



National Council of  
Teachers of English

## The Students' Right to Read

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***The NCTE Executive Committee reaffirmed this guideline in November 2012.***

*This statement was originally developed in 1981, revised April 2009 to adhere to NCTE's Policy on Involvement of People of Color, and revised again in September 2018.*

**Overview:** The Students' Right to Read provides resources that can be used to help discuss and ensure students' free access to all texts. The genesis of the Students' Right to Read was an original Council statement, "Request for Reconsideration of a Work," prepared by the Committee on the Right to Read of the National Council of Teachers of English and revised by Ken Donelson. The current Students' Right to Read statement represents an updated second edition that builds on the work of Council members dedicated to ensuring students the freedom to choose to read any text and opposing "efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others." Supported through references from text challenges and links to resources, this statement discusses the history and dangers of text censorship which highlight the breadth and significance of the Students' Right to Read. The statement then culminates in processes that can be followed with different stakeholders when students' reading rights are infringed.

### The Right to Read and the Teacher of English

For many years, American schools have been pressured to restrict or deny students access to texts deemed objectionable by some individual or group. These pressures have mounted in recent years, and English teachers have no reason to believe they will diminish. The fight against censorship is a continuing series of skirmishes, not a pitched battle leading to a final victory over censorship.

We can safely make two statements about censorship: first, any text is potentially open to attack by someone, somewhere, sometime, for some reason; second, censorship is often arbitrary and irrational. For example, classics traditionally used in English classrooms have been accused of containing obscene, heretical, or subversive elements such as the following:

- Plato's *Republic*: "the book is un-Christian"
- Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*: "very unfavorable to Mormons"
- Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: "a filthy book"

- Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "too violent for children today"
- Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: "a poor model for young people"
- Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: "contains homosexuality"

Modern works, even more than the classics, are criticized with terms such as "filthy," "un-American," "overly realistic," and "anti-war." Some books have been attacked merely for being "controversial," suggesting that for some people the purpose of education is not the investigation of ideas but rather the indoctrination of a certain set of beliefs and standards. Referencing multiple years of research completed by the American Library Association (ALA), the following statements represent complaints typical of those made against modern works of literature:

- D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: "profanity, lurid passages about sex, and statements defamatory to minorities, God, women, and the disabled"
- John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: "uses the name of God and Jesus in a vain and profane manner"
- Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson's *And Tango Makes Three*: "anti-ethnic, anti-family, homosexuality, religious viewpoint, unsuited to age group"
- Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "promotes racial hatred, racial division, racial separation, and promotes white supremacy"
- Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*: "occult/Satanism, offensive language, violence"
- Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: "offensive language, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group"
- Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings's *I Am Jazz*: "inaccurate, homosexuality, sex education, religious viewpoint, and unsuited for age group"

Some groups and individuals have also raised objections to literature written specifically for young people. As long as novels intended for young people stayed at the intellectual and emotional level of *A Date for Marcy* or *A Touchdown for Thunderbird High*, censors could forego criticism. But many contemporary novels for adolescents focus on the real world of young people—drugs, premarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, gangs, school dropouts, racism, violence, and sensuality. English teachers willing to defend classics and modern literature must be prepared to give equally spirited defense to serious and worthwhile children's and young adult novels.

Literature about minoritized ethnic or racial groups remains "controversial" or "objectionable" to many adults. As long as groups such as African Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinxs "kept their proper place"—awarded them by a White society—censors rarely raised their voices. But attacks have increased in frequency as minoritized groups have refused to observe their assigned "place." Though nominally, the criticisms of literature about minoritized racial or ethnic groups have usually been directed at "bad language," "suggestive situations," "questionable literary merit," or "ungrammatical English" (usually oblique complaints about the different dialect or culture of a group), the underlying motive for some attacks has unquestionably been discriminatory. Typical of censors' criticisms of ethnic works are the following comments:

- Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "homosexuality, offensive language, racism, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group"
- Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: "occult/Satanism, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit, violence"
- Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: "sexual violence, religious themes, 'may lead to terrorism'"
- Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*: "anti-family, cultural insensitivity, drugs/alcohol/smoking, gambling, offensive language, sex education, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group, violence, depictions of bullying"

