

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM NARRATIVES

Libraries face a reactionary movement that goes against our ideals of free speech, diversity, and the public good.

This movement has worked to ban books and defund libraries, and has condemned libraries for supporting intellectual freedom.

One of the ways we must resist is by reclaiming and asserting our positive narrative about libraries and the freedom to read.



LIBRARIES HAVE A POWERFUL STORY

Our opposition is small, and most people love libraries. **How are we telling that story?**

- What does the library do that's great?
- What library story do you have to tell?
- What are the library's values?

Try creating an elevator pitch about the library

- Make it succinct, sincere, and meaningful
- Defend our choices without being defensive
- But if necessary, dismiss the opposition

If you need help getting started, **use this template:**

"[Library]'s fundamental role is to [action/purpose] that [impact to community]. [Some examples of what the library does]. The library's values are [a, b, and c] and we live those values by [x, y, and z].

WHAT DOES "NEUTRALITY" MEAN?

The popular understanding of neutrality dictates that libraries must show **all sides at all times**, and must **not take a position on anything**.

However, this viewpoint doesn't consider:

- Ongoing targeting of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC+ library materials and workers .
- A long history of attempted censorship within the profession.
- The uneven power dynamics of speech, such as the elevation of corporate speech and money-as-speech.
- Bad faith arguments that manipulate free speech language.
- Blatantly counterfactual positions.

The First Amendment defines the following terms:

Viewpoint Neutrality: when government actions implicate the speech rights of groups and individuals, those actions must be done in an evenhanded way.

Viewpoint Discrimination: singling out a particular opinion or perspective on that subject matter for treatment unlike that given to other viewpoints.

THE L.E.A.R.N APPROACH

Listen – Many people just want to be heard

Empathize – Do not apologize or appear to agree

Advocate – For what libraries are and what they stand for

Redirect – Show them we have something for everyone, including them

Notify others – You're not in this alone; find support in/outside your institution



WHO ARE WE TALKING TO AND HOW DO WE TALK TO THEM?

How can we tell the difference between well-meaning people captured by propaganda, and hostile people who wish us harm?

And what draws the line at harassment? Remember, **you don't have to engage** if the person is abusive and harassing.

Reminders:

- Many people are motivated by emotions, not facts.
- Some automatically think we are the enemy.

Questions to consider:

- What motivates this person/these people?
- What goals do we have in talking to them?
- How do we talk about library values in a way that is meaningful to them?

THINGS TO TALK ABOUT

- What does the library stand for?
- What is our mission and reason for being?
- Who do we represent?
- What do we offer?
- What stories do we have to tell that answer these questions?

HARASSMENT

Harassment is behavior meant to **intimidate, humiliate, or threaten.**

Legal definitions of harassment include **discriminatory behavior or comments.**

Comments such as “librarians are groomers” or “the library carries pornography” may be considered harassment.

You do not have to endure harassment at work.

You have the right to shut it down; eg “You are harassing me and if you don’t stop, I will ask you to leave the library.”

If someone is harassing you and won’t stop, get backup, especially from a supervisor.

WITCHWORDS AND THE OPPOSITION

Our opposition has been successful at creating “witchwords” that make some members of the public immediately defensive or suspicious. In many of our communities, it is now very hard to use certain language.

We don’t want to dilute our message, nor do we want to capitulate to the negative worldview of our opposition. But sometimes it helps our narrative if we avoid using language that has baggage. If this language shift is necessary where you work, some ideas include:

- Say “freedom to read”, not “intellectual freedom”
- Say “welcoming and inclusive spaces”, not “DEI”
- Take the opposition’s words from them – eg, talk about the library and its mission as patriotic
- Talk about democracy and free speech



TALKING POINTS

TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS

The library does not impose parenting choices, methods, or ideologies, and we collect materials that reflect the information needs and intellectual curiosities of many kinds of families.

Materials, programs, or services that are not right for your family might be right for another family. We're happy to help you find what your family needs.

TO OUR COMMUNITIES

"Choice" is an essential concept in libraries; no one is forced to read or check out anything.

Librarians choose materials using professional judgment and following criteria outlined in policy. We don't necessarily agree with everything we buy, but we do make sure the materials we choose have been recommended for the diverse patrons we serve.

Children and teens as well as adults have First Amendment rights to seek and receive information.

TO LEGISLATORS

The First Amendment prohibits libraries from discriminating against people or groups based on views. It does not prevent libraries from having their own values.

Publicly-funded libraries have a responsibility to follow professional standards in selecting materials to meet the wide-ranging needs, interests, identities and experiences of everyone in the communities they serve.

