

Crying Over Spilled Milk

Weeding is defined as the ongoing process of removing resources from the collection. What is also ongoing, unfortunately, is the recurring outcry from the public over weeded resources. Visions of headlines such as “Librarian Trashes Precious Books” and scores of parent protestors guarding school dumpsters can turn even the most determined library media specialist into an equally determined weeding procrastinator.

That strategy turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the unpurged materials get older, mustier, and more in need of weeding. Unable to put the task off any longer, the library media specialist attacks the task in the heat of summer and in the early morning dumpster dusk. Of course, such activity rarely goes unnoticed, and the heat of summer becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the heat of unwanted and distracting phone calls, headlines, and outrage from overburdened taxpayers.

Gathering support from the library media center advisory committee, prominent PTA and other parents, and administrators is a good idea, and should be done on an ongoing basis. It is certainly easier, though, to discuss with committees and administrators the few books that are being weeded rather than the many thousand. This article contains a few strategies to streamline that process, as well as to give the timid weeder a few good reasons to begin.

Weeding Basics

Weeding is a professional responsibility. It is what librarians in all types of libraries do. Abdicating this responsibility degrades the appearance of the collection and creates the opportunity to spread



By Gail Dickinson

dangerous or misleading information. Much of the health and nutrition information from the 1960s and 1970s has been found to be completely false. Scientific facts have changed our perception of the world. Formats have disappeared from use. The library media center collection should not be an interactive museum of equipment, media, and information from past generations.

The act of weeding in itself creates opportunities to learn the collection. Because online catalogs abound, it is comforting to use more of the senses in working with resources. Great finds that could be miscataloged, need better subjects, or different classification numbers as the curriculum has changed through the years wait on every shelf. OPAC searches sometimes reflect cataloging skill rather than content.

How to Weed

Weeding is selection in reverse—literally de-selection. Many

M	Misleading information
U	Ugly
S	Superseded by better works
T	Trivial—may have been more valuable to the collection years ago
Y	Your collection has no use—(irrelevant to curriculum, student, or teacher needs)

Figure 1

C	Continuous
R	Review
E	Evaluation
W	Weeding

Source: Segal (1980).

Figure 2

mnemonic devices exist as guidelines, and the bibliography of this article gives some further reading for weeding how-to's and why-to's. The most common tools are the M*U*S*T*Y and C*R*E*W principles, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

The CREW principles use the MUSTY guides with the added categories of the copyright date and the last checkout date. If the book fits the MUSTY standard, is of a certain age determined by subject category, and has not been checked out in several years, then that book will probably be weeded. Ramona Kerby takes the CREW standards and gives them a school media center slant in her 2002 article.

Weeding fiction is always more difficult. The guidelines shown in Figure 3 come from Merle Jacob's article subtitled “Should I Dump Peyton Place.” The answer to each question is probably, “yes.”

Weeding Logistics

Because weeding is frequently far down on the to-do lists of student-centered library media specialists, there can be a buildup in important areas of the collection. This creates, as mentioned earlier, the chance that weeding could be a political process rather than a backroom program administrative task. One strategy is to turn weeding into an instructional event, with students evaluating the material as part of an information skills lesson (Davis, 2001) if that is seen to possibly relieve the political pressure rather than exacerbate it. However, it may be easiest simply to make weeding a continuous part of the administrative routine of the library.

Weeding is best done:

■ **Continuously throughout the year.** This makes the weeding process a weekly task, not a summer project that may or may not get accomplished. Weeding continuously also takes less time. You can spare 15 minutes each week to weed. You may not have a free day or a free week.

WEEDING FICTION

Duplicates	Was it once a class set used by teachers long retired? Once a bestseller? Do you need the extra copies?
Poor condition	At one time, books were rebound in monocolour, with austere lettering. Those books may not appeal to today's readers. Neither will books that are falling apart or look in poor condition
Obscure	Some authors seemed up and coming at the time, but were one-hit wonders who are long gone. Some books may have once been wildly popular, but today's youth may not be able to identify with the characters, plot, or setting.
Genre fiction	May have affected collection development at one time, but the collection should reflect current reading interests, not past
Short stories	Short story collections do not see heavy use usually, so it should be kept small and current.

Figure 3

■ **In small numbers at a time.** Some of us became library media specialists because we love books. It's hard to see them go in the dumpster. Our patrons, whether parents, classroom teachers, or students, also think we love books. To think of us throwing books away is the worst kind of cannibalism. We are eating our young, in some minds, and it opens the door for other unflattering comparisons. Weeding in small portions also lessens the likelihood that we will be targeted as wasting taxpayer money and destroying the hopes and dreams of a future generation.

