The
WEEDING
HANDBOOK
A Shelf-by-Shelf Guide

REBECCA VNUK
Booklist collection management editor

An imprint of the American Library Association
CHICAGO | 2015

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REBECCA VNUK has a high profile in the library community as a librarian, consultant, workshop presenter, speaker, writer, and blogger. She is currently best known as Editor, Reference and Collection Management, at Booklist, and as the co-creator of the popular blog Shelf Renewal. Her most recent library position was as Adult Services Director at the Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library. She has been widely recognized for her contributions to the field. In 2008, she was Library Journal’s Fiction Reviewer of the Year, and in 2010 she received the Public Library Association’s Allie Beth Martin Award for excellence in Readers’ Advisory and was named a Library Journal Mover & Shaker. Vnuk is the author of Read On . . . Women’s Fiction (2009) and Women’s Fiction Authors: A Research Guide (2009), and co-author (with Nanette Donohue) of Women’s Fiction: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests (2013). She has spoken at conferences and presented workshops extensively; her panels are among the most popular at ALA Annual and Public Library Association meetings.

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Printed in the United States of America
19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-0-8389-1327-7 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Vnuk, Rebecca.
The weeding handbook : a shelf-by-shelf guide / Rebecca Vnuk. pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Z703.6.V68 2015 025.2’16—dc23
201508707

Book design by Kimberly Thornton in the Eames, Aleo, and Cardea typefaces.
© This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (Permanence of Paper).
CONTENTS

vii Acknowledgments
ix Introduction

CHAPTER 1 The Basics ............................................. 1
CHAPTER 2 Shelf by Shelf: 000, 100, 200. ...................... 21
CHAPTER 3 Shelf by Shelf: 300s. ............................... 25
CHAPTER 4 Shelf by Shelf: 400s and 500s .................... 31
CHAPTER 5 Shelf by Shelf: 600s. ............................... 35
CHAPTER 6 Shelf by Shelf: 700s. ............................... 41
CHAPTER 7 Shelf by Shelf: 800s and Fiction ................. 45
CHAPTER 8 Shelf by Shelf: 900s and Biography ............ 53
CHAPTER 9 Other Areas of the Collection .................... 57
CHAPTER 10 Special Considerations for Youth Collections .... 65
CHAPTER 11 Weeding Gone Wrong ............................ 69
CHAPTER 12 The Importance of a Collection Development Plan .... 77
APPENDIX Annotated Sample Collection Development Plans ........ 81

185 Suggested Reading
187 Index

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Weeding Skit

Written and performed by Ricki Nordmeyer, Jon Kadus, and Rebecca Vnuk, for the 2000 ALA Annual Conference workshop presented by Merle Jacob, “Weeding the Fiction Collection: Or, Should I Dump Peyton Place?”

The three “Weeders” enter the stage with various expressions of agony on their faces and approach a table with several books on it. They have dust masks, latex gloves, a feather duster, and printouts with them.

RICKI. Come on, come on, the sooner we do this the sooner it’ll be over!
JON, looking at his watch. What time is it?
REBECCA. What else do you have to do?
JON. I select these materials. I’m behind on my journals.
RICKI. We have NO ROOM! You can’t purchase more books if there is no space for them.
JON. There’s an idea. Why don’t they just read the old ones?
REBECCA. Ooh. Look at them. These books are so dirty!
JON. Where? Which One? I must have missed that!
REBECCA. Not that kind of “dirty.”
RICKI. That’s why I brought these things. (Distributes masks and gloves; waves around her feather duster.) We’ll clean as we go.
JON. Are these latex? I won’t go into prophylactic shock, will I?

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REBECCA. That’s anaphylactic shock. Little chance of either!

RICKI. OK, OK. Let’s get started. What’s first?

REBECCA. *Take Leave and Go* by Karel Schoeman. This is like new.

RICKI. It’s not in *Fiction Catalog*. When did it last go out?

REBECCA, checking her printout. Uh, it’s never gone out.

JON. I know I wouldn’t have bought it without a great review.

RICKI. It’s never gone out!

REBECCA. What if they make it into a movie? I’ve heard rumors that Spielberg and Gibson want to do this.

RICKI. OK, OK, we’ll keep it.

JON. What about this one? *Two Little Misogynists* by Carl Spitteler. It’s not in very good shape.

REBECCA. It hasn’t gone out since 1987.

RICKI. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1919. We can’t discard that, it’s an award winner! I know, maybe we’ll put it on a display.

JON, under his breath. Of oldy-moldy translations?

REBECCA. OK, we have three copies of Jean Paul Sartre’s *The Age of Reason*. Can we withdraw this copy?

RICKI. He’s definitely in *Fiction Catalog*.

JON. You can never have enough of Sartre!

RICKI. What are the chances of three people in this town wanting this at the same time?

JON. You can never have enough of Sartre!


REBECCA. It’s never gone out.

JON. Wait a minute! Look at this bookplate.

RICKI. Donated by Hester Stoopover. AGGH!!! The Mayor’s wife!
JOHN. You know, I think I pulled this and declared it missing a while back.