Books are not alone in being subject to censorship. Magazines or newspapers used, recommended, or referred to in English classes have increasingly drawn the censor's fire. Few libraries would regard their periodical collection as worthwhile or representative without some or all of the following publications, but all of them have been the target of censors on occasion:

- *National Geographic*: "Nudity and sensationalism, especially in stories on barbaric foreign people."
- *Scholastic Magazine*: "Doctrines opposing the beliefs of the majority, socialistic programs; promotes racial unrest and contains very detailed geography of foreign countries, especially those inhabited by dark people."
- *National Observer*: "Right-wing trash with badly reported news."
- *New York Times*: "That thing should be outlawed after printing the Pentagon Papers and helping our country's enemies."

The immediate results of demands to censor books or periodicals vary. At times, school boards and administrators have supported and defended their teachers, their use of materials under fire, and the student's right of access to the materials. At other times, however, special committees have been formed to cull out "objectionable works" or "modern trash" or "controversial literature." Some teachers have been summarily reprimanded for assigning certain works, even to mature students. Others have been able to retain their positions only after initiating court action.

Not as sensational, but perhaps more important, are the long range effects of censoring the rights of educators and students to self-select what they read and engage with. Schools have removed texts from libraries and classrooms and curricula have been changed when English teachers have avoided using or recommending works which might make some members of the community uncomfortable or angry. Over the course of their schooling, many students are consequently "educated" in a system that is hostile to critical inquiry and dialogue. And many teachers and other school staff learn to emphasize their own sense of comfort and safety rather than their students' needs.

The problem of censorship does not derive solely from the small anti-intellectual, ultra-moral, or ultra-patriotic groups which will typically function in a society that guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The present concern is rather with the frequency and force of attacks by others, often people of good will and the best intentions, some from within the teaching profession. The National Council of Teachers of English, the National Education Association, the American

Federation of Teachers, and the American Library Association, as well as the publishing industry and writers themselves agree: pressures for censorship are great throughout our society.

The material that follows is divided into two sections. The first on "The Right to Read" is addressed to parents and the community at large. The other section, "A Program of Action," lists Council recommendations for establishing professional committees in every school to set up procedures for book selection, to work for community support, and to review complaints against texts.

*Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the free intellect. . . . A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she [sic] becomes instead a pipe line for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.*

—Justice William O. Douglas, United States Supreme Court: *Adler v. Board of Education*, 1951

## **The Right to Read**

An open letter to our country from the National Council of Teachers of English:

The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways, education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large.

One of the foundations of a democratic society is the individual's right to read, and also the individual's right to freely choose what they would like to read. This right is based on an assumption that the educated possess judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of their own actions. In effect, the reader is freed from the bonds of chance. The reader is not limited by birth, geographic location, or time, since reading allows meeting people, debating philosophies, and experiencing events far beyond the narrow confines of an individual's own existence.

In selecting texts to read by young people, English teachers consider the contribution each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability for a particular group of students, and its appeal to young children and adolescents. English teachers, however, may use different texts for different purposes. The criteria for choosing a text to be read by an entire class are somewhat different from the criteria for choosing texts to be read by small groups.

For example, a teacher might select John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* for reading by an entire class, partly because the book has received wide critical recognition, partly because it is relatively short and will keep the attention of many slower readers, and partly because it has proved popular with many students of widely differing skill sets. The same teacher, faced with the responsibility of choosing or recommending books for several small groups of students, might select or recommend books as different as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, Marjane Satrapi <sup>[1]</sup>'s *Persepolis*, Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, or Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, depending upon the skills and interests of the students in each group.

And the criteria for suggesting books to individuals or for recommending something worth reading for a student who casually stops by after class are different from selecting material for a class or group. As opposed to censoring, the teacher selects texts, and also helps guide students to self-select them. Selection implies that one is free to choose a text, depending upon the purpose to be achieved and the students or class in question, but a book selected this year may be ignored next year, and the reverse. Censorship implies that certain works are not open to selection, this year or any year.

