is important that withdrawn items be evaluated for disposal so that their relevant value, if any, can be ascertained. Possible historical or regional value may

lead a library to attempt placement of some withdrawn items with another more appropriate institution. Items deemed worthless due to condition or age probably need to be put either in the garbage or recycling. Items that one library no longer needs may be useful to another. Often a group of libraries will trade lists of withdrawn items and exchange materials. Another option is to produce revenue out of withdrawn items by holding a sale or by finding other methods such as the Internet through which to sell them.

There are drawbacks to all these methods of disposal. Depending upon a library's garbage/recycling contract, a great influx of discarded materials could become cost prohibitive. Exchanging items with other libraries can prove time-consuming with the need to produce and check lists. Having sales is also time-consuming and can also result in bad publicity if library users disagree with what they find withdrawn from a library. Selling over the Internet can be more anonymous and could reap higher prices, but staff may find they are spending too much time running an online bookstore.

**Deprocessing:** Withdrawn books, journals, and other physical items need to be marked in some way to indicate they are no longer library property. The disposal of security strips, date slips, pockets, and property markings needs to be determined. Ephemeral materials such as website links must be severed comprehensively.

**Updating Records:** Make sure that follow-up is done in updating library catalogs and websites to reflect weeding. This is especially critical where different departments and staffs are focused on weeding and recording keeping. It is a central tenet of librarianship that library catalogs must reflect holdings. It is no less critical that catalogs should not contain withdrawn items.

**Records of Weeding:** Keeping a list or file of withdrawn items can assist in knowing what happened to a work that is requested or turns up later. As staff changes, having a history of weeding decisions will help to focus future weeding practices.

**Summary:** Proper weeding involves taking many factors into account in making final decisions. Weeding factors should be employed flexibly to deal with different collections and different areas within collections. Weeding needs to be an integral part of any collection development process. Items that a library would never consider adding to its collection are likewise items that it should withdraw.

Superior collection management is a continuous process that runs from budgeting and selecting through weeding and withdrawing.

**Bibliography:** There are many useful books and articles that discuss various aspects of weeding.

A couple of titles to considering looking at are:

*Evaluating and Weeding Collections in Small and Medium-Sized Public Libraries: the CREW Method.* Segal, Joseph P. American Library Assn, 1980.

*Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods.* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Slote, Stanley J. Libraries Unlimited, 1997.

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