REBECCA. She has a stack of them. She just re-donated it.

REBECCA, RICKI and JON, in unison. KEEP.

RICKI: *Mayday* by Thomas Block. This was published in 1979.

REBECCA. I was in kindergarten then.

*(Ricki and Jon roll eyes.)*

JON. What time is it? Are we almost done?

REBECCA. What is it? You got a date or something?

JON. As a matter of fact I do.

REBECCA. That must be the first time SINCE I was in kindergarten.

RICKI. All right, all right, back to business here. We have not made any headway, and I’m getting a lot of pressure to do something about these cramped shelves. I think we can pull *Mayday*. Has it ever gone out?

REBECCA. Eighty-two times. It was just returned last week.

JON. Well, that settles that one.

RICKI. Well, I know we’ll get rid of this one with the puke-brown library binding . . . *The Women at the Pump* by Knut Hamsun. It’s wretched!

JON, sputtering. *(Makes up a Norwegian title.)* #$@#$% by Ham-sun?? Why, my mother read that to me while I sat on her knee. She would roll over in her grave if she knew I had a part in throwing #$@#$% away. Look! It says it’s one of the Foreign Classical Romances right here on the cover.

RICKI. But it’s only volume 1 . . .

JON. Then they could get started!!! You just can’t throw this away. Why . . .

RICKI and REBECCA, in unison. KEEP.

REBECCA. We have twenty-three books by James Fenimore Cooper,
but it looks like the only three that have ever circulated are *The Deerslayer*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Pathfinder*.

RICKI and JON. But it’s Cooper, one of the greatest American authors.

REBECCA. But no one is reading them or cares!

RICKI and JON, in unison. JAMES. FENNIMORE. COOPER.

(The two point to the table as Rebecca sadly returns the book to the pile.)

RICKI. Now for a change of pace: We seem to have 1,045 copies of Danielle Steel’s books. She is coming out with them monthly now.

JON. YUCK! Get rid of them.

RICKI. You know if we just leave two copies of each that would look like we’ve weeded an entire range of books.

REBECCA. But it’s all in the S’s.

JON. Eh, let Circ shift the Steel shelves.

REBECCA. Yeah, Soon it will all be e-books so we won’t need to weed.

ALL. We’re out of here!!!

**Weeding**

The very word *weeding* often strikes terror in a librarian’s heart. And it’s not a new concept: it seems that weeding has been a controversial topic in the field of librarianship for a long time. As Loriene Roy, past President of the American Library Association, and Professor, School of Information, University of Texas at Austin, noted in her entry on weeding in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, there were programs on weeding as far back as the 1893 ALA Annual Conference. William Poole, a founding member of ALA, was very concerned that weeding meant a local library would have “no books which will interest persons with an intellectual range above that of clod-hoppers and market gardeners.” Melvil Dewey bemoaned that “It is bad enough to stand the critics who
complain that a book they wish has not been bought. You can always fall back on lack of funds. But it is a rash librarian who would like to tell one of these gentry that he had recently thrown that very book away.\textsuperscript{71}

It’s a shame that not much has changed in over 100 years. At just about any library conference, you’ll still be able to find a program on weeding. Many librarians have never had formal instruction in weeding—if they were lucky, maybe it was covered in a collection development class (if they took one).

I find no one is ambivalent about weeding—people either love it or loathe it. I fall into the love-it camp. In fact, I once imagined my perfect career would be traveling from library to library across the nation, weeding collections. However, most librarians dread the task. And I’m not heartless; I can see the reasons why. It can be hard to part with books that were carefully selected and paid for with tax dollars. Some librarians feel that it is impossible to imagine that a particular book no longer has any worth. Others have a hard time reconciling their calling as a keeper of information with the need to sometimes discard that information.

All of these worries and doubts are valid, but the bottom line is that libraries (particularly public libraries) are not—and never have been—archives. There simply is not enough space to hang on to every book and every item. And there is no need. A library is an ever-changing organism. Weeding helps a library thrive.

So, what makes me qualified to talk about weeding? In my library career, I’ve held numerous positions in public libraries, from librarian to collection development specialist to department manager, and in every job I’ve been in, there was a weeding project. I fell into weeding as a specialty by chance, but I do think that I have the temperament of a weeder. What do I mean by that? I mean that as much as I love reading and am passionate about books, I don’t see them as some kind of precious physical item. I don’t have an emotional connection to the physical items themselves (even though I have an emotional and intellectual connection to the contents and the authors!).

Like many of my MLIS contemporaries, I didn’t have formal weeding instruction in library school. I’m sure it may have been mentioned at some point in my Public Library Administration course, but there was
not a lot of time spent on weeding in any of my coursework. A class on collection development wasn’t even offered at the time I was on campus. My first encounter with a collection that needed weeding was during an internship at an academic library, where I went to check out a copy of Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. The library had a tattered mass-market paperback copy that looked like it was ready for the shredder. The head librarian was, to her credit, quite embarrassed at the condition of the book, especially when I asked her why we couldn’t spend the five or so dollars it would cost to buy a replacement.

