

THE ABA RIGHT TO READ TOOLKIT

**How Booksellers and
Readers Can Resist
Book Bans**



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INTRODUCTION TO THE ABA RIGHT TO READ TOOLKIT

Why This, Why Now?

The **ABA Right to Read Toolkit** is part of a larger strategy by American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE), ABA's initiative defending free expression for readers and booksellers, to resist the insidious trend of book bans around the country. ABFE has recently enjoyed victories in court against legislation that would limit free expression, including preliminary injunctions in Arkansas and Texas.

Yet, despite these victories, booksellers still face a climate hostile to the right to read. This toolkit is a starting point in organizing our members to be resilient to these challenges in your day-to-day work.

How to Use It

The toolkit is designed to be modular and does not have to be read in full! Take what works for you and leave what doesn't. Jump right to the How-Tos if you just want practical guidance. Skip ahead to hear from the booksellers in our case studies. Follow the links if you want to see our source material.

The following sections are designed to address different needs:

The **"About Book Bans"** section contains the information you need to engage in informed discussion about the unprecedented moment of book-banning and censorship in which we find ourselves.

The **"How-Tos"** section has specific, actionable resources you can use to support the right to read in your bookstore and community, as well as resources to protect booksellers in the face of harassment and intimidation.

The **"What ABA Is Doing"** section gives you an update on ABA's strategy to defend the right to read and regions where we are having an impact.

The **"What Can I Do?"** section will provide a checklist of things to do after you finish browsing the Toolkit to make a difference.

The **Appendix** contains additional tools and resources.

Throughout, **Case Studies** have been included tapping the collective experience of store owners, booksellers, and the wider bookselling community.



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EMAIL ICON: *Contact the Advocacy team by email*



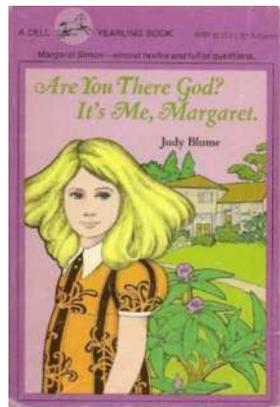
**ABOUT
BANNED
BOOKS »»**

WHY ARE WE BANNING BOOKS AGAIN? A RECENT HISTORY OF BOOK BANS

When did book bans come back, and how extensively?

Book bans are not new to American life, but they are back with a vengeance. The practice goes back to bans of books like Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* in the 1970s and '80s, McCarthyism's "Red Scare" in the 1950s, and burnings of anti-slavery books in the South in the period leading up to and during the Civil War.

The last few years have seen the beginning of another such era. And, as [Judy Blume herself put it earlier this year](#), "It is back so much worse than it was in the 80s." The current period of censorship is more polarizing and more legislative, with state laws backing book bans that reflect a larger national culture war.



[According to PEN America](#), the 2022-2023 school year saw an increase of 33% from the 2021-2022 school year. PEN found 3,362 instances of books being banned, impacting 1,557 unique titles. This only accounts for book bans that have been reported directly to PEN or covered elsewhere. The real number is almost certainly higher.

Why are books being banned?

Some topics have been subject to a small but consistent trickle of book challenges for a long time: witchcraft, sex, drug use, violence, and profanity. Almost any book depicting magic has long been subject to censorship from religious groups objecting to depictions of witchcraft. *Huckleberry Finn* has been [subject to restriction](#) for its inclusion of racial slurs.

In recent years, the nature of these challenges has changed to become more targeted and more partisan. Content by, about, and for LGBTQ+ people and people of color is particularly under attack. Of 1,648 titles banned in the 2021-2 school year, [according to PEN America](#), 41% contain LGBTQ+ themes or characters and 40% contain protagonists or secondary characters of color.

Children's books are especially under scrutiny for these themes. Of challenges to picture books [reviewed by the Washington Post](#) from the 2021-2022 school year, 75% target LGBTQ+ content and 25% target books that mention race or merely include characters of color.

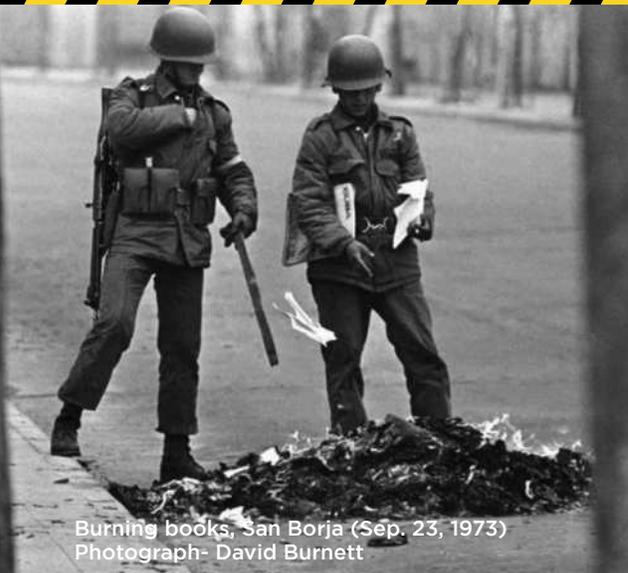
Who is banning books?

The book banning movement frames itself as being about parental rights, but in fact it constitutes a small number of parents restricting the rights of a larger number of people. [According to The Washington Post](#), 11 individuals were responsible for 60% of all book challenges filed in 2021-2022.

This partisan minority is able to be effective because they are organized. [According to PEN America](#), 74% of book bans from the 2021-2022 school year were connected to organized political movements. One of the main groups pushing content-based restrictions is Moms for Liberty, an organization with chapters across the country, whose [materials frequently object](#) to "critical race theory," "gender ideology," and diversity, equity, and inclusion movements in education.

Book bans in political context

This spike in content-based book bans should be understood in the context of a larger movement of censorship. Public statements defending racial justice have been in a harsh



Burning books, San Borja (Sep. 23, 1973)
Photograph- David Burnett



Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, pastor burns books,
January 2022

national spotlight, especially since 2016 — for example, when quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem at an NFL game in September 2016. This pushback has recently culminated in anti-historical whitewashing of education about slavery in Florida school districts (among others). LGBTQ+ speech has faced targeted restrictions, most recently in the censure of Montana State Representative Zooey Zephyr, attacks on Pride displays at Target and beyond, and “Don’t Say Gay” education bills in several states.

In short, this is not merely a movement to ensure age-appropriate educational material. It is part of a renascent censorship movement with a pattern of targeting marginalized groups. Nor is it a free and open discussion of educational priorities. It is a small number of parents whose extreme views are being allowed to narrow the education of children across the country.

How are booksellers affected?

While many book challenges explicitly target libraries and schools, booksellers are also affected as vendors to those school districts and as champions of reading, literacy, and historically marginalized authors. In addition, recent legislation poses a more direct challenge to booksellers.

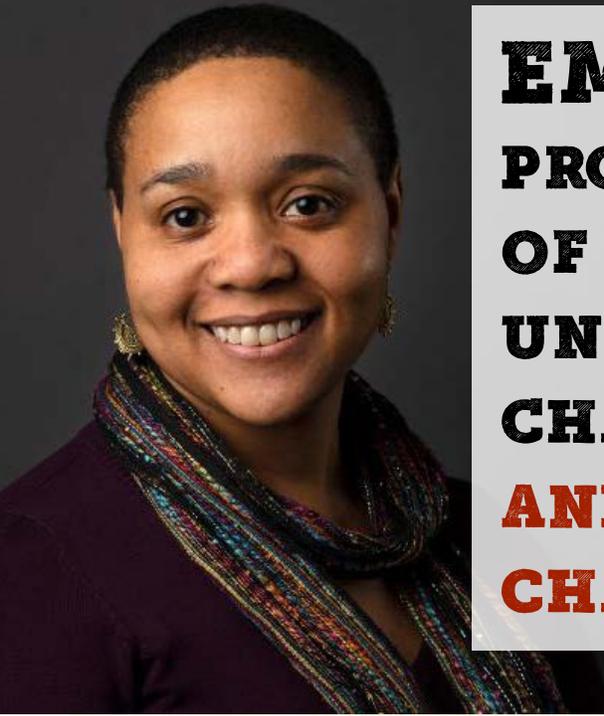
Arkansas recently passed and signed into law Act 372, which would have made it illegal to possess or distribute material deemed “obscene.” At worst, booksellers could

have been liable for a Class D felony for not upholding an ill-defined and political content-based restriction. At best, the vagueness of the law itself would have a chilling effect on the circulation and teaching of “sensitive” material.

