

MYTHS ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT IN LIBRARIES

First Amendment Myth Busters

Myths are one way people who do not have a complete understanding of something make sense of it. Unlike traditional myths that arise from religious or spiritual beliefs, myths held by members of a society can arise from misinformation and/or suspicion about some people's motivations or behaviors. Myths have much in common with stereotypes that can persist even in the face of new and contradictory information.

If perception is everything, then myths that do not accurately reflect a verifiable reality can be harmful to people and to institutions, including to librarians and libraries.

The purpose of debunking myths about libraries and librarians is to provide people with **facts and evidence** to help them change their misunderstandings.



The myths highlighted here are divided into three types:

1. the **overarching myths** that are generally applied to librarians and libraries;
2. the myths that **librarians themselves** may hold about their own practice of librarianship;
3. and the myths **non-library workers and community members** may hold about librarians and libraries.

These myths were collected from a series of surveys conducted in the summer/fall of 2025 and spring of 2026 by members of the **Freedom to Read Foundation's Krug Education Committee**. The lists of myths and evidence provided is not exhaustive but rather offers glimpses into commonly held myths. These indicators of misperception create opportunities for librarians to address them in their own practice of librarianship and in their interactions with library patrons, decisionmakers, and community members for whose benefit libraries exist.

As New York University Professor of Law Melissa Murray notes in her book *The U.S. Constitution: A Comprehensive and Annotated Guide for the Modern Reader* (Simon & Schuster, 2026), "the robust speech protections that the First Amendment now recognizes only gained traction in the last hundred years" (155). Today, free speech is widely recognized as essential to democracy. Helping librarians, library patrons, and the general public understand the breadth and importance of these protections is a core mission of the Freedom to Read Foundation.



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MYTHS ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT IN LIBRARIES

Four Overarching Myths About the First Amendment in Libraries

Myth	Fact
Reading, writing, and viewing aren't included in the First Amendment.	The First Amendment specifies that the freedom of speech is a right; reading, writing, and viewing provide access to speech. NOTE: The First Amendment prevents public institutions from compromising individuals' First Amendment freedoms by establishing a framework that defines critical rights and responsibilities regarding free expression and the freedom of belief. The First Amendment protects the right to exercise those freedoms, and it advocates respect for the right of others to do the same. Rather than engaging in censorship and repression to advance one's values and beliefs, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis counsels persons living in the United States to resolve their differences in values and belief by resorting to "more speech, not enforced silence." ALA.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship
Librarians and libraries have no role in teaching the First Amendment.	Learning about and discussing the Constitution is an essential aspect of civics education; offering education is not a partisan or "political" activity. The First Amendment provides the legal foundation for intellectual freedom; it is a core value of librarianship. The Constitution and its amendments are US history; every library patron should familiarize themselves with these basic documents. Libraries have a responsibility to educate all library users about the First Amendment and its importance in their daily lives.
Intellectual freedom does not apply in schools to people under 18.	Students in US public schools have First Amendment rights as decided in the Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District. Parents can make decisions for their own children but not for other people's children. NOTE: <i>Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist.</i>, 393 U.S. 503 (1969) "First Amendment rights, applied in light of the special characteristics of the school environment, are available to teachers and students. It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."
A book is not banned if it is available elsewhere.	A decision to send patrons to hidden shelving, another library, or bookstore to find a book is in effect banning that item if the decision to hide, deselect, or not purchase it was because of its topic or content, i.e. an act of censorship.



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Myths *Librarians* Hold About the First Amendment