In my first full-time job out of library school, I worked at a medium-sized suburban library that was tight on space—so tight that at that time, collection development was on a one-bought/one-weeded basis. I was given my first weeding project, which was culling the mystery section. It was an easy task, because we had circulation reports showing what hadn’t circulated in the last three years, and I simply used them (and visible condition) as my guideline. Since we spread the project out over several months, and it was obvious to all that we needed space, the project went very smoothly.

My next weeding project was not quite as smooth. In fact, it was a total nightmare. In 2001, the Commissioner of the Chicago Public Library (where I worked as a Collection Development Specialist) deployed a team of librarians to one of the regional branches for a full-scale weeding project. I wasn’t involved in the internal politics so I won’t get into them here, but suffice it to say that for whatever reason, the collection was badly in need of weeding. Tensions ran high on the project—branch librarians were unhappy that they were not consulted, the branch director was in personal conflict with the Commissioner, and the public was not informed that any such project was going to take place. Because the collection was large, and overdue for weeding, there was a vast number of items removed from the shelves in a short period of time. To cut a long story short, a local alderman was alerted that the library was being “decimated” and decided to head over and see for himself, with a reporter from the neighborhood newspaper in tow. The alderman frightened many of my coworkers by storming into an employees-only workspace, while yelling that our jobs were on the line if we didn’t have suitable
answers to his questions. Since I was the most senior person in the room, I had the pleasure of dealing with the very irate (and misinformed) gentleman. The incident eventually made it to the *Chicago Tribune*, where I was an “unidentified library official” who ordered the alderman off the premises.²

I learned many important lessons from that project. Always—*always*—have staff on board. There is no reason to keep experienced members of your staff from participating in a weeding project. It’s also of the utmost importance to keep your community involved in what’s going on at the library. (I’ll talk more about these two topics in chapter 1, and more about avoiding a weeding disaster in chapter 11.) Looking back, I can certainly see why patrons would be fearful of what was going on. There were recycling bags and Dumpsters filled with what to them appeared to be perfectly useful books. If the public had been better informed about what the project entailed, I have a feeling the entire alderman/reporter incident would have never have occurred.

My next position entailed working at a large suburban library that was preparing to move into a new building. The fiction collection, which I was in charge of, needed to be cut by about 10 percent to prepare for the move. In a three-month period, I single-handedly weeded over 9,000 books. This was TIRING, let me tell you. I would go home, hands aching, and dream at night about books, books, and more books. But it was very rewarding work—the fiction section in the new library building looked fresh and wonderful, and was filled with items that people actually wanted to use. The project went quite smoothly, because we kept our patrons informed of the process and explained to them that the bulk of the items being removed were either multiple copies or items that had not circulated in more than seven years. I don’t recall a single patron complaint.

The next major weeding project I was in charge of took place when I worked for a very small suburban public library. The collection was in dire need of a complete overhaul, so we weeded over 45 percent of the entire adult collection. In this instance, I was very lucky that the library’s Board also doubled my book budget for a year so that I could replace all of those items! Again, public perception was key—we kept the public
informed about why were we getting rid of so much of the collection, and also made them aware of what were we doing to beef it back up. In fact, we kept a “Cart of Shame” during this project, which was instrumental in getting the Board to give us more money for replacements. Nothing beats hard evidence when it comes to illustrating why a weeding project is necessary. No one could argue that it was acceptable to have books on yoga (a trendy topic at the time) that had no photographs but instead had line drawings of poses, or that we needed that softcover book on disco dancing (complete with a pull-out 45 RPM record!). My absolute favorite Cart of Shame item was the particularly nasty Jane Austen omnibus edition. There was something gross and possibly growing on the cover, it smelled like cigarettes, and had the classic wavy pages of something that had been read in the bathtub . . . but we still had it on the fiction shelves. Because, you know, it’s really hard to get replacement copies of any Jane Austen titles.

When I took the editing position at Booklist, I was put in charge of the e-newsletter Corner Shelf, which is devoted to collection development and reader’s advisory topics. (You can view issues and subscribe for free at www.booklistonline.com/GeneralInfo.aspx?id=80.) I knew right away that I wanted a recurring feature on weeding. That turned into the popular “Weeding Tips” column, which is the basis for the shelf-specific chapters of this book.

The general weeding guidelines found in the “Weeding Tips” series mainly cover what to get rid of (with a few notes here and there on what can or should remain) from any given library’s shelves. And there’s good reason for that. I can’t tell you exactly what you should keep. In fact, no one can tell you what to keep on your shelves, unless they work with your patrons and your collection. Weeding advice abounds, and much of it relates to a wide range of collections. Reports can guide you in the right direction, but you will actually have to come up with the magic number that works for your library to apply to that data. While it’s easy enough to judge most of the nonfiction collection (tell me you don’t have outdated medical books on your shelves, please), what’s a good length of time to keep a fiction book? Three years with no circulation? Five years? More?
It depends on a variety of issues—how much space do you have? What is your end goal for the weeding project? What condition is the book in? And speaking of condition, who gets to judge? One person’s tattered is another’s “well-loved” (although I always err on the side of making the grossness factor a big consideration!).