Act 372 did not go into effect as scheduled, however, thanks to a preliminary injunction issued in response to a legal challenge by ABA, WordsWorth Books, Pearl’s Books, and other coalition partners. We will continue to seek a permanent injunction.

Texas HB900 would force any Texas bookseller selling books to school libraries to somehow review and rate “sexual content” in any book sold to a school district in the past, present, or future, potentially retroactively rating and recalling many thousands of books from previous sales before conducting future business with schools. It is an unreasonable requirement based on vague and subjective definitions. Moreover, independent bookstores do not have the resources to review these materials as required. The requirement would give an even greater competitive advantage to Amazon and other large corporations with the resources to meet it and threaten small booksellers’ ability to sell to educational institutions.

Texas HB900 did not go into effect as scheduled because of a preliminary injunction issued in response to a legal challenge by ABA, Blue Willow Bookshop, BookPeople, and other coalition partners. We will continue to seek a permanent injunction.



EMILY KNOX, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN THE SCHOOL OF INFORMATION SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF URBANA-CHAMPAIGN, ON THE MEANING AND CONTEXT OF BOOK CHALLENGES TODAY

Dr. Emily Knox, Associate Professor in the School of Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is the author of *Book Banning in 21st-Century America* (2015) and *Foundations of Intellectual Freedom* (2023). She recently gave testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee as part of a hearing on book bans.

Your first book, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, was published in 2015. In September 2023, you gave testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee at a hearing on book bans and intellectual freedom. How has the issue of book bans changed in the years since your first book came out?

“Well, there are many more book challenges. Basically, we have a crisis right now. The culture warriors have come to libraries, schools, and sometimes booksellers. That is what’s different. The volume is unprecedented, but the reasons for the challenges are not. The only previous time when there were this many challenges was during

the ‘Satanic Panic’ in the 1980s [and] the 1950s with the Red Scare. The reason I bring up the Red Scare is that, like what we are seeing right now, it was a struggle over what it means to be American and how we think about the world that we live in and society. [As opposed to the Satanic Panic,] the Red Scare was much more about, ‘I don’t trust my neighbors. I don’t like what may be taught in schools.’ Today, due to social media, people are much more able to get in touch with each other and bring their concerns directly to the board and find other people who share similar concerns.”

Why are so many book challenges targeting books about Black history, and what is at stake in defending against them?

“Because Lost-Causism has never gone away — the idea of the rehabilitation of the South after the Civil War. The idea that when you teach American history, it should always be triumphant, and triumphant in a very particular way. It is okay if Black people suffer a little bit, but you must triumph over that suffering, and you can’t talk too much about it. This is a continual discussion within American society: that we are supposed to be a light on the hill [but] we have this history of genocide and slavery. In fact, these books have always been targeted. But people were very upset about *The 1619 Project*. The idea that the newspaper of record [*The New York Times*] would

take this up really just drove some people nuts.

“[The current backlash] came out of two things: the pandemic and the protests against the murder of George Floyd. I think a lot of parents were surprised to see their kids on the streets protesting the murder of George Floyd in tiny towns across America. And during the pandemic, classrooms came home. I don’t think people realized how much pedagogy had changed in the last 20 years.”

How do you think we should understand the disproportionate number of challenges to books with LGBTQ+ content?

“For book challengers, any book about LGBTQ+ issues is about sex by definition. No matter what the book is about — penguins, a Pride parade, going to the park, it doesn’t matter — it is about sex. Once you start with that understanding, you can see where the arguments come from. What has been surprising is how backlash to the legalization of same-sex marriage has come up now. People thought things were settled, and they are not. When things are not settled, people focus locally, on their schools, libraries, and bookstores. It’s a way of saying, ‘Well, I can’t do much on the federal level, but I can turn to my local community to say what my values are, and these institutions in my local community should support my values.’ ”

A common claim of book challengers is that they aren’t banning books. They often say that a book is not banned if it has merely been relocated in the library, made to require parental consent, or if it’s available for sale. How would you respond?

“It’s really important to many people that they not be seen as a ‘censor.’ The word ‘censor’ is similar to the word ‘racist’: people don’t like to be called racist, they don’t like to be called ‘censor.’ What I think about is, are you impeding access to the materials?

That’s really what censorship is about. I’m using the term ‘censorship’ and not ‘banning’ because banning is a particular type of censorship. I talk about censorship practices in which people engage [in terms of] four R’s: redaction, restriction, relocation, and removal. Removal is banning, but the others are also censorship practices.”

One premise of your work is that we should take the stated reasons for these challenges seriously and seek to understand rather than dismiss them, even if we object. How do you think this practice could be adopted by intellectual freedom advocates today?

“It really shows why reading matters, why reading is so important, and why people love books. You would not bother trying to censor a book if you did not think reading was important. In fact, our entire society is built on literacy. Reading, being able to read, is so important that we can’t even think of education without thinking about reading. But reading is risky. It opens you up to new ideas that may or may not mesh with the ideas of your family, your parents. It really is something that can change who you are. In the intellectual freedom community, we have to take that seriously. Reading entails risk, but it is still important to make reading available to everybody. [It’s about] discernment, how to think clearly about [your] choices.”

What is the most important thing advocates of free expression in the book community can do right now to support the right to read?

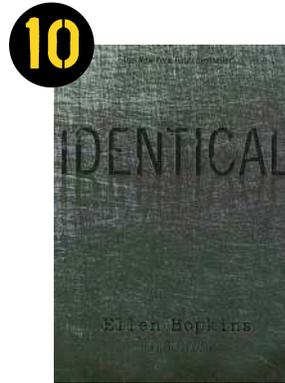
“Taking care of your own mental health and safety. That is actually the most important thing to do. Your safety matters more than anything. You have to know your community and who you can call on. But it’s important to stand up for the right to read. That’s part of our human rights. But also, solidarity. You have to work with other people. Do not go it alone.”

MOST BANNED BOOKS OF THE 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR

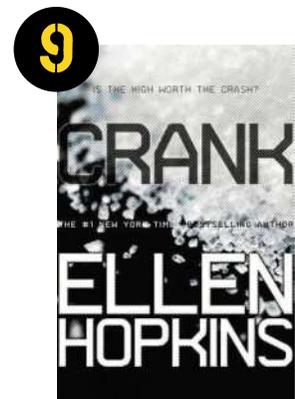
Based on a [study by PEN America](#). Links to [Bookshop.org](#).



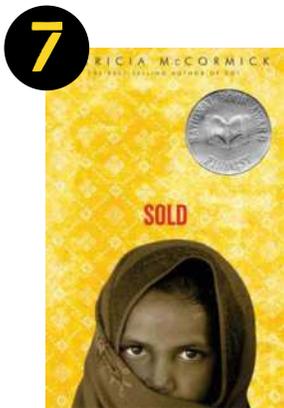
TIE! *Empire of Storms*, by Sarah J. Maas



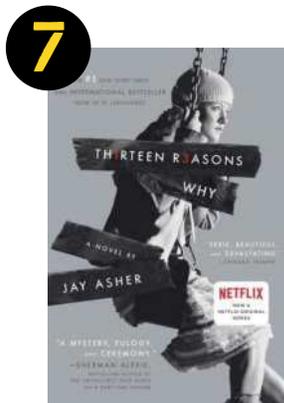
TIE! *Identical*, by Ellen Hopkins



Crank, by Ellen Hopkins



TIE! *Sold*, by Patricia McCormick



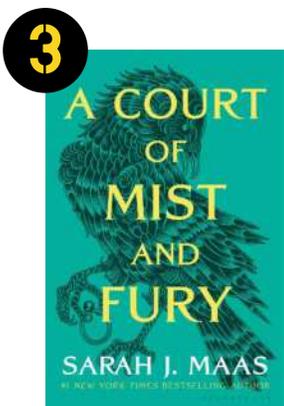
TIE! *Thirteen Reasons Why*, by Jay Asher



The Perks of Being a Wallflower, by Stephen Chbosky



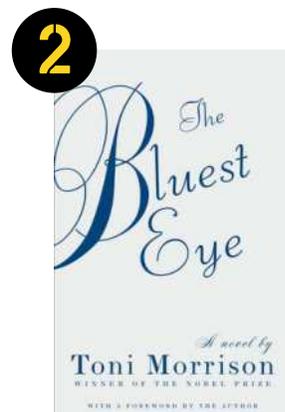
Gender Queer: A Memoir, by Maia Kobabe



TIE! *A Court of Mist and Fury*, by Sarah J. Maas



TIE! *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green



The Bluest Eye, by Toni Morrison

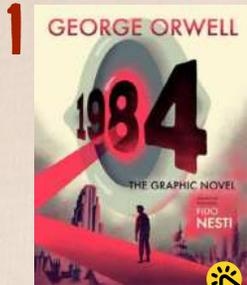


Tricks, by Ellen Hopkins

QUIZ

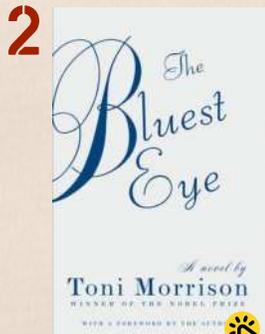


"WHY WAS THIS BOOK BANNED?"



