



Guide No. 6 Caring for your books

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1 **Introduction**

Books are made of organic materials such as paper, cloth, leather, wood, paste and glue. Some of these materials have proved to be incredibly durable, lasting hundreds of years, whilst others have been prone to chemical deterioration.

Most of the damage done to a book is the result of incorrect environmental conditions, poor shelving and storage, and careless handling. Proper handling and storage in a stable, cool, clean, dry environment can minimise damage and prolong its life.

2 **Environmental conditions**

Books need to be kept in a stable environment. The main factors are light, temperature and humidity.

Paper can be rapidly aged by light, becoming brittle and faded; leather and cloth bindings fade and discolour, especially along the spine. Avoid shelving or displaying books in direct light, particularly sunlight or fluorescent light, or shade them with window blinds.

The ideal temperature for book and document storage is 16°-18° C. This would be uncomfortably cool for some readers: where a room has dual use as book storage and reading space, temperatures may need to be 18°-20° C. Humidity is also important: an over dry environment can cause brittleness and cracking, and a damp environment encourages mould and insect infestation. The ideal relative humidity is 45-55%. Avoid storing books close to radiators, against damp external walls, or beneath plumbing

where leakages may occur. Storage areas with extreme fluctuations in temperature and humidity (e.g. by a radiator or a window, in an attic) are not suitable for books or documents.

3 Shelving and storage

Shelving should be strong, secure and durable, without sharp corners. Ideally it should be made of inert material – avoid unsealed wood which may release acid gases damaging to paper. The design can help mitigate flood damage (e.g., a bookcase or shelves incorporating a top canopy and with the bottom shelf at least 10 cm off the floor). To promote air circulation stand books about 5 cm away from the back of the shelf. Ideal shelving is adjustable, or of varied heights, and wide enough to store books vertically and well supported. Book supports should be used to hold items upright.

Enclosed bookshelves may give greater protection against dust and infestation, but there is increased danger of poor air circulation and possible mould growth. Occasional removal of books for cleaning and checking is advisable. See also [Equipment for a meeting library](#) guide 4.

Similar sized volumes should be stored together to support each other: this may mean having a separate shelf for larger books. Very large volumes should, if possible, be stored flat, as should pamphlet boxes. If boxes are to be stored upright, they should be neither over- nor under-filled to maximise support and prevent the contents bending.

Other materials: keep out dust by using protective enclosures e.g. made of acid-free paper or inert polyester (for specialist advice on photographic, audio-visual and computer media, contact the Library or see the websites [below](#)).

4 Care and handling

Careful handling can help books last longer. Books should be supported at all times to prevent strain on their structure, and they should not be marked or defaced. It is important to have clean hands, free from dirt and grease (e.g., hand cream)

- To take a book off the shelf, DO hold each side of the middle of the spine and ease gently up and out if space allows. If this is difficult, gently push in the books on either side of the book you want and try again. DON'T pull on the top of the spine of a book to remove it from the shelf.
- To transport books, DO take several small loads or use a trolley. DON'T overload and risk dropping books.
- To read a book, DO lay it down flat on a table, with plenty of space. DON'T hold it in your hands or balanced on the edge of a shelf or overhanging a table, and DON'T lean on a book or document, while reading it, or while writing
- To read a book which will not open out flat, DO support the side which is off the surface, ideally with a small bean bag or cushion. Use a "book snake" (long weight) to hold the pages open without undue pressure. These can be improvised from covered curtain weights. DON'T force a book to lie flat by pressing down on it (especially for photocopying).

- To mark a place in a book, DO use slips of white paper (acid free paper if for longer than a day or two), inserted towards outer edge of book, away from the spine. DON'T fold back pages or use bulky items (straining the binding), post-it notes (sticky residue) or paper clips (straining the binding and possibly rusting).

Water and insects can cause great damage to paper and bindings. Try to discourage Friends from eating and drinking in the library area, and locate plants and flower vases elsewhere: accidents will happen. Keeping books off the floor helps reduce risk of flood damage and damage from passers-by. Encourage the use of pencil rather than pen when working with old or rare books. If essential marks, such as shelf reference, need to be made in a book, use a soft lead pencil (e.g., 2B).