This uncertainty is likely the main reason why some people are so uncomfortable with weeding. We all want reassurance that what we’re pulling isn’t something that will be needed later. We want to know we’ve made the right decisions. What helps with those decisions is a solid collection development plan—which is covered in chapter 12. Having a plan in place puts everyone on the same page and can save a lot of time and frustration at all stages of the weeding project. Although it can’t tell you what to keep, it can give you firm guidelines of what should—and shouldn’t—remain on your shelves.

All of that said, I still fret over the thought of leaving people in the lurch about what to keep and what to weed. Feel free to contact me if you’re currently wrestling with something you are unsure about. While I can’t claim to give you the definitive, end-all-be-all answer, I may be able to offer some help, or just reassurance that you’re on the right track.

**How To Use this Book**

The goal of this book is to give the reader a good grounding of how and why to weed library collections. I’ve consciously stayed away from offering numerical formulas, as there are several resources that go in-depth with formulas and statistics. Stanley J. Slote’s *Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods* offers the idea of a variable called “shelf-time period,” defined as the “time a book remains on the shelf between successive uses.” Slote’s manual espouses that this formula is the best way to create “a smaller core collection that would satisfy a given level of predicted future use.” The CREW Manual, which I’ll talk about further in chapter 1, offers a numerical formula based on the copyright date, the date of last checkout, and conditional factors.
If you are looking for a formula, then either the Slote Method or CREW will give you what you are looking for. (Some weeders may wish to consult Tony Greiner and Bob Cooper’s *Analyzing Library Collection Use with Excel®.* My aim is to inspire you to weed, and since these publications already offer fantastic suggestions for using numbers and statistics, I’m not going to reinvent the wheel. I encourage readers to peruse the various statistical methodologies available and determine if one would work for their particular collections. My approach is intended to give library staff the knowledge and confidence needed to effectively weed any collection, of any size.

Because this book is intended for public and school libraries, the “shelf-by-shelf” advice is written by Dewey area, not LC. I have made some callouts in each area for the different considerations of large collections and smaller collections.

**A Note on Academic Libraries**

Weeding in the academic library could be a separate book altogether, but I didn’t want to leave it out of the discussion. While public libraries tend to provide general materials suitable for a variety of users, academic libraries differ in that they need to support the curriculum of the institution. And within the world of academic libraries, a university that supports doctoral candidates requires different materials than a liberal arts college or a community college. More and more often, academic libraries are shifting their budget dollars away from print to electronic resources. So you can see how it would be difficult to talk about academic weeding in general terms.

Many academic libraries seek feedback about the library collection from faculty members, both in terms of what to purchase and what to weed. This gets tricky, because faculty frequently want to keep everything. Or perhaps they were involved in the purchase in the first place, which can make it even more difficult to want to let go of an item. When possible, it is a good idea to give faculty the chance to review items before
they are withdrawn, not only as a goodwill gesture, but because faculty may truly be the experts in the subject.

Weeding can also be difficult because many items in an academic library may not circulate. As noted in chapter 1, there are methods that can be used to track non-circulating material, such as asking patrons to tick a piece of paper attached to the front of the book, or asking them not to re-shelve reference items so that at the end of the day, a shelver can make note of items that have been used and left out.

In many academic libraries (and some larger publics), an effort may be made to keep superseded editions or materials that are acknowledged as outdated in order to provide a historical perspective for that discipline. This may not be an issue with the arts and humanities, but is a terrible practice in most other subject fields. Outdated information on medicine, law, and the hard sciences can mislead patrons. An effort should be made to keep such items separate from current materials on a subject, or marked as such.

NOTES


## INDEX

### A

**A Is for Alibi** (Grafton), 50  
AbeBooks, 50  
Abrams catalog, 85  
academic libraries, xviii–xix  
adult kits (educational materials), 133–134  
adult mass market paperbacks, 19, 50, 169  
*The Age of Murderous Snailblasters* (Salter), x  
*The Age of Reason* (Sartre), x  
agriculture, gardening, pets (630)  
La Grange (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development Plan"), 107–108  
overview, 37  
Amazon Marketplace, 10  
*American Historical Review*, 88  
America’s Test Kitchen series, 38  
*Analyzing Library Collection Use with Excel* (Greiner and Cooper), xviii  
applied science and technology (600s)  
Berkshire Athenaeum ("Weeding Policy and Procedures"), 142  
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 167  
La Grange (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development Plan"), 105–106  
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy"), 86–88  
overview, 35–39  
sample weeding guidelines, 18  
arboriculture (720), 42  
Arizona State Library, 78  
art history (709), 42  
articles and books, suggested reading list, 185–186  
arts and recreation (700s)  
Berkshire Athenaeum ("Weeding Policy and Procedures"), 142  
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 168  
La Grange (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development Plan"), 110–111  
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy"), 84–85  
overview, 41–44  
sample weeding guidelines, 18  
averonomy and space (520), 33  
audiobooks, 58–59, 128–130  
audiovisual collection  
Berkshire Athenaeum ("Weeding Policy and Procedures"), 145  
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library  
("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 170  
Memorial Hall Library ("Collection Development Manual"), 154–155  
sample weeding guidelines, 19  
Austen, Jane, xvi, 14  
Austin (Texas) Public Library, 11  
author name recognition used as criteria to weed fiction, 48–49  
award-winning books, 12  
AwfulLibraryBooks.net, 14

