

# RESTRICTED ACCESS TO LIBRARY MATERIALS

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## **An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights**

Libraries are a traditional forum for the open exchange of information. Attempts to restrict access to library materials violate the basic tenets of the Library Bill of Rights.

Historically, attempts have been made to limit access by relegating materials into segregated collections. These attempts are in violation of established policy. Such collections are often referred to by a variety of names, including “closed shelf,” “locked case,” “adults only,” “restricted shelf,” or “high demand.” Access to some materials also may require a monetary fee or financial deposit. More recently, some libraries have applied filtering software to their Internet stations that prevent users from finding targeted categories of information, much of which is constitutionally protected. In any situation which restricts access to certain materials, a barrier is placed between the patron and those materials. That barrier may be age-related, linguistic, economic, or psychological in nature.

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. Needing to ask for materials may pose a language barrier or a staff service barrier. Because restricted materials often feature information that some library patrons consider “objectionable,” the potential user may be predisposed to think of the materials as “objectionable” and, therefore, are reluctant to ask for access to them.

Barriers between the materials and the patron which are psychological, or are affected by language skills, are nonetheless limitations on access to information. Even when a title is listed in a catalog with a reference to its restricted status, a barrier is placed between the patron and the publication. (See also “Statement on Labeling.”)

There may be, however, countervailing factors to establish policies to protect library materials – specifically, for reasons of physical preservation including protection from theft or mutilation. Any such policies must be carefully formulated and administered with extreme attention to the principles of intellectual freedom. This caution is also in keeping with ALA policies, such as “Evaluating Library Collections,” “Free Access to Libraries for Minors,” and the “Preservation Policy.”

Finally, in keeping with the “Joint Statement on Access” of the American Library Association and Society of American Archivists, restrictions that result from donor agreements or contracts for special collections materials must be similarly circumscribed. permanent exclusions are not acceptable. The overriding impetus must be to work for free and unfettered access to all

documentary heritage.

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