



OVERCOMING IDENTITY CENSORSHIP

Identity censorship happens when challenges are brought based on the personal identity of the author or the subject matter of a book. LGBTQ+ content is the most frequent target of identity censorship. Here's how you can fight back.

What has been targeted?

Identity censorship is based less on the content of a book or event and more on who created it and its intended audience. Many identity censorship efforts impact libraries and schools.

Book Bans and Challenges

Graphic novels that have been challenged or banned over the identity of characters or creators include:

- *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner
- *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier
- *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel
- *Love Is Love*, edited by Marc Andreyko, Sarah Gaydos, and Jamie S. Rich
- *My Brother's Husband* by Gengoroh Tagame
- *Sandman* by Neil Gaiman and various artists
- *Stuck Rubber Baby* by Howard Cruse
- *This One Summer* by Jillian and Mariko Tamaki

Cancellation of Events

Censors frequently target LGBTQ+ speakers. In summer 2019, the Leander Public Library in Texas canceled an event with author and transgender rights activist Lilah Sturges (*Lumberjanes: The Infernal Compass*). CBLDF led an effort to reverse the cancellation, which was likely an act of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community: Leander had canceled a Drag Queen Story Hour event just weeks earlier. Likewise, Drag Queen Story Hour has been canceled in other communities around the country.

Legislation

Lawmakers in several states, including Minnesota, Missouri, and Tennessee, are currently considering legislation targeting Drag Queen Story Hour events for children. If passed, the Missouri and Tennessee laws could result in fines and imprisonment for public library personnel found in violation. The Minnesota law would defund libraries that host Drag Queen Story Hour. CBLDF opposes these laws.

Why does representation in stories and events matter?

A broad range of identity representations reflects the world as it is and helps readers develop empathy and understanding of others. Further, readers deserve to see themselves reflected in reading materials and programs. Children who can identify with characters in books or event speakers subsequently recognize that they are as normal as anyone else rather than feeling like something is wrong with them. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ children, who may be sorting out who they are in an environment that doesn't accept them.

How do I deal with identity censorship?

Identity censorship is an especially emotional kind of censorship, so it's hard not to feel overwhelmed. As you handle identity censorship, it's important not to fight negative with negative and to respond when you have the capacity to do so calmly. A few tips follow.

Stand by Your Policies

Specific written policies about collection development and challenge management are essential tools, and adherence to your policies is vital to handling challenges. Policies should allow you to consider complaints objectively, ensuring that your institution serves the needs of everyone in your community. The American Library Association offers policy tips at <http://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport>. For information specific to comics, check out CBLDF's *Comics—Start Here!* at <http://cbldf.org/library/>

Be Prepared

Having a policy is just the first step—be sure to train all current and new staff in your policies and procedures. Use tools such as FAQs, talking points, and role playing to help staff prepare for potential challenges, and have periodic refreshers to make sure your team is on the same page.

Support the Intellectual Freedom of the Entire Community

Libraries have a broad mandate to provide for all members of a community. While some people may be opposed to a book or program, there are others who support access. Trying to debate the merits of a specific book or program can reinforce or escalate disagreement, so focus on the ways in which you're supporting intellectual freedom. Refusing to remove a book or cancel a program guarantees intellectual freedom rights for everyone, including opponents of the material.

Keep It Positive and Listen

Believe it or not, a challenge is a chance to bring people into a community mindset. Someone who raises a concern obviously cares, and an honest and factual conversation may bring them around to supporting intellectual freedom. Here are a few best practices for handling a complaint:

- Don't forget to breathe! In these kinds of situations, it's easy to get stuck in the emotions of the ideologies that are being presented. Take some time to calm down, and respond when you can do so clearly.
- Don't presume bad faith on people who approach you with an objection to a book or event. They are generally well-intentioned, and they have a right to be heard.
- Be empathetic, kind, and courteous. Start your response by acknowledging the speaker and thanking them for their concern.
- Be prepared to present facts, an explanation of the challenge process, and when a decision can be expected.

Keep in mind that some of your staff may disagree with your decision, as is their right. You don't want to censor them, but you also want a unified front. Develop talking points to help

What can individuals do to fight identity censorship?

A lot of this advice is aimed at librarians and administrators, but individuals have the power to fight identity censorship, too!

- **Stay informed!** Keep in touch with your local librarians and educators, and subscribe to news dedicated to free expression, such as CBLDF's weekly email newsletter.
- **Report censorship!** CBLDF can't help if we don't know about identity censorship! Contact CBLDF and other free speech fighters if you notice identity censorship in your community.
- **Speak up!** Attempts to ban books and cancel events rarely succeed when people speak out against them. Attend school board, PTA, or library meetings to defend challenged books and events. Write letters to local administrators, politicians, and newspapers. Be prepared to stand up for all books and events, even those you may not like—any successful ban opens the door to more censorship!

staff prepare, and encourage open and confidential conversation among staff and decision-makers.

Build Coalitions

You don't need to go it alone! Make sure your staff and board of directors are all on the same page. Contact CBLDF and other free expression advocates, whose expert staff can help you manage the situation with proactive resources, one-on-one advice, letters of support, and more.

Be Persistent

Controversy doesn't always disappear when an event is over or a book challenge has been decided. People may continue to object, so plan on defending the material again. Use each experience to improve your responses and training.

Get a firsthand account of identity censorship with the CBLDF webinar "Addressing Identity Censorship": <https://youtu.be/GX7oME7NwTw>

Visit cbldf.org for the latest censorship news and more resources!

Support this important work by becoming a member of the Fund! <http://cbldf.org/member>

Call CBLDF at the first sign of a First Amendment Emergency:
1-888-88-CBLDF • info@cbldf.org