### B

B-logistics, 10  
*Baby and Child Care* (Spock), 38
Baltimore County Public Schools  
(“Selection Criteria for School Library Media Center Collections”)  
assessment and inventory process, 182–183  
inventory procedures, 183–184  
overview, 182  
weeding library media materials, 183  
withdrawing library media materials, 184  

Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”)  
applied sciences and technology (600s), 142  
arts and recreation (700s), 142  
audio visuals, 145  
biographies, 143  
disposal of materials, 146–147  
fiction, adult, 143  
fiction, children’s, 144  
frequency of weeding, 145–146  
general (000s), 141  
history and geography (900s), 143  
linguistics and language (400s), 142  
literature (800s), 142–143  
local document repository, 144–145  
non-fiction, children’s, 144  
overview, 139–141  
periodicals, 144  
philosophy and psychology (100s), 141  
pure sciences (500s), 142  
religion and mythology (200s), 141  
scores, 145  
social sciences (300s), 141–142  
young adult fiction, 144  
young adult non-fiction, 144  

Best American Short Stories, 46  
Better World Books, 11  
The Betty Crocker Cookbook, 38  
bibliography (010), 22  
biographies  
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 143  
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library  
(“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 168  
overview, 54–55  
sample weeding guidelines, 18  
Block, Thomas, xi  
board books and picture books, 66, 68  
Booklist, xvi, 14, 54  
books and articles, suggested reading list, 185–186  
Books in Print, 83, 89  
Boon, Belinda, 6  
botanical sciences (580), 34  
building construction and home repair (690), 39  
business and management (650), 38  

C  
Calvin and Hobbes comics, 43  
Cart of Shame, xvi, 13–14, 71  
CDs and DVDs, 59–60, 61, 130–133  
checkouts of an item before weeding, number of, 15  
Chicago Public Library, xiv, 70  
Children’s collections. See youth and young adult collections  
Chilton Auto Repair database, 37, 87, 106  
circulation records, 5, 48  
classic books, 12, 49  
Collection Development and Management for 21st Century Library Collections: An Introduction (Gregory), 78  
collection development plan. See also  
sample collection development plans; specific library collection development plans  
best practices, 1–2  
creating (or updating), 78–79  
overview, 77–78  
using, 80  
“Collection Development Policies, Procedures, and Plan” (Glen Ellyn Public Library). See Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library  
Columbia University  
overview, 177  
preservation policy, 177–178  
weeding and discard policy, 178  
Comics Buyer’s Guide, 127  
commerce, communications, and transportation (380s)  
La Grange (IL) Public Library, 99  
overview, 29  
complete collections of an author’s work, 13  
computer science, information & general works. See generalities (000s)  
computers (004), 21–22
condition of book used as criteria to weed fiction, 48
Cooper, Bob, xviii
Cooper, James Fenimore, xi–xii
Corner Shelf, xvi
crime, education and commerce (360-389), 99–100
“Criteria for Selecting Book Weeding Candidates” (Milwaukee School of Engineering), 73
“Criteria Used in the Creation of the Potential Withdrawal Lists” (Wesleyan University), 7–8
customs, etiquette, and folklore (390s)
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 100–101
overview, 30

D
Dale, Jim, 59
damaged items, pulling visibly, 5
Darwin, Charles, 32
databases and electronic resources
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 169
overview, 63
sample weeding guidelines, 19
decorative and graphic arts (740-779), 111–112
decorative arts, interior decoration, crafts, antiques (745-749), 43–44
The Deerslayer (Cooper), xii
Dewey, Melvil, xii
digital media collections, 156, 158
Disney guidebooks, 54
display, giving a book one last chance on, 13
disposal of materials, 72, 146–147, 178
drama and poetry (811-812), 46
drawing (740), 43
Dune, 126
Dusty Shelf report, 61
DVDs and CDs, 59–60, 61, 130–133

E
e-books, 62
e-readers, 135–136
earth science, paleontology, biology, botany, zoology (550-599), 103–104
earth sciences (550), 33
eBay, 10
economics (330), 27
economics, finance, law, and military biographies (330-359), 98–99
education (370)
La Grange (IL) Public Library, 99, 100
overview, 29
educational materials (adult kits), 133–134
electronic resources. See databases and electronic resources
ELL (English language learners) materials, 32
Emmanuel d’Alzon Library, Assumption College (“Collection Development and Retention Policy”)
criteria for evaluating books, 180–181
evaluating the reference collection, 181
overview, 179
review process for evaluating books in the collection, 179–180
Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science, xii
encyclopedias (030), 22–23
economics, finance, law, and military biographies (330-359), 98–99
engineering (620s)
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy”), 87
overview, 36–37
ENL (English as a New Language), 164, 167
Entertainment Weekly, 123, 125, 130
ESL (English as a Second Language) materials, 32
ethics and morality (170), 24
etiquette. See customs, etiquette, and folklore (390s)
Europe (940), 55

