

5. Choosing Stock for the Library

What stock does the library need?

A library needs a variety of books that will be useful for readers. This should include:

- Reference books that provide quick answers (e.g. an encyclopaedia, a dictionary, a thesaurus, and an atlas).
- Information (non-fiction) books that readers can borrow.
- Fiction books that readers can borrow, in English and the local language.
- Some textbooks (for school libraries). You should aim for multiple copies so that students share with as few other students as possible.

If your library has been open for some time, it may already have a variety of books and other stock. You need to look at every item of stock and decide if it is suitable for the library. Books that are not suitable should be removed.

What makes an information book suitable for the library?

To answer this question, you will need to look carefully at the books and other library materials the library owns. As a rule, reference and information books should:

- Give knowledge (both general knowledge and specific information from set textbooks)
- Provide explanations (e.g. how coal is made)
- Satisfy readers' curiosity and interest in life
- Offer art, craft, music, dance, and cultural information

Use the seven questions below to find out if your reference and information books are useful for the library. It is important to involve your library committee when assessing or selecting books. In a school library, ask

teachers' advice about books in the subjects they teach. Score one point for a 'yes' answer to each question.

- Is the book accurate? This can be hard to judge, so ask others what they think.
- Is the author giving two sides to the story? Does it have balance?
- Is the book up to date? This is important because information changes quickly, especially in medicine and science. Old atlases may have maps of countries in them that do not exist now! Look up the name of a country that you know has changed and check if the book is correct.
- Will readers find the book easy to read? Is it of an appropriate reading level? At primary schools, books should be as attractive as possible. Young children find too many words on a page dull, but colour pictures will interest them. At secondary schools and community libraries, the best information books use a print that is easy to read. They are written in easily understood English, using simple words and short sentences. The text is made clearer by pictures, photos, diagrams, cartoons, and maps. Older books often have no colour pictures and this can make them seem boring.
- Are there a contents page and an index?
- Is the book in good condition? If it is old or the pages are torn, ask yourself if it can be mended. If you cannot repair the book, it is not suitable for the library.
- (For school libraries) Is a book on this subject needed by students and teachers at the school?

Useful books will score full marks (i.e. six or seven points). Books with a very low score should be removed from the library.

What makes a fiction book suitable for the library?

A fiction book is suitable if it is enjoyable to read, written at a level that readers can understand, and does not include

material that is sexist, racist, or otherwise vetoed by the library committee.

Fiction books may sometimes be used for study, but they should also be read for fun during leisure time. You should aim to have a wide variety of fiction books with vocabulary that suits all skill levels. Practice will help you recognise a good fiction book, but this is easier to do if you read the books yourself.



Figure 5.1. Librarians sort through books (Swaziland).

Why remove some books from the library?

Your aim should be to have a collection of well-used, informative, and enjoyable books in the library. It is better to have a small stock of interesting books than a large collection that nobody reads. To achieve this, you must sort through your existing stock carefully and remove books that are of no value to your library. 'If you receive many

copies of a book that is not used frequently, put one or two on the shelves and keep the rest in the back room so they remain in good condition,' recommends Francis Kachala, Co-Founder of the Wungwero Book Foundation in Malawi.

How do you decide which books to remove?

Experienced librarians have found the following to be true:

- Older books may contain out-of-date information.
- Books that are sexist and/or racist are not appropriate for libraries.
- Books using old-fashioned words may be hard for readers to understand.
- Books that look boring or are falling apart will not be read.
- Unused books attract insects.

Look at all gift books extra carefully. Donated books may not be what you want or what the readers need.

It is also important to be careful about the subject matter. If you have any doubts, check with your headteacher or your library committee. Remember that although there may be taboo subjects, people will be curious about all sorts of things.

Deciding which books should be removed can be difficult. You may find it helpful to make these decisions with the library committee. Together, you will need to decide which books are to be thrown out, which sold, and which given away. You could also try contacting the librarian at the nearest local library for advice. Other experienced librarians also may have faced similar decisions and be able to give a great deal of support if there are strong feelings about, for example, allowing a teenager to read a sex education book or removing particular items of old stock.

Books or magazines that include controversial topics should be kept away from open circulation. Reading of such should be based on the librarian's judgment of the student.

*- Francis Kachala, Co-Founder,
Wungwero Book Foundation, Malawi*

If the library committee decides some books are not suitable for the library, they could be sold to raise funds to buy books that are needed. You could also give away old magazines. This is especially useful if you have a large collection of old magazines and no plans to bind them into sets.

LIBRARY TIP

If your library already has an accession register, it is important to cross off each item in the accession register, shelf list, and title catalogue as you remove it from the library. If you forget to do this, it will create a problem during stocktaking, and you may think books have been stolen.

What else is useful for a library?

Most libraries have more books than any other type of stock. However, newspapers, maps, flip charts, pamphlets, posters, audio-visual equipment, books in the home languages of the community, books written by local writers, postcards of well-known national and international scenes, photocopies of interesting articles, and journals are all useful for a library.

When you are choosing stock for your library, remember to consider all these different types of stock, but only add to your library items that you know will be useful.

A good idea for building up a section about local life is to encourage students to make their own books. Add the best ones to the library's stock.



Figure 5.2. Local-language books are shelved in a separate section (Swaziland).

Encourage readers to make suggestions about books they would like in the library. Even if you are sure you have ideas about what people should be reading, it is more interesting for people to read a book they have chosen themselves than to be given a book and told to read it.