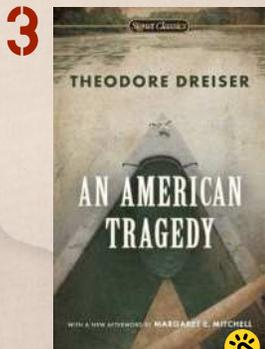
1 **1984: The Graphic Novel, George Orwell and Fido Nesti**

- A Thoughtcrime
- B Sexual content
- C Book banners love irony
- D "The original was better"



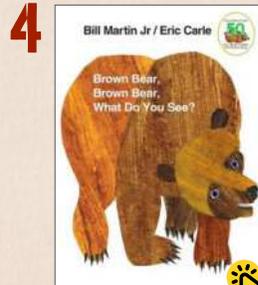
2 **The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison**

- A "EDI" (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) content
- B Frankly, they prefer *Beloved*
- C Inappropriate use of a superlative. Can something really be the "bluest"?
- D How do we know that I see the same color blue that you see, and that my blue isn't your red? ...Woah. I just blew my own mind.



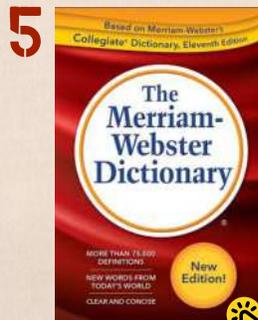
3 **An American Tragedy, Theodore Dreiser**

- A Dreiser was a member of the American Communist Party
- B The implication that tragedy could occur in America
- C Too much Zolaesque description
- D We don't know, because AI made the decision



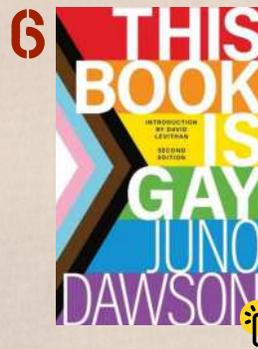
4 **Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? Bill Martin and Eric Carle**

- A What *does* Brown Bear see? It could be obscene!
- B Bears are scary
- C Brown Bear is a furry
- D Author was confused for a different Bill Martin, author of *Ethical Marxism* — which, by the way, is also constitutionally protected free speech



5 **The Merriam-Webster Dictionary**

- A Kids can't talk back if they don't know any words!
- B A word's meaning is historically unstable and cannot be prescriptively defined
- C Includes an accurate definition of the term "oral sex"
- D "It was just too dense, I couldn't get through it"



6 **This Book is Gay, Juno Dawson**

- A ...
- B ...
- C ...
- D I mean, do we really have to ask?



SEE THE ANSWERS >

WHAT THEY SAY AND WHAT IT MEANS

Book bans use broad, vague language so they have free reign to target whatever they want. They also hide their censorious intent behind common-sense issues with broad appeal. Here are some of the phrases to take with a grain of salt.

WHAT THEY SAY:

“Reviewing educational materials for age-appropriateness”

WHAT IT MEANS:

It is indeed important to introduce children to age-appropriate material. Thankfully, school districts and librarians already do so. The contemporary movement seeks content-based restrictions that disproportionately restrict materials inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals and people of color. In other words, book bans.

WHAT THEY SAY:

“Pornography,” “sexual content,” “sexually relevant material”

WHAT IT MEANS:

School libraries do not have pornography. The mere presence of LGBTQ+ people or identities is often falsely claimed to be sexual in nature. Artistic nudity, such as Michelangelo’s statue of David, is not always distinguished from pornography in these cases, nor are instructional discussions of anatomy.

WHAT THEY SAY:

“Grooming,” “sexualizing children,” “transing our kids”

WHAT IT MEANS:

Anti-grooming laws exist already in many of the states targeted by these challenges. Around the country, anti-LGBTQ+ activists are attacking queer and trans people with false claims of “grooming” children for sexual abuse. Meanwhile, the supposed anti-

grooming movement is silent on the [41 states where child marriage is legal](#) or the [20 states where there is no minimum age for marriage](#). (Oh, and “trans” is not a verb.)

WHAT THEY SAY:

“CRT/Critical Race Theory,” “SEL/Social and Emotional Learning”

WHAT IT MEANS:

Especially since 2020, there has been intense pushback to the recognition of systemic racism and/or acknowledgment of racism in America’s history and present. This is not the same as Critical Race Theory, which is an incredibly complex subject taught in law schools, not elementary schools, and shows how existing legal structures disadvantage people of color. Moms Against Liberty falsely claims that Social and Emotional Learning is a vehicle for Critical Race Theory. In fact, [Social and Emotional Learning](#) is an evidence-based approach to education that focuses on supporting students’ identities, emotions, and relationships with others. Both terms are essentially used as euphemisms for “talking about race,” cast in terms that make them seem overly ideological.

WHAT THEY SAY:

“Racist”

WHAT IT MEANS:

While some books may be banned for containing legitimately racist content, opponents of “CRT” often call books “racist” for identifying and critiquing white supremacy. Merely mentioning the existence of racism can sometimes be enough to see a book (somewhat paradoxically) deemed racist.



JONATHAN HAMILT, CO-FOUNDER OF DRAG STORY HOUR'S NYC CHAPTER, ON REPRESENTATION AND ITS BACKLASH

and it's a very tragic story. Imagine being a kid and finding books and media and musicians and artists that are positive, clear role models, that don't have a tragic end in life, that don't die from a disease, that don't have people damning you to hell. It will negate a lot of self-hate and self-harm, and make [LGBTQ+ youth] feel more secure."

What is Drag Story Hour?

"We are drag artists — kings and queens and all other royal beings — who read to kids at public schools, libraries, bookstores, and community centers all over the country and the world. We are a children's literacy 501(c)(3), and our mission is to spread literacy and love, and open doors and minds for kids to be bright lights of change in their communities. And we hope that when kids experience otherness at a young age, they can [become] adults who embrace the diversity of this world that we live in."

On the difference age-appropriate queer media can make...

"I am from the deep South, from Georgia. At 14-15 years old, the only kind of queer media I could get my hands on were *Rent* and *Angels in America*: two amazing pieces of theater, but also maybe not age-appropriate for a 14-year-old. Having to deal with the AIDS epidemic, and being unhoused, and being in '90s New York, and drugs — it's very heavy,

On choosing books for LGBTQ+-focused events...

"There are lots of great LGBT books for kids, but we mainly focus on picture books and books that are better for groups and for storytelling. We also try to stay away from books that include bullying, or teasing, of a main character. We also work with our performers to try to make all of the pronouns gender-neutral. A lot of the books you read are about animals or inanimate objects. They don't really need a gender. And the majority of the books we read are on the banned books list."

Resisting the chilling effects of book-ban legislation...

"It's extremely important for children to see themselves in books and see themselves in media. And it's way more important for LGBT kids to see themselves, and even more important for BIPOC kids to see themselves. There's a really low number of BIPOC characters in children's books and there's not a lot of intersectionality with those characters. And [the plot is] often about them being Black or them being gay. It's never, "Oh, I'm just gay and Black, and this is my story about something completely different." So we just need more diverse books, and I really hope they keep getting published and written and illustrated. I don't want that to be silenced. Because that's happened in history before, and we know how that turned out."