Wallace Stevens once wrote, "Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add / provided life is the better part of literature" (1957). Students and parents have the right to demand that education today keep students in touch with the reality of the world outside the classroom. Many of our best literary works ask questions as valid and significant today as when the literature first appeared, questions like "What is the nature of humanity?" "Why do people praise individuality and practice conformity?" "What do people need for a good life?" and "What is the nature of a good person?" English teachers must be free to employ books, classic or contemporary, which do not hide, or lie to the young, about the perilous but wondrous times we live in, books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be. English teachers forced through the pressures of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of humanity.

The teacher must exercise care to select or recommend works for class reading and group discussion. One of the most important responsibilities of the English teacher is developing rapport and respect among students. Respect for the uniqueness and potential of the individual, an important facet of the study of literature, should be emphasized in the English class. One way rapport and respect can be developed is through encouraging the students themselves to explore and engage with texts of their own selection. Also, English classes should reflect the cultural contributions of minoritized groups in the United States, just as they should acquaint students with diverse contributions by the many peoples of the world. Finally, the teacher should be prepared to support and defend their classroom and students' process in selecting and engaging with diverse texts against potential censorship and controversy.

## **The Threat to Education**

Censorship leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values, and problems of their culture. Writers may often represent their culture, or they may stand to the side and describe and evaluate that culture. Yet partly because of censorship or the fear of censorship, many writers are ignored or inadequately represented in the public schools, and many are represented in anthologies not by their best work but by their "safest" or "least offensive" work.

The censorship pressures receiving the greatest publicity are those of small groups who protest the use of a limited number of books with some "objectionable" realistic elements, such as *Brave New World*, *Lord of the Flies*, *George*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Catch-22*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. The most obvious and immediate victims are often found among our best and most creative English teachers, those who have ventured outside the narrow boundaries of conventional texts. Ultimately, however, the real victims are the students, denied the freedom to explore ideas and pursue truth wherever and however they wish.

Great damage may be done by book committees appointed by national or local organizations to pore over anthologies, texts, library books, and paperbacks to find passages which advocate, or seem to advocate, causes or concepts or practices these organizations condemn. As a result, some publishers, sensitive to possible objections, carefully exclude sentences or selections that might conceivably offend some group, somehow, sometime, somewhere.

## **The Community's Responsibility**

Individuals who care about the improvement of education are urged to join students, teachers, librarians, administrators, boards of education, and professional and scholarly organizations in support of the students' right to read. Widespread and informed support in and across communities can assure that

- enough residents are interested in the development and maintenance of a rigorous school system to guarantee its achievement;
- malicious gossip, ignorant rumors, internet posts, and deceptive letters to the editor will not be circulated without challenge and correction;
- news media will observe that the public sincerely desires objective reporting about education, free from slanting or editorial comment which destroys confidence in and support for schools;
- the community will not permit its resources and energies to be dissipated in conflicts created by special interest groups striving to advance their ideologies or biases; and
- faith in democratic processes will be promoted and maintained.

## **A Program of Action**

Censorship in schools is a widespread problem. Teachers of English, librarians, and school administrators can best serve students, literature, and the profession today if they prepare now to face pressures sensibly, demonstrating on the one hand a willingness to consider the merits of any complaint and on the other the courage to defend their literacy program with intelligence and vigor. The Council therefore recommends that schools undertake the following two-step program to protect the students' right to read:

- establish a diverse committee that is representative of the local school community to consider book selection procedures and to screen complaints; and
- promote a community atmosphere in which local residents may be enlisted to support the freedom to read.

## **Procedures for Text Selection**

Although one may defend the freedom to read without reservation as one of the hallmarks of a free society, there is no substitute for informed, professional, and qualified book selection. English teachers are typically better qualified to choose and recommend texts for their classes than persons not prepared in the field. Nevertheless, administrators have certain legal and professional responsibilities. For these reasons and as a matter of professional courtesy, they should be kept informed about the criteria and the procedures used by English teachers in selecting books and the titles of the texts used.