F
family management. See home and family management (640s)
Farmers’ Almanac, 23
fiction
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 143, 144
classics, 49
favorites, 49
f小吃continued
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 166
La Grange (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Plan"), 122–126
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy"), 89–91
multiple copies, 49–50
overview, 47–51
sample weeding guidelines, 16
series, 13, 50
young adult, 66
youth collection, 66, 68
Fiction Catalog, 49
Five Laws of Library Science, 2
Fodor’s New York City, 2000, 54
folklore. See customs, etiquette, and folklore (390s)
foreign language literature (830-899), 115–116
Foundation Trilogy (Asimov), 126
frequently asked questions, 10–15
Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management (Johnson), 78
Fundamentals of Managing Reference Collections (Singer), 58, 78

G
games and sports (793), 44
gardening. See agriculture, gardening, pets (630)
Garfield comics, 43
generalities (000s)
Berkshire Athenaeum ("Weeding Policy and Procedures"), 141
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 166
La Grange (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Plan"), 93–94
overview, 21–23
sample weeding guidelines, 17
generalities (000s)
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 168
La Grange (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Plan"), 116–118
overview, 53–54
sample weeding guidelines, 18
gift books, 12
giving away weeded copies, 11
GLEN Ellyn (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"
adult mass market paperbacks, 169
applied science and technology (600s), 167
arts (700s), 168
audiovisual materials and resources, 170
biographies, 168
databases and electronic resources, 169
fiction, 166
generality (000s), 166
graphic novels, 169
history and biography (900s), 168
language (400s), 167
large print, 168
literature (800s), 168
newspapers and magazines, 169
non-fiction circulating collection, 166–170
overview, 79, 163–164
philosophy and psychology (100s), 166
Popular Materials Center, 165
reference collection, 165
Reference Library, 165
religion (200s), 166
roles of the collection, 164–165
science (500s), 167
social sciences (300s), 167
travel (910-919), 168
young adult/teens, 169
GNLIB (graphic novel librarians’ listserv), 128
Grafton, Sue, 50
graphic and decorative arts (740-779), 111–112
graphic novels
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan"), 169
La Grange (IL) Public Library ("Collection Development Plan"),
INDEX

127–128
overview, 43
Gray’s Anatomy, 36
Great Books, 49
Great Courses Company, 133
green weeding, 11
Gregory, Vicki L., 78
Greiner, Tony, xviii
Guidall, George, 59
guidelines for weeding. See sample weeding guidelines
The Guinness Book of World Records, 23

H
Hamsun, Knut, xi
health. See medicine and health (610s)
Hesse, Hermann, xiv
Hibner, Holly, 14, 78
Highland Park (MI) High School, 69
history and geography (900s). See also
graphy and travel (910-919)
Berkshire Athenaeum (‘Weeding Policy and Procedures’), 143
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library
(‘Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan’), 168
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library
(‘Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy’), 88–89
overview, 53–54
sample weeding guidelines, 18
home and family management (640s)
La Grange (IL) Public Library
(‘Collection Development Plan’), 108–109
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library
(‘Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy’), 87
overview, 37–38
How to Raise Your Mongoloid Child (as example of a book to weed), 75
humor and satire (817), 46

I
importance of weeding, 1–2
InfoNET, 173, 174
integrated library system (ILS) software, 5

J
Jacob, Merle, ix, 47
job hunting, starting a small business,
INDEX

La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”) (continued)
large type format, 126–127
literature in English (800-829), 114–115
magazines, 137–138
music, film, television, and sports entertainment (780-799), 112–114
music CDs, 132–133
mystery fiction, 124–125
nonfiction, adult, 93–120
overview, 92–93
philosophy and psychology (100s), 94–95
reference collection, 120–122
religion (200s), 95–96
science fiction, 125–126
social sciences (300-329), 96–97
technology, medicine and health (600-619), 105–106
U.S. history, Latin American history, Pacific Island history (970-999), 119–120
VHS tapes, 131–132
video games, 136–137
wiring, small engines, and vehicles (620-629), 106
world history (920-969), 118–119
landmark books, 12
landscape architecture (712), 42
language (400s)
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 142
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 167
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 101–102
overview, 31–32
sample weeding guidelines, 17
youth collection, 68
large print
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 167
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 126–127
sample weeding guidelines, 19

The Last of the Mohicans (Cooper), xii
law (340), 28
Libraries of Love, 11
library science (020), 22
life sciences (570), 34
literature in English (800-829), 114–115
literature (800s)
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 142–143
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 168
overview, 45–46
sample weeding guidelines, 18
local authors, books by, 12
local document repository, 144–145
logic (160), 24
Lonely Planet series, 54
Lyric Opera of Chicago, 85