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT BANNED BOOKS

MYTH:

Inappropriate books are being forced on children in schools.

FACT: School administrators and libraries design curricula and reading materials suitable for each grade. No first grader is being forced to read books meant for teenagers or adults.

DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT. Email your child's teacher or school librarian and ask what your child is reading. Or even better, read the material, determine for yourself what is appropriate for your child, and let other parents do the same.

MYTH:

Pornographic books are in school curricula and libraries.

FACT: School libraries and curricula do not contain pornography and never have. They do contain books that deal with complex subjects and diverse characters and experiences, as they should. Books that have been challenged as "pornographic" often just include LGBTQ+ characters (such as children with two moms) or accurately depict diverse identities and lifestyles.

DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT. Ask to take a tour of the media center or library at your child's school.

MYTH:

School curricula and libraries are racist or promote racial grievance.

FACT: Parents of color who want their children to have books that promote self-confidence and empowerment have more options than ever, like Carolivia Herron and Joe Cepeda's *Nappy Hair*. So do parents of any race who want to raise their children to create a more racially just world, like Ibram X. Kendi and Ashley Lukashevsky's *Antiracist Baby*. Merely including diverse characters

or mentioning racial justice in a book can be enough to prompt a challenge in this climate.

DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT. Visit your local library and read some of [2022's most banned picture books](#) for yourself — not just the title or the cover, but the whole book. (They're short, we promise!)

MYTH:

There are no book-ban attempts; groups simply want to ensure children are reading age-appropriate material.

FACT: Schools and libraries already have highly trained professionals ensuring the age-appropriateness and educational value of the books students are reading. Librarians read and expertly curate books for children, while every state's department of education and school districts have guidelines in place to ensure reading materials are suitable for each grade. Outside groups claiming to ensure "age-appropriateness" are often trying to shut down access to books (which they often haven't read) because they dislike the content for various reasons (political, religious, cultural, and so on).

DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT. Find your state Department of Education's guidelines, your school board's guidelines, or ask your child's teacher or school librarian about their own guidelines for age-appropriateness.

MYTH:

Books are only being banned in red states or conservative areas.

FACT: Moms for Liberty and other conservative advocacy organizations are pumping money into school board elections to get their extremist candidates elected around the country.

DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT. Moms for "Liberty" brags about it on their website. (Need a palate cleanser? Check out Red Wine & Blue, who are going toe-to-toe with them nationwide.)



HOW - TOS
»»

MAKE AN EFFECTIVE BANNED BOOKS DISPLAY

Stand against censorship by featuring banned and inclusive titles in your displays.

BEST PRACTICES FOR BANNED BOOKS DISPLAYS

1. Lean into the “books are dangerous” motif.

Who doesn't like to do what they're not supposed to? Many effective banned books displays emphasize the forbidden nature of the books as a sales strategy. Elements might include caution tape, “beware” signs, references to danger, etc.

2. Pick your display location(s) thoughtfully.

Depending on how much of a statement you want to make, you might place your display in different locations, for example, the front window (high visibility), sandwich sign (high visibility), near the counter (medium visibility), or at a normal display table (lower visibility). In-store displays can be used in conjunction with online displays, like this one by Loudmouth Books, powered by Bookshop.org.

3. Curate your list for your community.

Consider focusing on books banned in your state or county, which could drive local advocacy. You can find local book bans in [PEN America's 2022 Index of Banned Books](#). For example, [River Dog Book Co.'s “Books Banned by Wisconsin School Districts”](#) list on Bookshop.org.

4. Use your list to surprise people.

Did you know that *Charlotte's Web* and *Beloved* have both been banned this century? Your readers might not. Consider books that are widely regarded as classics to drive home how ridiculous these bans are.

5. Make your list representational.

Book bans disproportionately target books by and about LGBTQ+ people and people of color. Consider curating your display to reflect this. You might also have multiple banned books displays focusing on different topics or identities. Take inspiration from [River Dog Book Co.'s “LGBTQ+ Banned Books List”](#) on Bookshop.org or Mahogany Books' [“Banned Black Books”](#) online display.

6. Tie sales to activism.

Consider including information about book ban legislation in your area or books banned by your local school districts. Donate a portion of your sales to a free expression advocacy organization. Or even just engage your customers in conversation on the issue.



**Snug Books
Baltimore, MD**

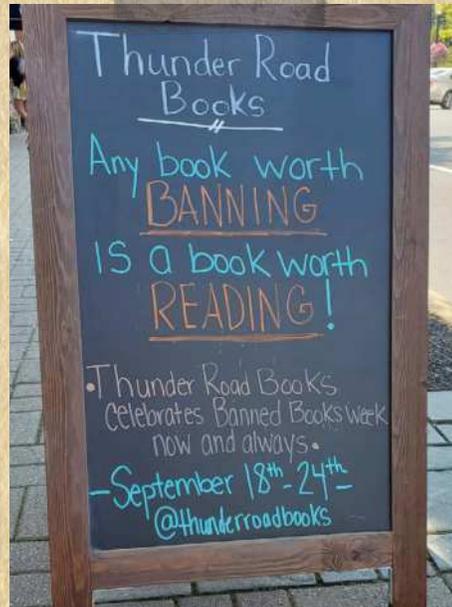
GORGEOUS EXAMPLES FROM OUR MEMBERS

Here are a few beautiful banned book displays from our members' stores.

Gathering Volumes
Perrysburg, OH



Thunder Road Books
Spring Lake, NJ



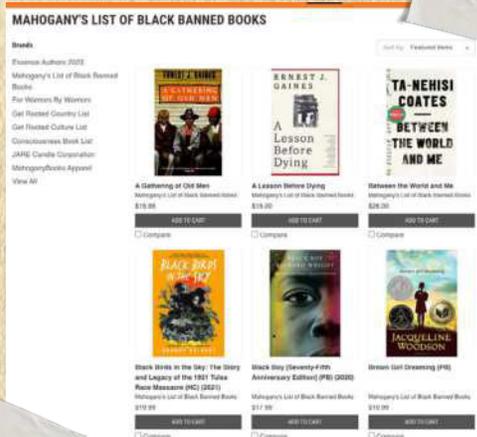
Powell's Books, Inc.
Portland, OR



Wheatberry Books
Chillicothe, OH



MahoganyBooks
Washington, DC



DEAL WITH "BOOK CHALLENGES" IN YOUR STORE

This subsection offers specific strategies you can use to respond to book challenges from customers in your store. The table below and the conversation tree that follows can be used to train booksellers.

Note: *It is highly recommended that you and/or your staff practice these aloud and figure out which strategies each individual feels most comfortable with.*

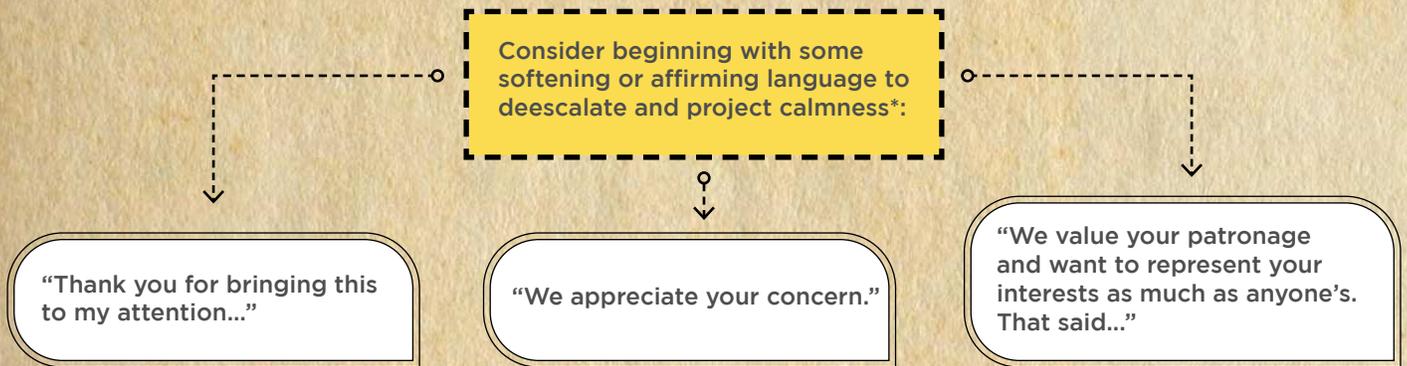
STRATEGIES	EXAMPLES
<p>CHALLENGE THE CHALLENGER</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask them to point to specific pages with offensive content. They may not be able to find one or refuse to try. • Create a form for customers to fill out if they want to challenge a book. Include page numbers as a required field in your customer concern form. • Look out for instances where representation (LGBTQ+ characters or themes, non-white characters or discussion of race) is being framed as inappropriate (pornography, racism). • Continually deflect from the general to the specific: presented with “this section is woke,” ask if they can tell you which specific titles they object to; then page number; then engage. • Ask the customer to translate vague ideological terms like “woke” into more specific complaints.
<p>PASS THE BUCK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BIPOC employees should not be the ones to field racially motivated challenges, nor should queer/trans employees have to field homophobic and transphobic challenges. Others should step in where possible. • If you are not a manager, send them to your manager. • Say you will bring it up with your manager, who is not here at the moment. • Say the material has been approved, has been judged age-appropriate, etc. Either stick with the passive voice or say the judgment was made by the publisher/book buyer/etc. • Give them a customer concern form to fill out.