■ **In targeted small sections of the collection.** It's always nice to see progress. Instead of weeding randomly, keep your enthusiasm strong by noting how good the sports section looks after it has been weeded. Keep track of your progress.

■ **Quietly and without comment.** Weeding Party! Come Help Weed! It's Time to Weed! Although this certainly spreads the responsibility of weeding over a large number of people, it also equates weeding with spring cleaning, harvesting, and other one-time events. Weeding is a continuous event, and a normal professional responsibility. Every so often, put your selection policy

advisory committee. Before-and-after pictures help, as do student comments regarding "new" books that were just recent finds rather than recent purchases. Remember that you are not asking for forgiveness or permission, but rather informing the principal and advisory committee of a routine procedure that is part of

slightly pulling out the books that at first glance look like they might need to be weeded. (Time: 1 minute)

Step 2. Look at each book you have selected, and apply the selection principles of accuracy and authoritativeness. Make the decision of whether or not to actually weed the books. (Time: 4 minutes)

Step 3. Take the books that you have selected to the workstation, and delete them from the catalog database. Mark the books as weeded, remove markings, and complete any other tasks to take them completely out of the collection. Toss the books in the trash can. (Time: 10 minutes)

While it is true that this procedure will not weed every single book that needs to be weeded, it will find the most glaring examples of weeding readiness. Over time, you can get through the entire collection, and then repeat the process. It's quick, it's efficient, and it works!

Trash or Trade?

Although it is general consensus that books and other resources that do not qualify to remain in one library media center collection do

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and weeding procedures on the agenda for the library media center advisory committee. Most likely, you will get through the discussion quickly before the yawns begin. Weeding is just what you do.

■ **With support of the principal and library media center advisory committee.** As noted, you need to review the procedures with the principal and library media center

developing and maintaining an adequate collection.

Three-Step Weeding Process

When does anyone have time to weed every week? Everyone has 15 minutes at some point during the week. Try this one-shelf-per-week procedure.

(Total Time Required: 15 minutes)

Step 1. Stand in front of the shelf,

Milk is outdated, curdled and lumpy Would you?...	Book is outdated, with misinformation So why would you?...
■ Keep it because you don't know when you can get to the store?	■ Keep it because you don't know when you can replace it?
■ Give it to a neighbor to keep in his or her house?	■ Give it to a teacher for classroom use?
■ Keep it because otherwise the refrigerator would be empty?	■ Keep it because if you weeded everything that should be weeded, the shelves would be completely empty?

Git-R-Done

Although there are few occasions when a quote from Larry the Cable Guy will appear in a practice-based library media center journal, in this case, it may be appropriate. It is the professional responsibility of a library media specialist to weed. Weeding, when viewed as a normal part of a library media center routine, does not involve shirt

sleeves, hot summer days, or brown paper bags surreptitiously stored in the trunk of the library media specialist's car. Plan to start your 15-Minutes-to-a-Better-Collection exercise routine today. ■

not qualify enough to be in anyone else's collection either, there are still those who seek to place weeded books anywhere but in the trash. The following analogy might help.

The Milk in the Refrigerator

The milk in the refrigerator is past the sell date, has an odor, and is curdled and lumpy. Would you?

- Keep it, because you don't know when you could get to the store to buy more?
 - Then why would you keep a book on the shelf with misinformation because you don't know when you could replace it?
- Keep it, because otherwise your refrigerator would look empty?
 - Then why would you keep outdated books on the shelf to preserve a false collection size?
- Give it to a neighbor to keep in his or her refrigerator?
 - Then why would you send outdated encyclopedias or other materials to a teacher for classroom use?
- Donate it to a food pantry for hungry children?
 - Then why would you send outdated resources to be used by children in this or other countries?

The facts are simple: either the resources remain in the collection or they don't. When in doubt, keep it for another year. After all, the milk may not be all that spoiled; it may be still usable and have value.

The arguments commonly used to discourage weeding simply will not wash. Keeping resources to meet a books-per-pupil quota will not pass inspection. Just as spoiled milk can no longer be considered milk, spoiled information can no

longer be counted as books. Try this argument with a principal or supervisor, "We will be cited either way. We can either be praised for having a well-developed and well-maintained collection of resources but cited for it being too small, or we can be cited for having an old, outdated collection that does not meet the learning needs of students. Your choice." As to whether or not anyone would notice, just compare a weeded shelf with a non-weeded one. Trust me, they'll know.

Sometimes a library media specialist will claim that a principal has ordered that weeding not be done, or wants to review every book weeded—comply with this request. Explain the reasons that the books should not be on the shelf, constantly point out the increased usage that weeded shelves get, and ask to simply store the books somewhere other than the library shelves. Eventually, the books may even disappear.

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