Guidelines: Can You Put That In Writing?

We like to think of libraries as peaceful, quiet places where people are always nice to each other. Much of the time this is true. There are times, however, when libraries are not so quiet. In fact, sometimes libraries can become downright controversial.

For example, sometimes there are people who do not like some of the books or other materials that a library makes available to the school community. Or an employee may feel that she has been treated unfairly. Or somebody’s behavior disturbs other patrons. Or someone claims that his books have been returned, although the library’s records show they are still checked out.

What do you do in these situations?
One method of library management is to make up rules as you go along. Each situation is handled as the staff sees fit, with little or no guidance. This may work for a while, but it will not end happily.

For one thing, the system is arbitrary. What the library manager decides to do may be based on his current mood or on her previous experiences with the customer in question. And library staff members will naturally like some people more than others. They may treat some library users more leniently than others. Even if every staff member treats every customer the same, without written guidelines, there may be a perception of unfairness. This problem is magnified when different people are handling the same problem at different times. Different staff members bring their own standards and methods of problem solving to the job.

Secondly, written guidelines add extra authority to the staff when a confrontation occurs. Most library users tend to believe things when they are written down. (They are readers, after all.) So, when a question arises, the staff’s ability to show the patron the guideline in black and white can often be very helpful.

Written guideline, then, are an invaluable library management tool. What kind of guidelines should you have? At a minimum, you library should have the following guidelines:
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A COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINE outlines the kinds of materials to be selected, who will do the selection, what criteria will be used in selection, how donated materials will be handled, weeding procedures, and how the library will respond to complaints about its materials.

OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES. These guidelines provide conditions for using the library. They set expectations for the behavior of the library’s customers. They may also set special conditions for the use of library resources.

SPECIAL GUIDELINES deal with recurring problems that may be unique to your own library. For example, if you have a meeting room, you should have guidelines on who can use it, and how it is to be scheduled.

**The Guideline Manual**

If you are a new school library manager, how can you find out about your library’s guidelines?

First, ask for a copy of the library’s guideline manual. If no one knows where it is, look around to see if you can find it. Usually, it will be kept at the manager’s work desk or at the circulation desk. If such a manual exists, read the guidelines. Your library’s guidelines may be available online.

If the manual exists, and it accurately portrays the way things are done, you are all set. The only thing you will need to do is an annual review of your library’s guidelines with your principal to see if any changes need to be made and to develop new guidelines as needed. You will find that some guidelines eventually need to be retired. If you cannot find a manual in the library, check with the principal to see if such a manual exists.

If a guideline manual does not exist, you will need to compile one. You may find some individual guidelines. Some guidelines may need to be rewritten a bit. Making your library’s guidelines available on the library web site in PDF format makes them easy to find and print and difficult to misplace.
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In general, a guideline manual should include:

(1) title
(2) mission statement
(3) analysis and description of your community
(4) statement of purpose
(5) detailed description of each guideline
(6) date the guideline was approved
(7) date(s) the guideline was reviewed and revised

Developing a guideline manual may take quite a bit of time, but in the long run it will also save a time. If you need to develop a number of different guidelines, do it over several months. Remember guidelines are the outline on which your library’s services are based.