STRATEGIES	EXAMPLES
<p>REFER TO STORE POLICY OR COMMUNITY STANDARDS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider having a diversity, equity, and inclusion policy or program for your store that staff can refer to, while being aware that some customers will object to discussion of DEI/EDI as “wokism.” • “The majority of our customers support this content, and we strive to represent the community. There are plenty of titles in our store that do not have LGBTQ+ content or political themes. I would be happy to show you some.”
<p>USE DEESCALATION STRATEGIES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay attention to how you say something as well as what you say: use soft tones when possible, match their volume/intensity and step it down gradually, do not be more aggressive than the customer. • Pay attention to non-verbal cues: maintain eye contact, sit if the person is sitting or stand if they are standing, and maintain personal distance (more than one arm’s length away). • Ask the customer if they can “walk with you” to defuse the situation, take a breath, or move to somewhere you have more support. • Don’t threaten, argue, challenge, order, or shame the other person. • Check out our “Top 10 Things to Know About: Non-Violent Communication & De-escalation” article and webinar.

SEE FLOWCHART >

Use the following flowchart or “decision tree” to craft your own preferred responses. They provide examples putting the above strategies into action. Don’t forget the deescalating language, and make sure to adapt them to suit your needs, community, and comfort.



IF THEY SAY...

YOU CAN SAY...

“Do you have any books by conservative politicians?” OR Ask for a specific title by a conservative politician and accuse you of bias for not having it OR Ask why you only have books by liberals and “Leftists”

“The politics section is over here. I’d be happy to order a specific title for you if we don’t have what you’re looking for.”

“Our inventory reflects the interests of our customers, and we haven’t had much interest in that book. I will make a note that you asked about it.”

In reference to LGBTQ+ content in the store/in the children’s section: “It is not appropriate to have this material where children can access it” OR “Stop sexualizing our children/trying to trans our children” OR Accusations of “grooming”

“Our store supports the LGBTQ+ community in many ways, including by carrying books by and for LGBTQ+ children and families.”

“There is no sexual content in the children’s section. Anything in this section has been deemed age-appropriate.”

“If you find a depiction of sexual activity in a book in this section, please show me the specific page [and I will report it to my manager].”

De-escalating Language



YOU CAN SAY...

IF THEY SAY...

"This book [which promotes anti-racism] is racist" OR "Stop pushing Critical Race Theory/CRT on our children" or "Children are too young to deal with race"



"We try to carry diverse books so that every reader/child can see themselves reflected in what they read."

"Critical race theory would be in the law or philosophy section. It is much too difficult for the children's section."

"We hope our books will reflect the complexity of the world in terms children can understand so they can navigate it more effectively."

"We respect your right to give your children whatever books you want, but we have a wide array of books so that parents can make their own decisions about what they want their children to read."

"Let me get a Customer Concern Form for you to fill out."

**Yes, these sound robotic. That is kind of the point! You want to seem unflappable, in control, and not do anything that escalates the situation. The point is safety, not clapping back or winning the argument.*

KEEP YOUR EVENTS SAFE IN A CHARGED CLIMATE

Every store needs to make their own decision about how controversial they allow their events to be. It is a matter of your store's location, resources, owner comfort, staff comfort, and community support. If you do decide to host events you think might provoke resistance, **here are some tips to keep your staff, event participants, and community safe:**

1. Identify events likely to prompt disruption.

This will depend on your location and the nature of your events. Events about LGBTQ+ issues and racial justice issues are most likely to warrant extra consideration (but that does not mean you should stop holding them!).

2. Consider whether the event itself is harmful.

An event itself may be harmful if it spreads misinformation about or incites violence against a group of people. BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities are especially under attack. As a best practice, consider whether events are in line with your DEI policy when scheduling. If it is, but employees are uncomfortable, consider letting them opt out of working an event. Better yet, survey your staff anonymously to gauge comfort with an event before scheduling it.

3. Contact other stores in the area.

What other booksellers in the area have held similar events? Find out how it went for them and if they have any recommendations.

4. Publicize events mindfully.

Advertisements in your store or sent to opt-in followers of your newsletter or social media will only reach your customers. Flyers or online advertisements and social media with a broader reach are more likely to attract negative attention.

- Physical advertisements: keep in-store, by word of mouth, or in friendly local stores with similar missions.

- Online advertisements: advertise on opt-in newsletters; set [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) advertisements to only reach your "Close Friends" list. (This list can be set to include all your followers, hiding it from anyone who doesn't follow you.)

5. In case of a bomb threat:

The US Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has [resources and suggestions](#) to help you deal with bomb threats. Check out their [video trainings](#) and [checklist](#).

6. Have a plan with assigned roles.

Do not leave it up to quick thinking in the moment. Write out a plan and assign specific roles to everyone working the event. Consider:

- When does the plan go into effect? When someone starts shouting? If people enter from outside to disrupt the event? Does the owner or manager give a particular signal?
- Who cuts the mic?
- Who engages the disruptors, and how? ([Check out CISA's De-escalation Series](#) and consider de-escalation training if occurrences are frequent.)
- Is there any need to shield children or other guests from offensive behavior? Consider adopting the tactics of [The Parasol Patrol](#).
- Where are the exits?
- If necessary, who ushers guests out, what is the best way to do so safely, and what is the signal to begin doing so?

- When do you call the authorities and whom do you call? Do you want police presence in your store? Do you need to call the police for insurance liability? What is your alternative last-resort if things get out of hand? **Keep in mind:** be aware when contacting police that police presence may introduce a perceived or actual threat to your staff members, customers, or community. If you must contact the police, consider going to the department in person to make your report. Check [outdontcallthepolice.com](https://www.outdontcallthepolice.com) for some options.
- [Check out CISA's guidelines](#) for more advice.

In case of disruptive protesters:

Note: The First Amendment protects everyone's right to assemble and express their views through protest. We support that right while condemning any action that promotes hate and bigotry. Further, protests may not block access to sidewalks or buildings, nor can they threaten harm.

- **Do not escalate.** Avoid direct eye contact, shouting, advancing on protestors, or any other behavior that could be construed as hostile.
- **Stop your supporters from escalating.** Nip any escalating behavior in the bud by firmly saying "No. We're not doing that."
- **Shield children or other guests from offensive behavior.** Consider adopting the tactics of The Parasol Patrol.
- **Maintain distance between protesters and counter-protesters.** Physical distance will allow you to control your supporters and prevent scuffles from breaking out.

- **Check permits ahead of time.** Depending on the specific layout of your store and laws in your area, there may be certain areas permits needed to protest on public property. Know these regulations, call to see if the protesters have obtained a permit, and use this to your advantage if applicable.
- **Counter hate with joy.** Instead of yelling back at protesters, start a dance party. Take the wind out of your opponents' sails by showing them you can't be intimidated.

8. Keep your supporters in the loop.

In the aftermath of a disruptive event, tell your customers and supporters what happened, what you did about it, and what you are doing going forward. Be prompt and do what you can to reassure people of the safety of your space and events. Consider issuing an immediate statement or post saying what happened and outlining any immediate effects to buy time for a more considered response in the coming days.

