

Labeling and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights

The American Library Association (ALA) affirms that everyone has the right to form their own opinions about the things they read, listen to, or watch. Libraries do not support, endorse or promote the ideas found in the materials or resources they provide. Offering access to a book or digital resource doesn't mean the library agrees with its contents. Labeling and rating systems can conflict with the principles of intellectual freedom.

Labeling Systems

Sometimes, libraries use labels to organize materials or help users find resources. Labels can be simple—like a colored dot to indicate a reference book, or genre labels (such as “mystery” or “western”) for fiction. They can also be more complex, such as the Dewey Decimal System or Library of Congress call numbers. Libraries may also add subject headings from professional sources to guide users in making selections. Classification systems and subject headings are meant to label information in a fair and neutral way. They help users find and use resources more easily and save time. Users can choose to use these labels or ignore them. They are different from labels that try to influence or to restrict access to certain resources.

While classification and subject heading systems try to be viewpoint-neutral, many of these systems reflect outdated or limited views. These systems should be regularly reviewed and updated to address biases, use current language, and better reflect a diverse, multicultural society.

Prejudicial labels are used to try to influence opinions or behaviors and restrict access, which is a form of censorship. The ALA opposes using labels to bias people's views about library resources. These types of labels might be based on a value judgment about:

- the content;
- language;
- themes; or
- the background or views of the creator.

These labels often mark materials as inappropriate or offensive for certain groups of users. They are used to warn, discourage, or block access. Sometimes, libraries use these labels to move materials to restricted areas. This may mean making materials harder to find by separating them from other similar items in the collection or requiring staff assistance to use them.

Directional aids can have the same effect as prejudicial labels when they make it more difficult to access materials. Directional aids should be used to help users locate items. If they are used to restrict access or imply moral or doctrinal approval, they function as prejudicial labeling. Even labels with good intentions can have this effect.

Libraries that use prejudicial labeling assume they know what is appropriate for users. They also assume people need guidance in deciding what ideas to explore. The ALA opposes prejudicial labeling. Everyone has the right to form their own opinions about what they choose to read, listen to, or watch.

Rating Systems

Rating systems are tools or labels designed to guide people on whether materials are suitable or appropriate. The creators of these systems assume there is someone who can decide what is right for others. They also assume that people want or need help choosing what to access.

While creating and publishing rating systems is protected by the First Amendment's right to free speech, the ALA believes everyone has the right to form their own opinions about the content they use.

Using, enforcing, or approving of rating systems violates the *Library Bill of Rights*. It may also be unconstitutional if it restricts someone's access to library materials or resources. If a law requires libraries to enforce rating systems, the library leadership should seek legal advice to understand how it will affect library operations.

Libraries often acquire items with ratings, such as DVDs, CDs, and video games. Library workers should not approve or endorse these rating systems. However, removing or destroying ratings placed on the original item by the publisher, distributor, or copyright holder could be considered censorship.^[1]

Libraries should resist policies that restrict access based on a user's reading or age level. When libraries rate or label materials based on assumed age-appropriateness or readability levels, that may be perceived as restricting access. These systems can

stop users from choosing materials that interest them. It can also limit access to the library's full collection.

Some libraries add ratings in their bibliographic records because they accept standard records that include them. Others do so to provide as much information about the resource as possible. Including rating systems in library catalogs can conflict with intellectual freedom principles. Cataloging best practices do not require libraries to include ratings. If ratings are included, the source of the rating should be clear to users. Including ratings without proper attribution is a violation of the *Library Bill of Rights*. The library should not endorse rating systems and rating systems should never be used to restrict access to materials based on the age of a user. Such restrictions may violate the First Amendment rights of minors.^[iii]

Libraries can answer questions about rating systems without endorsing them. Library workers can share resources about rating systems to help users find the information they need. Staff may also guide users to review sources, which can help them form their own opinions about what to read, listen to, or watch.

Notes

[i] "Censorship by Altering Library Resources: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," adopted February 2, 1973, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; January 10, 1990; July 2, 2008; and July 1, 2014, under the previous name "Expurgation of Library Resources"; and June 29, 2025.

[ii] *Engdahl v. City of Kenosha*, 317 F. Supp. 1133 (E.D. Wis. 1970); *Motion Picture Ass'n of Am. v. Specter*, 315 F. Supp. 824 (E.D. Pa. 1970); *Swope v. Lubbers*, 560 F. Supp. 1328 (W.D. Mich. 1983); and *Rosen v. Budco*, 10 Phila. 112 (1983).

Adopted July 13, 1951, by the ALA Council; amended June 25, 1971; July 1, 1981; June 26, 1990; January 19, 2005; July 15, 2009; and July 1, 2014. Divided into two interpretations, "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," and "Ratings Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," both adopted June 30, 2015; both amended June 25, 2019. "Labeling Systems" and "Ratings Systems" merged into a single document, "Labeling and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," adopted May 29, 2025.