M
magazines and newspapers, 19, 60, 137–138, 144, 169
Making a Collection Count: A Holistic Approach to Library Collection Management (Hibner and Kelly), 78
manufacturing (670), 39
manufacturing and building (660-699), 88
Martin, Beverly S., 47
mass market paperbacks, 19, 50, 169
mathematics (510), 33
Mayday (Block), xi
media collections
audiobooks, 58–59, 128–130
Baltimore County Public Schools (“Selection Criteria for School Library Media Center Collections”), 183–184
CDs and DVDs, 59–60, 61, 130–133
format of media and weeding, 58–59
Memorial Hall Library (“Collection Development Manual”), 156, 158
overview, 58–60
medicine and health (610s)
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy”), 87
overview, 35–36

www.alastore.ala.org
 Memorial Hall Library (“Collection Development Manual”)  
- audiovisual collections, 154–155  
- children’s audiovisual collections, 162  
- children’s print collections, 159–162  
- collection formats—adult collection, 151–156  
- collection formats—children’s collection, 159–162  
- digital media collections, 156  
- general weeding policy, 149–151  
- mixed media collections, 156  
- overview, 148  
- print collections, 152–153  
- replacement copies, policy for, 148–149  
- young adult audiovisual collection, 158  
- young adult digital media, 158  
- young adult print collection, 157–158  

Metropolitan Art Museum, 85  
Metropolitan Opera, 85  
micromanaging staff, 12–13  
- military science and public administration (350), 28  
Milwaukee School of Engineering, 72–73  
- Mobil guides, 89  
- Modern Library 100 Best Novels list, 49  
The Mongoloid Child: Recognition and Care (as example of a book to weed), 14  
- morality and ethics (170), 24  
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy”)  
- applied science and technology (600-699), 86–88  
- arts and recreation (700-799), 84–85  
- fiction, 89–91  
- geography and history (900-999), 88–89  
- overview, 82  
- religion (200-299), 82–84  
- multiple copies of fiction, 49–50  
- music (780), 44  
- music, film, television, and sports entertainment (780-799), 112–114  
- music CDs, 132–133  

MUSTIE (misleading, ugly, superseded, trivial, irrelevant, elsewhere)  
guidelines, 6  
- mystery fiction, 124–125  
- mythology. See religion and mythology (200s)  

N  
new to job and responsible for weeding, 15  
New York Times Book Review, 88  
- newspapers and magazines, 19, 60, 137–138, 144, 169  
- Nintendo DS, 136–137  
- Nintendo Wii, 136–137  
- nonfiction collection  
- Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 144  
- Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 166–170  
- La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 93–120  
- sample weeding guidelines, 17  
- youth collection, 65–66, 67–68  
- Nook Colors (Barnes & Noble), 135  
- Nordmeyer, Ricki, ix  
- numismatics (737), 43  

O  
occult, paranormal, dream books (130), 23  
On the Origin of Species (Darwin), 32  
- Opera News, 85  
- Orwell, George, 46  
- outdated materials, purging, 2  

P  
- paleontology (560), 34  
- The Pathfinder (Cooper), xii  
- patrons  
- attitude toward a book’s condition, 15  
- communicating with, 71–73  
- justifying weeding to, 13–14  
- Peanuts comics, 43  
- performing arts (790), 44  
- periodicals, 19, 60, 137–138, 144, 169  
- Petersen’s Photographic, 85  
- pets. See agriculture, gardening, pets (630)  

www.alastore.ala.org
philosophy and psychology (100s)
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 141
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 165
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 166
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 94–95
overview, 23
sample weeding guidelines, 17
Physician's Desk Reference, 36
picture books and board books, 66, 68
poetry and drama (811–812), 46
political science (320s)
La Grange (IL) Public Library, 97
overview, 26–27
Poole, William, xii
Powell's, 10
pre-weeding steps, 5–6
The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 46
problems with weeding. See weeding problems
professors, books by, 12
psychology (150), 24
psychology and philosophy. See philosophy and psychology (100s)
public administration and military science (350), 28
Public Library Catalog, 89, 115
Public Library Core Collection: Nonfiction, 12
Public Library Core Collection: Fiction, 12
public perception of weeding, 9–10
Publishers Weekly, 83
pulling visibly damaged items, 5
pure science. See science (500s)
purging outdated materials, 2
R
Ranganathan, S. R., 2
Reader's Advisor, 83, 89, 120, 123, 166
reading list, suggested
articles and books, 185–186
websites, 186
real-life examples of weeding horror stories, 74–76
recreation. See arts and recreation (700s)
recycling weeded copies, 11
reference collection
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 165
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 120–122
overview, 57–58
Reiser, Paul, 46
religion and mythology (200s)
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 141
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 166
La Grange (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Plan”), 95–96
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development and Materials Selection Policy”), 82–84
overview, 24
sample weeding guidelines, 17
replacement copies, 148–149
responsibility for weeding, 3
retention and weeding, sample guidelines for, 16
Ringworld (Niven), 126
Romantic Times, 123
Rosenblatt, Barbara, 59
Rough Guide series, 54
Roy, Loriene, xii
Rules of the Road manuals, 106
S
Salter, George, x
sample collection development plans
Baltimore County Public Schools, 182–184
Berkshire Athenaeum, 139–147
Columbia University, 177–178
Emmanuel d'Alzon Library, Assumption College, 179–181
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library, 163–170
La Grange (IL) Public Library, 92–138
Memorial Hall Library, 148–162
Morton Grove (IL) Public Library, 82–91
Seattle Public Library, 171–176
sample weeding guidelines
adult mass market paperbacks, 19