In each school, the English department should develop its own statement explaining why literature is taught and how books are chosen for each class. This statement should be on file with the administration before any complaints are received. The statement should also support the teacher's right to choose supplementary materials, to build a diverse classroom library, and to discuss controversial issues insofar as they are relevant. In addition, students should be allowed the right to self-select books to read from classroom and school library shelves.

Operating within such a policy, the English department should take the following steps:

- Establish a committee to support English teachers in finding exciting and challenging texts of potential value to students at a specific school. Schools without departments or small schools with a few English teachers should organize a permanent committee charged with the responsibility of alerting other teachers to new texts just published, or old texts now forgotten which might prove valuable in the literacy program. Students should be encouraged to participate in the greatest degree that their development and skill sets allow.
- Devote time at each department or grade-level meeting to reviews and comments by the above committee or plan special meetings for this purpose. Free and open discussions on texts of potential value to students would seem both reasonable and normal for any English department. Teachers

should be encouraged to challenge any texts recommended or to suggest titles hitherto ignored. Require that each English teacher give a rationale for any text to be read by an entire class. Written rationales for all texts read by an entire class would serve the department well if censorship should strike. A file of rationales should serve as impressive evidence to the administration and the community that English teachers have not chosen their texts lightly or haphazardly.

- Report to the administration the texts that will be used for class reading by each English teacher. A procedure such as this gives each teacher the right to expect support from fellow teachers and administrators whenever someone objects to a text.

### **The Legal Problem**

Apart from the professional and moral issues involved in censorship, there are legal matters about which NCTE cannot give advice. The Council is not a legal authority. Across the nation, moreover, conditions vary so much that no one general principle applies. In some states, for example, textbooks are purchased from public funds and supplied free to students; in others, students must rent or buy their own texts.

The legal status of textbook adoption lists also varies. Some lists include only those books which must be taught and allow teachers and sometimes students the freedom to select additional titles; other lists are restrictive, containing the only books which may be required for all students.

As a part of sensible preparations for handling attacks on books, each school should ascertain what laws apply to it.

### **Preparing the Community**

To respond to complaints about texts, every school should have a committee of teachers (and possibly students, parents, and other representatives from the local community) organized to

- inform the community about text selection procedures;
- enlist the support of residents, possibly by explaining the place of literacy and relevant texts in the educational process or by discussing at meetings of parents and other community groups the texts used at that school; and
- consider any complaints against any work. No community is so small that it lacks concerned people who care about their children and the educational program of the schools, and will support English teachers in defending books when complaints are received. Unfortunately, English teachers too often are unaware or do not seek out these people and cultivate their goodwill and support before censorship strikes.



## Defending the Texts

Despite the care taken to select worthwhile texts for student reading and the qualifications of teachers selecting and recommending books, occasional objections to a work will undoubtedly be made. All texts are potentially open to criticism in one or more general areas: the treatment of ideologies, of minorities, of gender identities, of love and sex; the use of language not acceptable to some people; the type of illustrations; the private life or political affiliations of the author or the illustrator.

Some attacks are made by groups or individuals frankly hostile to free inquiry and open discussion; others are made by misinformed or misguided people who, acting on emotion or rumor, simply do not understand how the texts are to be used. Others are also made by well-intentioned and conscientious people who fear that harm will come to some segment of the community if a particular text is read or recommended.

What should be done upon receipt of a complaint?

- If the complainant telephones, listen courteously and refer them to the teacher involved. That teacher should be the first person to discuss the text with the person objecting to its use.
- If the complainant is not satisfied, invite them to file the complaint in writing, but make no commitments, admissions of guilt, or threats.
- If the complainant writes, contact the teacher involved and have the teacher call the complainant.
- For any of the situations above, the teacher is advised to be aware of local contractual and policy stipulations regarding such situations, and keep a written record of what transpired during the complaint process.

An additional option is to contact the NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center to report incidents and seek further resources (<https://www2.ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/> <sup>[2]</sup>).