9. Debrief with your team.

Hold a meeting with your whole team to go over what happened, what worked and didn't work in the response, and how to put better structures in place for next time if applicable.

10. Contact ABA.

You can [reach out to us](#) before an event you're concerned about for advice. We can help you think about PR after the fact, refine your response plan for future events, or just offer a sounding board.





CHELSIA RICE, MONTANA BOOK COMPANY, HELENA, MT

7 TIPS FOR MOBILIZING YOUR COMMUNITY TO SECURE AN EVENT

Montana Book Company is a self-described “defender of equality, women, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC folks” and is avowedly anti-racist and anti-fascist. It is also in a red state. They’ve had their fair share of protesters, and co-owner Chelsia Rice has some tips on how to handle them.

Charlie Crawford (they/them, left) and Chelsia Rice (she/her, right). Co-owners and married for 10 years as of October 2023!

1. Look for advance signs of trouble.

“We anticipated that we would have protesters long before we were notified that they were coming [because of what] was happening around the nation with other drag events. Then it was posted on Facebook that people were making comments about disrupting us, all the typical things that you would expect from people who are homophobic. [At first,] we were thinking about just not alerting our customers so that we didn’t have people too afraid to come. Then we were contacted by the FBI and told the Oathkeepers were going to be coming to our events. A local organization that has tracked hate groups for a long time notified us as well.”

2. Have the right people in place for de-escalation.

“We had a meeting about what the best and worst case scenarios would be, our fears, our skills, our strengths, where we felt we would each be most useful,

and where we would potentially be more problematic. My people who are comfortable with potential conflict [volunteered] to be up front with Charlie, one of the owners, who is a veteran and doesn’t have the kind of fear that I have about [conflict]. These were people who were not interested in escalating. They were intent on not not engaging and making sure that the crowd who came out didn’t engage either. They were out front.

“We gave [de-escalation] responsibility to four people who stood away from the front of the store, in between the crowd that had gathered and the protesters. If somebody got excited and started yelling back, one of those people would turn back and say, ‘No, we’re not doing this, we’re not escalating, we’re not making eye contact, we’re not doing any of that stuff.’ Really a no-conflict approach.

“One of the people who tends to be more reactionary got charged with keeping the children in the back of the store, in the children’s section, safe if something was to happen, including having an alternate exit so people could be moved if they needed to be. I, as one of the owners, was in charge of the event, making sure that people were safely seated and organized and that there was a clear path for that as well.”

3. Contact allies strategically.

“Before we put it out publicly, I contacted some white, cisgender, heterosexual men in the community who are our allies. I said, ‘This is an important opportunity for allyship, and we would be so happy if you could come help keep everyone safe during this event.’ And that was a really important move, because all of them committed to it. Most of them had military experience. One of them was a retired sheriff’s deputy. So the people I was tapping into, I was tapping into strategically. They have experience with these things.

“And then we asked the public [via social media] to turn out. That was how we got our blockade of allies who stood outside in 100 degree weather and made sure that the protesters across the street weren’t [causing trouble]. We didn’t escalate them, and they stayed where they were.

“And even though there’s some contention about whether or not the police should be allowed at Pride events, I contacted our local police. A police officer came down to talk to me about what I was afraid of, what they’d heard, what they needed, what they knew. Two police were present on each side of the crowd. This was during Pride and the organizers also coordinated with law enforcement for extra support. I also contacted my mayor and my city commissioners, told them what was going on, and asked them to come out publicly and denounce it. A city commissioner said that they’d show up to protect the store, too. And so, it was really calling on the community to get people to come out.”

4. Coordinate with neighbors.

“Both years, I talked to my neighboring retailers to make sure they understood what was going on and see if they had any questions. We share a pass-through door with a boutique [next door], and I asked them if we had a problem if we could exit through their store. So kind of a neighborhood collaboration just to make sure everybody understood what was going on. And everybody on our block is an ally.”

5. Interrupt.

“This was an unintentional tactic, but on the way to work that morning, I said, ‘Hey, we should stop and get an air horn.’ It was just an idea. And when one of the men decided to pull out their bullhorn and start yelling at us towards the end, my spouse, who was in the middle of the street — when he tried to yell something through it, they hit the airhorn a couple of times to interrupt it, and every time he tried to yell, did it again. Again, they did not escalate by looking him in the face, but looked back over their shoulder at the store when they did it, and the crowd kind of laughed and cheered and clapped. It was quite joyful.”

6. Keep open lines of communications.

“We had walkie talkies. I had one with the event, which is upstairs. My spouse had one in the front. We had one at the front counter. And I think one or two outside, one in the back, one in the front, with people who are not standing with the crowd, but keeping an eye on the periphery. Everyone had the same channel. When the protesters left and began to move, I was notified in the event that they were moving north. And then when they were gone I was notified again.” We used earpieces to not startle the customers. We even had customers and community members in the neighborhood in cars and on foot in case people were coming in mass from any direction.”

7. Keep event to a manageable size

“Instead of one big show, which could have been potentially dangerous if somebody needed to escape, we did two small shows which were much more comfortable. Much safer, much more regulated. We had secret shoppers in the store, people who just milled around both events to make sure that people weren’t being shady or stealing, and several checkpoints to get into the actual area for the event.”

CAROLYN GODAVITARNE, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER OF POLITICS & PROSE, ON EVENT SAFETY

Carolyn talked to ABA's Advocacy Associate Manager about event security, one of her many roles at Politics & Prose. P&P is DC's largest independent bookstore and has multiple events daily across their several locations, as well as larger off-site events.



Plan ahead and give everyone a role...

“We have set procedures that I ask the floor staff to go through every single time. The number one thing is, you’ve got to have that plan ahead of time. The shift supervisor will assign a role so that if there’s a disruption in the store, everybody knows exactly what they’re supposed to do. For example, one event staff’s job is to turn off microphones, take away that platform as much as possible. Another event staffer will escort the author to a safe location. We’ve got somebody posted at the phone, so they can make that phone call [to authorities] if the disruptors refuse to leave the store. We post somebody by the front door who can let people know before they come in and keep the exits clear.”

Plan accordingly for higher-risk events...

“If we have somebody coming in that we know is controversial, we are definitely on heightened awareness. That might be a day that I stay late and attend the event, just to have an extra person on hand. Make sure that the staff are very aware of the roles.

“You have to know your community, what people tend to show up for. A lot of times, the more visible, political figures — controversial figures — would be off-site partner events, so security’s going to be a little bit different and we don’t worry about that necessarily in the store. In those situations, the venues are going to have their own security.”

Look for signs online...

“[We have] the benefit of having a marketing team who can keep an eye on the chatter online. (There are also services and software that will do that.) So we might get a heads up if it’s something that may have people show up. We’re very lucky in that.”

Coordinate with the speaker’s team, and have resources ready...

“We also communicate with the publicist or publishers before the event. If [an author or speaker] is somewhat controversial, sometimes they bring up the possibility of outside security. We have a name of a firm that’s in the area that I’ve talked with, and they’ve come and visited the store so that when the publicist says ‘Oh, do you have somebody?’ we just have that on hand immediately. I’ve got their card and can just pass that on to the publicist.”

Only do what you have capacity for...

“Think about your store, and if you want to open yourself up to disruptions by having an event that may attract unwanted attention. There’s a cost-benefit analysis about whether or not you’re ready to open yourself up to that kind of scrutiny. Some people are a little more like, ‘Yes, forge ahead, got to fight the good fight,’ and some people are like, ‘You know what, let’s think.’ It’s OK. Maybe forgive yourself if you want to pass on something.”

DEAL WITH ONLINE HARASSMENT

EMAIL HARASSMENT PROCEDURE

1. Limit access to the email. The moment an employee recognizes an email as harassment, they should stop reading. Consider setting up an email folder where you can move harassing emails, storing them while sequestering them from the main inbox. Additionally, have employees forward the email to a manager or owner, save it, and remove it from inboxes checked by employees. (Sometimes authorities need to see the original email, not just a forward.)

2. Don't engage. People mostly do this to be disruptive. If they think they're taking up your time or upsetting you, it will encourage them.

