



National Preservation Office

# Good handling principles and practice for library and archive materials



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# Good handling principles and practice for library and archive materials

Much of the damage that books and archives sustain is due to bad handling. The purpose of this leaflet is to emphasise the importance of good handling practices in libraries and archives; to encourage the application of these methods; and to offer guidance to all users on the handling and care of manuscripts, printed documents and books.

It is important that readers also understand that they have a responsibility for the care of the collection which they use. Damage caused through poor handling is often cumulative and not immediately apparent to the user.

Collection care should therefore be a core element of any library or archive's preservation policy. Care in handling will reduce the amount of costly conservation work needed. The institution's aim must be to instill a culture of good handling practice throughout the institution and to transmit this culture to all its users.

The text of this leaflet may be freely used for staff or reader education.

## Using library and archive materials

- All staff in reading rooms and search rooms should be aware of the correct handling techniques, preferably through a specific training programme.
- Staff should be proactive in monitoring reader activities, and intervene when necessary to offer advice in handling materials.
- Users should be actively encouraged to participate in the care of the collections. Information and advice on how to handle the collection must be available to readers. Reading room rules should be clearly displayed.
- The use of surrogates (microfilm or electronic media) can minimise the use of

fragile original material. Users should be informed if a surrogate is available from the outset of their enquiry and it should be advised that this be used rather than the original item.

- Special equipment may be needed for certain items, and should be supplied. For example, gloves of the correct type should be provided for staff and readers for handling historic and important bindings, illuminated items, photographs, microfilms, maps and all framed and mounted material. The use of polyester sheets for overlaying on maps (and for other items where appropriate) should be adopted.
- Reading rooms should have an area for viewing oversize books or large items. Staff should offer assistance with handling large items.
- Bound volumes are mechanical structures that are subject to structural stress. Ideally, all books should be supported when open, and for certain categories of material, book supports are essential.
- Reading Rooms and search rooms should be equipped with the appropriate book supports, snakes etc. and instructions on their use. Weighted snakes and clean smooth weights should be made available to hold open pages and restrain unrolled charts and plans.
- Only a few bindings can be opened to more than 180 degrees without being damaged. 120 degrees is the maximum opening angle that a book should be subjected to. Books with tight bindings should be limited to an opening angle of 90 degrees.
- Readers should be shown how to open tight bindings and newly bound books.
- Traditional library reading stands or lecterns will not support books safely, and can cause damage by the steep angle at which books are held. Suitable alternative book rests should be available and readers should be encouraged and shown how to use them.
- When collection items are being prepared for transit, they should be packed flat in crates, lined with bubble wrap. Crates must not be overfilled. Voids should be filled with foam or bubble wrap. Two people will be needed to move fully loaded crates.

## Rules for reading rooms and search rooms

Rules for the use of library reading rooms and archive search rooms can incorporate regulations designed to minimise the risk of damage to collections. Conditions of use for reading rooms and search rooms should include the following:

- No drinking, eating or smoking should be allowed in collection areas at all.
- Do not use ink of any type near the collection items or to write notes. Ideally all forms of ink should be banned and only soft graphite pencil should be allowed.
- Do not write in the margins or gutters of books or documents.
- Avoid touching the text or image on the page. Acid free paper slips can be supplied for readers who need to follow the text.
- Uncut books and pages should be reported to reading room staff. Readers should never be allowed to cut pages themselves.
- Limit the number of items that are in use at any one time, including loose papers.
- Do not stack books on desks more than three high.
- Do not place items on the floor.
- Do not write, lean or rest on top of collection items.
- Do not use handcreams before handling books and documents and dry hands thoroughly after washing.
- Allow adequate space on the desk if using oversize items.
- Do not insert bookmarks or attach notes to books or documents.
- Do not fold over the corners of pages.
- Sharp instruments of any type should not be used in the reading room, e.g. scissors, staplers, hole punches, pen knives or pencil sharpeners.
- Readers should seek advice on how to open a tight binding and newly bound volumes.
- Cameras or scanners should not be used by users in reading or search rooms.
- No more than three books or one large volume should be carried at a time.

## Retrieving materials for use

Careless handling can cause irreparable damage to books. If staff are unsure of the correct method of handling they should seek advice from their manager or from conservation staff before attempting to retrieve the item.

