

Urban Libraries Council Sample Advocacy Letter #1
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Freedom to Read – the 21st Century Way

If this year is like other recent years, more Americans will visit and use their public library than will attend all the professional sporting events in the U.S. combined. We Americans use our libraries for many reasons -- from kids going for homework help, to seniors learning how to use a computer to stay in touch with family, to the do-it-yourself'er checking out a how-to book.

The common theme for all visits is the library as a place to learn, to discover, to connect with new ideas, and to read. But today, an important resource for millions of library users is at risk.

After decades of selling books to public libraries, several of the largest publishers are now refusing to sell the latest format -- e-books. Some publishers do make e-books available, but at very high prices, and others impose onerous restrictions on lending. These obstacles add up to keeping e-books, including half of the New York Times best seller list, out of the hands of adults and children who rely on the public library for reading material.

E-books --- are here to stay. A study by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 20 percent of adults had read an e-book over the past year. And libraries are already responding to the demand. Today 76 percent of public libraries offer e-books to patrons and are looking for ways to purchase more e-books with fewer barriers.

How does it make any sense in the United States for publishers to refuse to sell to public libraries? Libraries represent some of the core values of this country -- the freedom to read, the freedom to learn, and universal access to books. How does it make any sense to withhold e-books from people who depend on libraries? Americans lives are increasingly dependent on electronic tools. Why would we accept that Americans will not have access to e-books via the public library?

In the 21st century, a great many tools that we and our children use are digital. Paper maps are now digitized and navigation systems keep us from getting lost. E-mail enables the work of teams scattered across multiple offices; text messages keep families connected. Kids learn more and faster with digital media. Electronic devices and what they accomplish are no longer nice to have, they are essential.

Public librarians can't resolve the e-book issue alone. They need citizens and leaders to lend their voices of concern about the importance of the freedom to read and learn through your public library. What can you do? Make your local and state elected officials and members of Congress aware of publishers' refusal to sell e-books to libraries. Join your local librarians and ask elected officials to tell publishers that everyone deserves the freedom to read -- in the 21st century way.

Libraries and E-Books: Preserving the Freedom to Read

Public libraries are champions of books and defenders of your freedom to read. They provide a wide variety of reading materials and access for all. It's an important role because a free society depends on freedom to read to ensure universal access to information, new ideas, different opinions, learning through books, and knowledge. These activities are protected by the U.S. Constitution.

But, the freedom to read through your public library could be in jeopardy.

Several major publishers have refused to sell or license e-books to public libraries. Some make e-books available at very high prices or impose heavy restrictions on their use. Those obstacles severely limit library e-book selections – particularly the most popular books – and make it inconvenient for people to get e-books through their library. The projected growth of e-books over the next five years could transform that inconvenience into an encroachment on your freedom to read.

E-books are here to stay. A recent Pricewaterhouse Coopers report projects that by the year 2016, e-books will make up 50 percent of the U.S. trade book market, and spending on printed books will be limited. A study by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 20 percent of adults had read an e-book over the past year. And libraries are already responding to the trend with 76 percent offering e-books as part of their collections and 39 percent lending e-readers.

It is possible that, in the not-too-distant future, new books may only be published in digital format. When that happens, those with an e-book reader, a credit card, and disposable income will have the most freedom to read – creating a deeper-than-ever digital divide and, even worse, a significant knowledge divide.

And that would be far more than an inconvenience.

Just as libraries have reinvented themselves over the years to adjust to dramatic changes in research needs, reading habits, and lending practices, traditional book publishers must reinvent their business models and their relationships with libraries to meet their bottom lines while continuing to support broad access.

Librarians and library organizations across the country are drawing attention to the challenges of e-book access and trying to get publishers to change their practices. Right now, there are discussions and pilots underway between some publishers and some libraries to develop mutually acceptable models for e-book library lending. These discussions will be productive only if they lead to broad action to make e-books available to all libraries for use by the reading public with no strings attached.

But libraries and librarians can't resolve this important universal access issue alone. They need readers, stakeholders, and policy makers to voice their concerns about the importance of preserving the freedom to read despite changes in what books look like today. The basic right to read hasn't changed—only the vehicle for delivering books to anyone and everyone seeking information, opinions, knowledge, and the pure joy of sitting down with a good book.

You can support this effort by reaching out to community stakeholders, local and state elected officials, and your members of Congress to make them aware of the e-book lending challenge and to get their support for preserving universal freedom to read and for encouraging committed collaboration between libraries and publishers.

Because your freedom to read is worth fighting for.