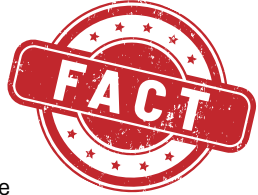
Myth	Fact
The First Amendment is not related to intellectual freedom. 	The First Amendment includes the freedom of speech. A speaker's words are not very useful if no one can hear/read/view them. There is a very direct connection between the First Amendment and intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to hold any opinion and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas—unrestricted by censorship—from all points of view. NOTE: <i>Bd. of Educ. v. Pico</i>, 457 U.S. 853 (1982) “[T]he right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient's meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom.”; <i>Martin v. Struthers</i>, 319 U.S. 141 (1943) “the First Amendment embraces the right to distribute literature and necessarily protects the right to receive it.”
Library administrators / boards do not need to show leadership with regard to the First Amendment.	Leadership in this regard should be strong in order to strengthen the work and comfort of frontline librarians in their charge as they uphold First Amendment rights for all patrons. Leadership and governance should support and encourage frontline librarians to educate library users about the First Amendment and the U.S. Constitution and to uphold their First Amendment rights.
There is no need to do more than mention it in the library's mission and policies.	Including references to the First Amendment in a library's mission and policies and providing access to information are important first steps. Without programming or direct teaching, patrons may not understand what the First Amendment means or what their First Amendment rights are.
Not purchasing a title for fear of a challenge (soft censorship) is an acceptable practice.	A collection development policy should provide a clear process for selection that supports the purchase of resources to develop a balanced collection that reflects the reading needs and interests of the entire community. Selection could include potentially controversial works as well as “frequently challenged” works that are supported by positive reviews and to develop a balanced collection that reflects the reading needs of all of the library's patrons.
Patrons learn about the First Amendment in their K-12 or college education.	Patrons will possess various degrees of understanding regarding the First Amendment. For many library users, K-12 and college were a long time ago; they may appreciate or benefit from a refresher.
Sending parents notices of the books their children check out of the school library violates students' privacy rights.	Courts have determined that parents have the right to know what their own children are reading. In most states, school library records are considered education records. Parents can request these records, but it is not required that records be sent to them automatically.
The First Amendment supports the right of patrons to film their library experience, known as a “First Amendment Audit.”	A First Amendment audit is a form of activism where individuals (auditors) film in places used by the public, such as libraries. These efforts infringe on the privacy rights of others who may be visiting the library, especially including minors. Libraries may need local policies to guide staff when faced with such visits, policies to preserve patrons' privacy and keep patrons and staff safe.





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Myths *Some People* Hold About the First Amendment

Myth	Fact
Library collections are “government speech.”	Libraries supervised by town, county, or local governance are not the mouthpiece for the town/county/etc. Librarians work to provide access to all points of view. Library collections include so many authors, topics, and points of view it would not be possible to say there is a single “party line” expressed by the available resources. The government does not speak through its library collection. The library collection reflects the interests of the entire community. 
Librarians / library collections favor Democrats / progressive / leftwing thought.	Librarians support all patrons in accessing the information they seek and choose. Library collection development policies call for balanced collections - showing all points of view and addressing the interests of the entire community.
If an individual thinks it’s inappropriate, no one should be able to read it.	Every reader has the option to choose whether to read or not to read any specific title. No two patrons have the same idea of what is a “good” book. If anyone thinks it is inappropriate, they can control only whether their family reads it.
It is acceptable to challenge a book without having read it based on the title, topic, cherry-picked passage, or a book review.	Many books have challenging passages that support a theme/opinion that engages readers to better understand a controversial or difficult/challenging issue. If challengers have not read the entire book, they will not see that connection to the theme/opinion. In reviewing allegations that books should be removed, courts have stated that the entire work must be considered.
It takes a large number of people submitting challenges in order for books to be removed.	Every individual challenge is considered on its own merit. The process is time-consuming and costly when engaged in its full design where several readers engage with the title in full before discussing whether or not it should remain on the library shelves.
A “graphic novel” means it is sexually graphic.	A “graphic novel” is a book-length narrative that uses sequential art—a combination of text and images in a panel-to-panel format—to tell a story. The topic of the story can be anything.
“Sexually explicit” content is a sufficient reason to ban a book.	Sexually explicit materials are a protected category of speech if, as held by the Supreme Court, the material has “literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”
Restricting access to selected books is not censorship.	Librarians are trained to use library policy to purchase books of interest to the community and to specific age ranges. Limiting access to any specific topic is censorship, as is non-public shelving or sending someone to a bookstore. Library users may not have funds or transportation to visit another location to access the title.
Displaying books for Banned Books Week or other “months” means they are recommended for all readers.	Displaying “Banned Books” raises awareness of the reasons books have been challenged or banned in the past and/or currently. All displays offer patrons the opportunity to browse and select featured books.
Mandating that library book orders must be approved by non-library entities does not undermine librarians’ expertise and training.	Librarians have training in selection methods intended to support collection decisions that include a broad variety of authors, ideas, and opinions. Librarians have an awareness that every reader is different and seeks different resources. Outside committees may impose preconceived notions of what readers should be allowed to read.
Sending parents notices of the books their children check out of the school library violates students’ privacy rights.	Courts have determined that parents have the right to know what their own children are reading. In most states, school library records are considered education records. Parents can request these records, but it is not required that records be sent to them automatically.