It can help Friends to treat books with more respect if you let them know you have handling equipment for older or fragile books available, such as book cushions and weights.

A summary of points to remember about handling books is given in appendix 1.

5 Cleaning

Try to keep your library area clean. Dirt is harmful to the collection, and can easily be transferred from shelves and books, but it needs to be dealt with carefully.

No chemical products should be used. On emptied shelves a slightly damp cloth can be used, and on books soft bristle brushes are best. Try to check shelves regularly for dust and dirt. It helps to have a regular programme of cleaning, so that all areas of the library are cleaned in turn. Make sure that everyone who is cleaning is aware of the need for careful handling ([see above](#)). Books should not be flapped or snapped open to remove dust from the top of the text block, but held firmly shut and brushed very gently away from the spine and towards the front. Wear suitable clothing, with adequate lighting and ventilation.

As part of the cleaning routine, monitor storage areas for the presence of insects, which may damage books. Sticky traps can be used to detect insects (available from conservation suppliers, see [Equipment for a meeting library](#) guide 4). The most potentially harmful are silverfish, booklice, moths, beetles, mites and cockroaches.

A library that is clean and tidy looks more attractive and inviting, and Friends and enquirers are more likely to enjoy using it.

A summary of housekeeping points is given in appendix 2.

6 Repairs and damaged books

Repairs to old or rare books should only be carried out by professional conservators. A list is available from the Institute of Conservation's Conservation Register: <https://www.conservationregister.com/>. However, there are some steps you can take to prevent further damage and keep books available for careful use.

- **A book with a broken binding or loose pages** should be tied up with flat unbleached linen tape (2 separate strips around the volume in parallel, tied separately in order to avoid pressing into the binding or neighbouring volumes). String or rubber bands should not be used as they damage covers and pages.
- **A damaged volume** could be stored in a box, ideally acid free and custom made.
- **A volume with dry flaking leather covers** can be wrapped in acid free paper or a polyester jacket to protect adjoining items, clothing, and hands.

Conservators currently advise against the use of “leather dressing”: it is believed to leave a potentially harmful deposit and should be avoided.

7 Disasters

A plan for coping with a potential disaster (whether from flood, fire or simply a leaking pipe) is very helpful. At the very least it is important to provide copies of contact details in case of an emergency, for the warden, clerk, and meeting librarian or library committee members. The information could include contact details of Friends willing to form a disaster response team and contacts at the local library or record office.

A written plan can also include any salvage priorities in the case of a major disaster, for example, a collection of older books, or unique items, such as photograph albums or visitors books. It should also include the location of library material if it is stored in different parts of the meeting house.

Depending on the nature and size of the meeting library, the likelihood of disaster and the space available, a stock of emergency equipment may be of value, e.g., torches, dusters/j cloths, sponges, dust masks, disposable plastic gloves, bin bags, freezer bags and labels, tie on labels, cotton tape, folding plastic crates, plastic sheeting, clip pads, blank paper and pens, blotting paper, scissors.

If rare or valuable books are damaged by water or fire, a rapid response is needed to prevent further damage. Air drying may be sufficient for damp books. Stand them vertically on the top or bottom edge, opened out, on absorbent paper, in a well ventilated area, ideally with fans to move the air around (but not pointing directly at the book), and continue to expose damp pages until dry, occasionally turning upside down – usually a few days.

Completely sodden books can be saved by freeze drying. A number of firms provide freeze drying and conservation services – details can be obtained from your local record office, or from the Library at Friends House. For small quantities of books, it is possible to do this in a domestic freezer. Drain excess water from book, without fanning the pages, wrap in plain waxed paper and place in a frost free freezer. This prevents further damage, and gives you precious time, but only removes a little water through the freezing process; the book will still need careful treatment when you are ready for it. You will need to brush off the ice, blot off water as it thaws and then air dry as above. The Library of Congress website includes a video guide to this method (see [References and resources](#) below).