## Request for Reconsideration of a Text

Author \_\_\_\_\_

Paperback \_\_\_\_\_ Hardcover \_\_\_\_\_ Online \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Publisher (if known) \_\_\_\_\_

Website URL (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Request initiated by \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City / State / Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Complainant represents

\_\_\_\_ (Name of individual) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ (Name of organization) \_\_\_\_\_

- Have you been able to discuss this work with the teacher or librarian who ordered it or who used it?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- What do you understand to be the general purpose for using this work?

- Provide support for a unit in the curriculum?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- Provide a learning experience for the reader in one kind of literature?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- Provide opportunities for students self-selected reading experiences?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- Other \_\_\_\_\_

- Did the general purpose for the use of the work, as described by the teacher or librarian, seem a suitable one to you?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

If not, please explain.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- What do you think is the author's general purpose for this book?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- In what ways do you think a work of this nature is not suitable for the use the teacher or librarian wishes to carry out?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- What have been students' responses to this work?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

If yes, what responses did the students make?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- Have you been able to learn what qualified reviewers or other students have written about this work?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

If yes, what are those responses?

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- Would you like the teacher or librarian to give you a written summary of what qualified reviewers and other students have written about this book or film?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- Do you have negative reviews of the book?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- Where were they published?

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- Would you be willing to provide summaries of their views you have collected?

\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

- How would you like your library/school to respond to this request for reconsideration?

\_\_\_\_ Do not assign/lend it to my child.

\_\_\_\_ Return it to the staff selection committee/department for reevaluation.

\_\_\_\_ Other–Please explain

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- In its place, what work would you recommend that would convey as valuable a perspective as presented in the challenged text?

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Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

At first, the English teacher should politely acknowledge the complaint and explain the established procedures. The success of much censorship depends upon frightening an unprepared school or English department into some precipitous action. A standardized procedure will take the sting from the first outburst of criticism and place the burden of proof on the objector. When the reasonable objector learns that they will be given a fair hearing through following the proper channels, they are more likely to be satisfied. The idle censor, on the other hand, may well be discouraged from taking further action. A number of advantages will be provided by the form, which will

- formalize the complaint,
- indicate specifically the work in question,
- identify the complainant,

- suggest how many others support the complaint,
- require the complainant to think through objections in order to make an intelligent statement on the text and complaint (1, 2, and 3),
- cause the complainant to evaluate the work for other groups than merely the one they first had in mind (4),
- establish the familiarity of the complainant with the work (5),
- give the complainant an opportunity to consider the criticism about the work and the teacher's purpose in using the work (6, 7, and 8), and
- give the complainant an opportunity to suggest alternative actions to be taken on the work (9 and 10).

The committee reviewing complaints should be available on short notice to consider the completed "Request for Reconsideration of a Work" and to call in the complainant and the teacher involved for a conference. Members of the committee should have reevaluated the work in advance of the meeting, and the group should be prepared to explain its findings. Membership of the committee should ordinarily include an administrator, the English department chair, and at least two classroom teachers of English. But the department might consider the advisability of including members from the community and the local or state NCTE affiliate. As a matter of course, recommendations from the committee would be forwarded to the superintendent, who would in turn submit them to the board of education, the legally constituted authority in the school.

Teachers and administrators should recognize that the responsibility for selecting texts for class study lies with classroom teachers and students, and that the responsibility for reevaluating any text begins with the review committee. Both teachers and administrators should refrain from discussing the objection with the complainant, the press, or community groups. Once the complaint has been filed, the authority for handling the situation must ultimately rest with the administration and school board.

Freedom of inquiry is essential to education in a democracy. To establish conditions essential for freedom, teachers and administrators need to follow procedures similar to those recommended here. Where schools resist unreasonable pressures, the cases are seldom publicized and students continue to read works as they wish. The community that entrusts students to the care of an English teacher should also trust that teacher to exercise professional judgment in selecting or recommending texts. The English teacher can be free to teach literacy, and students can be free to read whatever they wish only if informed and vigilant groups, within the profession and without, unite in resisting unfair pressures.

## References

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