3. Document everything. The manager or owner should keep copies of the email, print multiple copies for the sake of reports. Do not just delete the email.

4. Assess the threat. Some red flags: Does the person identify themselves? Are they local? Do they make explicit or implicit threats of violence or other harmful activity? Is the harassment escalating in volume, intensity, or threat level? Are they making concerning references to details about store personnel or the store itself?

5. If you contact authorities, do so mindfully. Based on the assessed threat level, you may want to contact authorities using your local police department's non-emergency number or the FBI (<https://complaint.ic3.gov/>).

Keep in mind: Be aware when contacting police that police presence may introduce a perceived or actual threat to your staff members, customers, or community. If you must contact the police, consider going to the department in person to make your report.

6. Contact ABA. We will log the incident and see if it is part of a pattern impacting other stores. We can also talk to you

about managing the incident and use your experience to inform our work creating resources and education. Reach out to advocacy@bookweb.org.

SOCIAL MEDIA HARASSMENT PROCEDURE

1. Don't feed the trolls. (Don't engage.) As opposed to email harassment, social media trolls are not just intimidating the person they're addressing, but performing for a larger audience. Engaging with them will not only encourage them, but help them achieve their goal of eliciting a reaction they find gratifying or amusing. You may be outraged, but expressing it online is self-defeating.

2. Block, delete, or report hateful posts and profiles immediately. Consider where your "red line" is in terms of what constitutes harassment or even hate speech. If you find that a post violates this standard or another standard you set for your own store, immediately block and report the offending profile and delete the offending post (in that order). Write this standard clearly and use it to train staff. You may also want to "pin" a post to the top of your page in support of marginalized communities and stating your blocking policy. **Keep in mind**, though, that trolls sometimes screenshot notifications of blocking or deleted posts and use this to drive more attention to their targets.

3. Beware of the "just asking questions" approach and other traps. One tactic online trolls use is the "just asking questions" model, in which they use bad-faith or rhetorical questions to bait targets into a response. Examples of this approach might include:

- "Don't you think that it's wrong to put this pornographic material in front of minors?" (Rhetorical question based on a false premise.)

DEAL WITH ONLINE HARASSMENT CONT.

- “Stop pushing Critical Race Theory on children.” (False claim based on popular but baseless political narrative.)
- “Do you carry this book [by a right-wing politician]?” to follow-up, “Why do you carry all these books by liberal/leftist politicians but not by any conservatives?” (Both-sidesism — the idea that every platform should equally represent two sides of an issue regardless of the factual basis of each side. It is every store’s First Amendment right to curate their inventory as they see fit.)
- “Sealioning” is a term for when a large number of trolls swarm an account they want to discredit, repeating “polite” but bad-faith questions, quoting the same (often unreputable) article, or similar. The goal is to overwhelm the target until they get fed up, making them look unreasonable in response to reasonable-seeming questions.

The goal in all of these cases is to elicit an unflattering response that can be reposted or quoted out of context.

4. Ready a list of stock responses. If you’re not sure if a question is a trap or if you’re not comfortable not responding to posts that could be sincere, consider having a list of stock responses to copy and paste. These might direct question-askers to relevant sections of your website, an FAQ page, or give responses like “We do not carry pornographic material and have a clearly marked children’s section containing age-appropriate content.” If you are bombarded with the same question over and over again, you can respond with the same response over and over again.

5. Let your followers do the arguing. Sometimes a post will not cross any of your red lines for blocking or reporting, but you will still be uncomfortable with it. In that case, give it time, and let your followers respond.

Much of the time, someone else will make the argument you yourself would like to make.

6. Turn off notifications. If you are being flooded with trolls but don’t want to limit legitimate social media engagement, you can just turn off notifications. This will limit the ability of trolls to impact your or your customers’ time and mental space. This can make it easier to just ignore trolls and let the flame die out.

7. Turn off the comments. If the comments on a post get too heated or you have reason to believe they will on a forthcoming post, you can prevent users from commenting on your post. Type into a search engine “turn comments off on Instagram/Facebook/X” to learn how. **Keep in mind**, though, that trolls will sometimes just leave their comments elsewhere on the site or on other posts.

8. Protect staff information. Leave staff’s personal information off of the store’s social media and website. Do not have staff’s last names on staff picks. Leaving staff information vulnerable can lead to doxxing (publishing personal information online) or online harassment for staff.

REVIEW BOMBING RESPONSE PROCEDURE

Review bombing is a tactic in which an organized group swarm an entity or business negative reviews to make it appear undesirable, often without having interacted with it. It most commonly affects forthcoming movies, books, or TV shows, but it can also affect bookstores if someone objects to a store’s political stance or events. Reviews for stores may be logged on Google Maps, Yelp, or similar.

1. Distinguish review bombing from legitimate negative feedback. An unprecedented number of low ratings or reviews in a short period of time is likely

coordinated across a group of individuals or by one individual with multiple accounts, especially but not exclusively if they are making false claims about your store. Sometimes harassers make multiple accounts specifically to leave more reviews. If you are being attacked by recently made accounts with little to no other account activity, include it in any reports.

2. See if the site has a procedure in place for handling review bombing. Some sites let you report review bombing. Google the name of the platform and “review bomb” to see if they have a policy.

3. Decide whether to respond to negative reviews. If a negative review makes false claims about your store and there aren’t that many of them, you may find it helpful to rebut them briefly (“Our store stocks titles by people of all political backgrounds”; “There is no pornography in the store”; “We proudly support LGBTQ+ authors”; etc.) You can also use responses to boost search results.

||| **Ross Rojek, co-owner of Capital Books in Sacramento, CA, says, “I use the negative reviews to leave highly detailed and positive replies and include a lot of keywords I want to show up in our description. Plus some sarcasm.”**

4. Embrace your review bombers. If you are proud of and believe in the things that you’re being criticized for, own it! Consider putting over-the-top or political negative reviews on a chalkboard sign in front of your store, or even on merch. For example: “Zero stars. This store is the wokest place on earth” may be intended as an insult, but some customers may appreciate your perspective and sense of humor. [Here is an example](#) from Capital Books in Sacramento, CA.

5. Mobilize your customers on social media or in person. If your store has a social media presence or newsletter, consider making a post explaining the situation and asking supportive customers to flood the comments section with positivity.

Discourage them from engaging the negative reviewers directly. Instead, ask them to say what they like about your store or your approach. You can also make a physical sign, or a flyer to hand out at the register, requesting the same thing. Most of your followers follow your store because they like what you do, and they may even repost your request.

6. Contact ABA. ABA’s Advocacy team may be able to help coordinate a response or connect you with nearby bookstores who can amplify your call for help. Contact advocacy@bookweb.org.

Note: Thanks to the panelists and attendees of the “Action! On Banned Books and Staff Safety” panel at NVNR 2023 for some of these tips and strategies.





RAMUNDA YOUNG, MAHOGANYBOOKS, WASHINGTON, DC ON STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING BLACK BOOKS

Ramunda Young owns MahoganyBooks with her husband Derrick Young. They have two locations and have recently announced a partnership with the DCA National Airport.



The power of merch to get the message out...

“Some people don’t know how to stand in a gap for banned books. They can post on their page, but to have some kind of outward activism allows the movement to be accessible. I can wear my shirt and people can see it. For something as small as that to let people feel like they can be part of the movement is important. Things [like this and our website] have remained easy lifts for us, but also impactful.”

Engaging with customers...

“People come in and ask, ‘Do you guys carry banned books?’ I want to say, ‘They’re almost everywhere.’ That’s how I feel with Black books. But we tell them, ‘Here’s a section of them.’ If somebody comes in, and they’re upset, and they want this certain book banned — well, here’s a link where you can submit your concern. This is who we are, we stand boldly in who we are, this is what we’re going to sell, and we’re not going to back down or apologize for it. We’ve been really clear on that for 15 years. We’re not debating.”

Using partnerships to expand access to Black books...

“[Partnerships like the recent partnership with DCA National Airport are] huge for us. There are a lot of people who don’t have access to Black books, whether because their libraries are banning certain books, or their bookstores or schools are not carrying certain titles. Going into the airport allowed us to make Black books accessible to people who may not have them in their community. My husband [co-owner Derrick Young] and I chose books that we’ve never seen in the airport. I’ve never seen Assata [Shakur] in the airport. I’ve never seen Shoutin’ in the Fire [by Danté Stewart] in airports. Or Frederick Douglass — his Narratives are in the airport now.”