For further advice on minimising risk and preparing for disasters, see the Library's guidance pamphlet, [Disaster preparedness: guidance for meeting librarians, clerks and custodians of records](#))

8 References and resources

The British Library's has published a series of guides on preservation issues, including guidance on handling rare books, now available here:

<https://www.bl.uk/conservation/guides>. British Library videos on handling books and other documents are on their webpages here: <https://www.bl.uk/conservation>.

Frequently Asked Questions section includes "How should I store books?"

<https://www.bl.uk/conservation/advice>.

The National Archives has published leaflets on *Caring for your books*, *Caring for your prints, drawings and watercolours*, and *Caring for your photographs*, downloadable from its web-site, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>.

The US Library of Congress has guidance for librarians and non-professionals, including video demonstration of air drying wet collections <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/>.

Canadian Conservation Institute, *Care of objects and collections* webpages <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/care-objects.html> provide guides to caring for all kinds of materials including paintings and furnishings.

British Standards Institution, *PD 5454:2012 Guide for the storage and exhibition of archival documents* (2012).

Library of the Society of Friends, [Equipment for a meeting library](#) (Meeting librarians guide no. 4).

Library of the Society of Friends, [Disaster preparedness: guidance for meeting librarians, clerks and custodians of records](#) (Guides for custodians of records, no. 10).

9 Further advice

For further advice please contact the Library at Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ. Phone 020 7663 1135. Email library@quaker.org.uk.

Join the Quaker Meeting Librarians Cluster for email discussion with other meeting librarians. Email library@quaker.org.uk to register.

Other leaflets in this series to download from <https://www.quaker.org.uk/meeting-librarians>

1. The Role of the Meeting Librarian
2. Selection and acquisition of stock
3. Cataloguing and arranging the meeting library
4. Equipment for a meeting library
5. Disposing of unwanted books
6. Caring for your books
7. Promoting the meeting library
8. Online resources for meeting librarians

Disaster preparedness: guidance for meeting librarians, clerks and custodians of records (Guides for custodians of records, no. 10)

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Caring for your books
Appendix 1

Handling guidelines

- Most damage to books is the result of poor handling and storage.
- Ensure that hands are clean and keep handling to a minimum.
- Some bookcases and cupboards have fittings or recesses, which can easily catch the unwary. Try always to work in good light.
- You shouldn't attempt to lift heavy items without help. Heavy items on a high shelf should carry a warning label.
- Do not remove items on bookshelves by pulling down from the top. Hold either side of the spine (middle) and pull gently up and out if space allows. Push in items gently on either side if retrieval is difficult.
- Note how the removal of one item may affect the rest on the shelf.
- Bookends are a good investment and prevent books sliding.
- Try not to pile large items on top of small.
- Do not use the floor to stack/store books or as a working area.
- Encourage Friends to use a pencil when working with/near books.
- Try to keep items supported at all times- they should not be held to read or overhang the table. If your library contains many old and/or valuable items it is a good idea to invest in book supports.
- Open older or fragile books slowly. Do not force open to see into the margin or flex them flat.
- Do not lick fingers before turning pages
- Do not bend down corners or use 'Post it' notes to mark a page. Use plain white paper flags instead.
- Keep in mind that some books may be at the end of their natural 'shelf life'. No amount of careful handling will prevent the boards falling off.



Caring for your books
Appendix 2

Housekeeping guidelines

- Books should be stored in a stable, cool, clean, dry environment. .
- Try to keep your library area clean. Dirt is harmful to the collection, but it needs to be dealt with carefully.
- Discourage eating or drinking in the library area.
- Dirt on shelves or on books can easily transfer. Try to check shelves regularly for dust and dirt
- Care should be taken when cleaning the library. Your collection is important and so no chemical products should be used. On shelves, a slightly damp cloth, and on books, soft bristle brushes are best.
- Work in good light and maximise ventilation.
- Wear appropriate clothing; consider using a dust mask. Try not to get too tired as accidents can easily happen.
- Sometimes doing nothing is the best and safest option. If in doubt - don't.
- A library that is clean and tidy looks more attractive and inviting, and Friends and enquirers are more likely to browse through the books.