www.alastore.ala.org
applied science and technology (600s), 18
arts (700s), 18
audiovisual collection, 19
biographies, 18
databases and electronic resources, 19
fiction, 16
generalities (000s), 17
history (900s), 18
language (400s), 17
large print, 19
literature (800s), 18
nonfiction circulating collection, 17
overview, 3–5, 15–16
periodicals and newspapers, 19
philosophy and psychology (100s), 17
religion (200s), 17
retention and weeding, 16
science (500s), 18
social sciences (300s), 17
travel (910-919), 18
Sartre, Jean Paul, x
satire and humor (817), 46
schedule for weeding. See sample weeding
guidelines
Schirmer Books, 85
Schoeman, Karel, x
science, math, astronomy, physics,
chemistry (500-549), 102–103
science experiments (507), 33
science fiction, 125–126
science (500s)
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding
Policy and Procedures”), 142
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library
(“Collection Development
Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 167
overview, 32–34
sample weeding guidelines, 18
youth collection, 68
scores, 145
Seattle Public Library (“Weeding
Instructions for Branch Libraries”) CDs, 61
general weeding instructions for
branch libraries, 171–174
overview, 171
reader’s services department, 174–176
reassigns, 174
when to weed, 171–172
withdrawal procedures, 173
Segal, Joseph P., 6
Seinfeld, Jerry, 46
selling weeded copies, 10
“Sending Books to Needy Libraries” (ALA), 11
series, fiction, 13, 50
series, youth fiction, 67
Shakespeare (822.3), 46
shelf read, 5
shelf space, freeing up, 1
Siddhartha (Hesse), xiv
Singer, Carol, 58, 78
Slotes, Stanley J., xvii
social problems and social services (360s),
28–29, 99
social sciences (300s)
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding
Policy and Procedures”), 141–142
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library
(“Collection Development
Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 167
La Grange (IL) Public Library
(“Collection Development Plan”), 96–97
overview, 25–30
sample weeding guidelines, 17
youth collection, 68
sociology (300-310), 96–97
Sony Readers, 135
space and astronomy (520), 33
space issues, weeding for, 14–15
Spitteler, Carl, x
Spock, Benjamin, 38
Sports Illustrated, 85
staff members
convincing to weed, 12–13
informing about weeding, 9
stakeholders, identifying, 5
statistics (310s)
La Grange (IL) Public Library, 97
overview, 26
Steel, Danielle, xii
subscription database, 19, 63
suggested reading list
articles and books, 185–186
websites, 186

www.alastore.ala.org
T
Take Leave and Go (Schoeman), x
technology. See applied science and technology (600s)
TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) materials, 32
transportation. See commerce, communications, and transportation (380s)
travel. See geography and travel (910-919)
true crime (364), 99, 100
Two Little Misogynists (Spitteler), x

U
ugly books, 15
Universal Class database, 134
Urbana (IL) Free Library, 69
U.S. history, Latin American history, Pacific Island history (970-999), 119–120

V
VHS tapes, 131–132
video games, 136–137
Vnuk, Rebecca, ix

W
Watson-Guptill catalog, 85
websites, suggested reading list, 186
weeded copies
giving away, 11
methods of clearing out, 10–11
recycling, 11
selling, 10
weeding. See also sample weeding guidelines
excuses for not, list of, 8–9
frequently asked questions, 10–15
overview, 1–3
pre-weeding steps, 5–6
public perception, 9–10
responsibility for, 3
staff members, informing, 9
what to look for, 6–9
when to weed, 3–5
Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods (Slotes), xvii
weeding problems
communicating with patrons to avoid, 71–73
overview, 69–71
real-life examples, 74–76
“Weeding the Fiction Collection: Or, Should I Dump Peyton Place?” (2000 ALA Annual Conference program), ix–xii, 47–48
“Weeding Tips” (Booklist Online), xvi, 15, 74
Wesleyan University, 7
WesWeeding blog, 7
when to weed. See sample weeding guidelines
WIDUS (worn out, inappropriate, duplicated, undercirculated, superseded) guidelines, 6
Wilson’s Public Library Catalog, 12
wiring, small engines, and vehicles (620–629), 106
The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding (as example of a book to weed), 38
The Women at the Pump (Hamsun), xi
“Workbook for Selection Policy Writing” (ALA), 78
world history (920-969), 118–119
WORST (worn out, out of date, rarely used, supplied elsewhere, trivial or faddish) guidelines, 6
Wright, Frank Lloyd, 110, 111

X
Xbox 360, 136–137

Y
youth and young adult collections
Berkshire Athenaeum (“Weeding Policy and Procedures”), 144
board books and picture books, 66, 68
fiction, 66, 68
Glen Ellyn (IL) Public Library (“Collection Development Policy, Procedures, and Plan”), 169
language (400), 68
nonfiction, 65–66, 67–68
overview, 65
sample weeding schedule, 67
science (500), 68
series fiction, 67
social sciences (300), 68