

Overview of Shelf Reading

The purpose of shelf-reading is to maintain the proper order within a collection, usually in Library of Congress, Title, or SUDOC order. The key to shelf-reading lies in an inherent knowledge of the Library of Congress Classification system. Be sure to note that certain collections may be shelved using other classification systems. For example, periodical collections are shelved in alphabetical order and certain Government Document Collections are shelved using the SUDOC Classification System. Only when a staff member is proficient enough to shelve without having their work checked can they begin the vital process of shelf-reading.

Always alert Collection Management staff if you notice any problems when shelf-reading a collection. This can include (but is not limited to) space problems, damaged items, large sections of incorrectly shelved items, water damage or mold, vandalism to books, etc.

Shelf-reading is the process of checking the collections for improperly shelved books. Shelf-reading has saved libraries a great deal of time and resources by locating books that may have otherwise been lost. Shelf-reading has also helped countless numbers of patrons find books by keeping the collections neat and in order.

While the statistics of shelf-reading are kept differently in every library, the act of shelf-reading varies only slightly from library to library. The only major difference is that some libraries will divide the collection to be shelf-read into individual sections and parcel them out to employees, while others start at one side of a collection and leapfrog through the collection until they reach the other end. In either case, the employee will need to find a starting point.

An easy way to keep track of where shelf-reading has been left off is to use “START” and “FINISH” signs. Typically an employee will begin where they or another employee left off (after the “FINISH” sign). If using the leap frog method, it may also be beneficial to leave a “START” sign if another employee is shelf-reading part of the collection leading up to theirs. For example Jill finds the “FINISH” sign at the beginning of L. Jack begins shelf-reading after Jill in the M section and leaves a “START” sign so Jill will know where Jack started.

Once you have a collection to shelf-read and a starting point, find that item (or the closest item in order) in the collection. Then proceed in advancing order, reviewing each item.

Typically there are 5 things to look for when shelf-reading:

- Books out of order by Library of Congress call number, Title, or SUDOC order.
- Books shelved in the wrong location. For example: a Reference book shelved in the Stacks Collection.
- Books placed on top of other books, outside of bookends, or books that have fallen behind the row of books on the shelf
- Books with damaged or missing call number labels.
- Books shelved in the collection but owned by another library.

It is also important to write the starting and ending call numbers on the sheet used to keep track of statistics. An example of one type of these is shown at the end of this document (Figure 1). This sheet is a version of one currently being used at the Alexander Library. It contains sections for the date, the section read, and the number of books that were re-shelved.

Other libraries in the Rutgers University Library system may use different forms. However, most of the information that is recorded in the libraries is the same.

Damaged books found in the collection should be brought to the attention of a collection management staff person. The repair of damaged items is normally based on the circulation of that item and is forwarded to DTS upon discharge. If damaged items are found in the collection, the possible repair of those items can be discussed as possible “project work” with the appropriate DTS site. Problems with Call Number labels can be forwarded directly to DTS for correction.

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When a shelving error is found, remove it carefully from the shelf. At this point, the books that are removed for re-shelving should be discharged in case they have been charged to a “Missing” user. Once discharged, they will be removed from that missing user. Then either re-shelve the books or send them on to the appropriate library or collection.

Please remember that no book should be shelved on its fore-edge. Oversize items that cannot be shelved standing up or do not belong in an oversize collection should be shelved on their spine.

After you finish reviewing a shelf, be sure to “front/edge” the shelf by aligning the spines of the book with the front of the shelf. Please be careful when “edging” a shelf, as large items that are pushed all the way back by become stuck on the shelving. This will give your collection a neat and professional look and also assist with keeping the collection in order.

Each shelf should also have a book end, either a hanging wire book end or a sitting book end. If you find a shelf without a bookend, please let a collection management staff member know. As a best practice, book ends should never be removed from a shelf.

Once finished with the shelf-reading, please record and tabulate the information required by your library. See the “Overview of Statistics Keeping for Collection Management Group” document and/or the Collection Management Coordinator for more details.

Shelf-reading is an integral part of maintaining any collection. How often a collection should be shelf-read is determined by its size and how frequently it is used by patrons. Shelf-reading helps keep the number of missing books low and makes it easier for patrons to find books that should be in-library. Shelf-reading also helps to give a collection a professional look and helps to prevent damage to the collection.