- Hands should be clean before handling collection items.
- Collection items should be supported at all times.
- Collection items should always be removed one at a time and two hands used to carry large volumes or boxes.
- When books are being retrieved, if there is space above the book, it will be possible to reach over the top and push the required book forward by the foreedge. Alternatively, books on either side of the book required may be gently pushed back to free the spine. The volume can then be safely removed. The gap left should be closed by adjusting the books on the shelf, supported with bookends. Books must not be removed from the shelf by pulling at the head cap, as this will eventually result in the spine being torn off.
- Extra care is needed when retrieving and replacing books on shelves if they are fitted with clasps, metal fittings and cover flaps. Such volumes should be boxed if possible.
- Large books should not be placed next to small ones without a bookend in between to support them.
- No more than three books or one large volume should be carried or stacked at a time. The larger, heavier items should be placed at the bottom of the pile. When moving very large volumes, more than one person may be needed.

Large volumes (folios) should be carried with the spine nearest the floor, flat against one's side or chest and supported with both hands positioned under the spine and not in front like a tray.

## **Managing bookends and shelving**

- Volumes and boxes should fill the shelves if possible, but not be so tightly packed that damage will occur when an item is removed. Bookends should be used to support items if the shelf is not full, making sure the books stand upright.
- Collection items should not protrude over the edge of the shelf.
- Books should not be pushed too far back on the shelf.
- Collection items on mobile shelving need extra support, in order to minimise the risk of items shifting or falling when the shelves are moved.

## **Using book barrows**

- Barrows should be stable and easy to manoeuvre, with wide shelves and a protective rail.
- Collection items should stand upright and be supported at all times.
- Items must not protrude over the sides of the barrow.
- Barrows should be stabilised by loading large and heavy volumes on the lowest shelves first to create a low centre of gravity.
- Large or heavy volumes should not be stacked on top of smaller ones.

## **General principles for storage areas**

- Good ventilation and air circulation is important to reduce the risk of mould growth.
- Books and archives must be supported on secure shelving, which should be adjustable. Books should be kept at a minimum of 10 cm from the floor level.
- Shelves should not be positioned against an outside wall.
- Make sure the storage areas and shelving are kept clean, in particular from dust.
- Books and archives should not be packed too tightly on the shelves.
- Volumes and boxes should not be allowed to lean at an angle or collapse on

the bookshelf, as this will stress and weaken the bindings. They should be supported by bookends which should have smooth surfaces and broad edges, to avoid damaging bindings.

- Bound volumes should not stand on their foreedges, as this will eventually lead to the text block separating from the binding.
- If possible volumes of similar size should be shelved together.
- Oversized and damaged material should be stored flat. It may be possible to support very large maps and plans by rolling them round an acid free tube and then bagging them.
- Cloth and paper bindings should not come into direct contact with leather bindings.
- Pressure tapes, metal or plastic fasteners such as paper clips and pins should never be used, and must be removed by trained staff.
- Long term exposure of the collection to strong light of any sort e.g. sunlight, spotlights, fluorescent light, should be avoided. Minimise any exposure to light as damage is cumulative.
- Storage enclosures should be of archival quality.
- Letters and documents should be unfolded by trained staff only and stored flat in acid-free folders.

## **Preserving Access to the Collections for the Future**

For both libraries and archives there is an important message behind the practicalities of the collection care programme. The care of these collections has been entrusted to all who use or work with them. The best way to ensure their continued existence and usability is to be aware of, and to practise correct methods of handling library and archive material. It is the duty of all concerned to ensure that the collections will be preserved for future generations of users. Institutions should incorporate these general principles of good practice in all education programmes.



## Select Bibliography

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Pickett, A.g., Lemcoe, M.M., **Preservation and Storage of Sound Recordings**. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1991.

## Useful Websites

Abbey Publications Inc: <<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byorg/abbey/>>

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC):  
<<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/aic/>>

The British Library, National Preservation Office:  
<<http://www.bl.uk/services/preservation>>

Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI): <<http://www.pch.gc.ca.cci-icc>>

Conservation on Line (CoOL): <<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu>>

European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA):  
<<http://www.knawl.nl/ecpa/ecpatex/welcome.htm>>

Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAP):  
<<http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/fiaf/enfiaf.html>>

International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA) Core  
Programme on Preservation and Conservation (PAC):  
<<http://www.ifla.org>>

Library of Congress, Preservation Directorate:  
<<http://www.locweb.loc.gov/preserv/>>

Northeast Document Conservation Centre (NEDCC): <<http://www.nedcc.org>>

Solinet Preservation Service: <<http://www.solinet.net>>



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