A message to other booksellers fighting for the right to read...

Be bold. Bookstores are one of the most liberal places to be, where we give voice to so many thoughts, and don’t cower down just because the community is saying to cower down. [MahoganyBooks] has the luxury of being bold, because people know from the outside who we are. We’ve got “Black Books Matter” emblazoned on our window. I’m in an area where people aren’t picketing our store, wanting to close down because we’re selling certain types of books. It can be scary, but arm your team with information beforehand: what to say, what tools to use.”

CHRISTINA PASCUCCI CIAMPA, ALL SHE WROTE BOOKS, SOMERVILLE, MA, ON STANDING UP TO HARASSMENT



What kind of harassment have you dealt with, and how did you handle it?

“We’ve had phone calls, we’ve had emails, we’ve had comments on Facebook and Instagram. The ones that we can block and delete, we do automatically. I’m not giving you the platform. I’m cutting you off. You have other platforms. Go ahead. But not with our customer base, not with our community.”

How do you handle review bombing?

“I have good friends I can text, ‘Can you just report this very quickly, please?’ Our community knows what’s up and rallies around us in those situations. We can report it [ourselves], but coming from the business owner, it’s 50/50 [whether Google will take it down]. Same with Yelp.”

How do you handle phone harassment?

Hang up. “I tried to train my staff as well as possible. When they answer the phone, they just say, ‘Thank you for calling All She Wrote Books, how can I help you?’ without giving any names or descriptions or anything like that. Most of the time, the folks that call to say something offensive will breathe [heavily] for a hot minute, so I tell my booksellers to just hang up if they don’t say something right away. And if they start spewing hate, hang up.”

Block numbers quickly. “If they call back again, write down the phone number. We use [a VoIP internet phone service] Google Voice and we have the ability to block the number so it goes right into a spam folder. Zoom Phone also has a similar feature. It’s harder to block numbers on a regular phone [but you can]. So in the instances where we’ve had people call twice, I go into Google Phone and I block them automatically.”

How do you handle in-store harassment?

“[Recently] a man came in and was screaming outside that we were disgusting and awful and [on and on]. Then he came inside and continued, and it kind of scared my bookseller. Unfortunately, due to staffing, we don’t always have a buddy system available. I made sure to call right away, because I was on my way to a bookstore event elsewhere in the city.

“If someone comes in like that, it rattles everybody in the space. We’ll shut the doors and do a check on everybody. How can you make sure that everybody is okay? I’m more concerned about [my employees and customers]. The good news is, everybody was like, ‘Oh, I just was a little shaken, but I’m okay. That guy was wack.’ And then we moved on.”

All She Wrote Books is dealing with displacement due to rising rents. [DONATE HERE.](#)

ATTEND A SCHOOL BOARD MEETING

1. What is a school board?

School boards are generally composed of elected volunteers who set the budget, set and update policies, and oversee the superintendent of a school district. They may be called something other than a school board depending on the city, state, and district, and they generally have their own distinct policies.

2. Who can attend a school board meeting?

Generally speaking, anyone can attend a school board meeting. You do not need to have a child in attendance at the school (or a child at all) to attend.

3. Find your local school district.

Google “[your address] school district.” Realty websites like StreetEasy and Zillow often list school districts. You can also [use this tool from Great Schools](#). If you’re having trouble finding it, consider getting in contact with your school’s parent-teacher organization (PTO) or parent-teacher association (PTA) for advice.

4. Find your district’s policies and public meeting schedule.

You will often have to go to the district webpage to find this information. Boards may have specific rules governing the public comment section of the meeting, including specific time limits.

5. Preparing your comments.

- Make sure to stay within any allotted time constraints.
- Identify yourself. Are you a parent, a grandparent, an educator, a bookseller, a librarian, or a member of a community? Do you have a child in the school or pay taxes for the district?
- Include praise for anything that is being done well to show good faith — especially for related issues like teacher diversity, previous book challenge reviews, etc.
- Begin and end with your main request. Why are you speaking? What action do you want to be taken, and by whom? Alternately, what concern do you want to voice, and why?
- Offer evidence. Why do you believe the problem you’re identifying is a problem? If applicable, why do you believe your proposed solution is a solution?

6. Be respectful but firm.

Even if you are angry, you are most likely to persuade people to act if you present yourself respectfully, calmly, and with evidence.

7. Consider attending a meeting ahead of time.

Observe any specific procedures or to see how the public comment section operates.





MITCHELL KAPLAN, OWNER OF BOOKS & BOOKS, CORAL GABLES, FL

Mitchell Kaplan, owner of Books & Books in Coral Gables, Florida, believes that bookstores can be hubs of grassroots organizing that bring their communities together.

He has good reason to. In June of 2023, Kaplan and a coalition of local community members, national organizations, and authors gathered in Coral Gables, Florida, to champion the books that have been banned at increasing rates since 2021.

Long concerned by the conservative push to challenge the right to read, Kaplan decided to do something about it. He asked, “What do booksellers do best?” His answer: put on an event.

He started gathering allies. A liberal Congregational church where he had held offsite events — and which calls itself a sanctuary for banned books — offered space. Kaplan contacted authors and publishers and drew the attention of local organizers at [The Florida Freedom to Read Project](#) and national organizations like the ACLU, PEN America, the National Coalition Against Censorship.

The result was a massive book giveaway. Kaplan and his coalition gave away over 1,200 copies of three books banned in Florida school districts: *Love to Langston* by Tony Medina and R. Gregory Christie, *The ABCs of Black History* by Rio Cortez and Lauren Semmer, and *The Hill We Climb* by National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, [inauguration poem was put on restricted access](#) in Miami-Dade County.

The event would have been plenty on its own. But Kaplan decided to use it as a springboard for ongoing activism.

Out of the book giveaway emerged the FREADOM Coalition. Starting with a WhatsApp group, it gathered organizers from Florida-based organizations [Moms for Libros](#) and [Families Against Book Bans \(FABB\)](#). Soon they were attending school board meetings, bringing allies, publicity, and an action plan. Kaplan’s deep roots in the community also came in handy. “You have to know the politics involved in your school board and be cognizant of the state laws,” he says.

The result? Concern from local parents that access to books had been restricted without their knowledge or consent, and a change in the book challenge policy in the school district.

FREADOM isn’t done. The board currently has a 5–4 majority limiting campaigns like recognition of a LGBTQ+ Pride month and protections for instruction about Black history in the district.

It is no accident that a bookstore was at the center of this movement, says Kaplan.

“This is what a good independent bookstore can do that has the attention of its community: it can help draw that community together and think of itself as a focal point around which a lot of these grassroots groups can gather.”

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

1. Keep an eye out for ABFE's emails.

We will often email members when problematic bills are presented in your state. If you think we missed something, let us know at advocacy@bookweb.org.

2. Find bills or officials in your area.

Use the “Find Legislation” and “Find Officials” tools at the bottom of the ABA Advocacy page. Search the bill number if you know it, or search for keywords like “book,” “library,” or some of the language from the “What They Say and What It Means” section, above.

3. Use ABFE's message templates.

Rather than a vague template, each ABFE message is created to address a specific bill. From there, you can edit the template and individualize it as you see fit. Find message templates by clicking “Campaigns” on our Advocacy page.

The screenshot shows a web interface for composing a message. At the top, there are three buttons: a red 'Write' button with an envelope icon, a blue 'Tweet' button with a bird icon, and a blue 'Call' button with a phone icon. Below these is a section titled 'Compose Your Message' with a dropdown menu showing 'US Senators' and 'US Representative'. Underneath is a 'Subject' field containing the text 'Please Cosponsor the Credit Card Competition'. The 'Message Body' field contains the text: 'As an independent bookseller and one of your constituents, I am writing to urge you to support the Credit Card Competition Act, a bill that was introduced by Senators Roger Marshall (R-KS), Dick Durbin (D-IL), J.D.'

4. Use firm but respectful language.

For example, “I urge you to veto this bill,” “This bill is bad for Texans, and you should vote no,” etc.

5. Include the name or number of the bill you are discussing.

If you are emailing your officials, include the bill number (for example, Texas HB 900 or Arkansas Act 372) and your stance in the subject line.

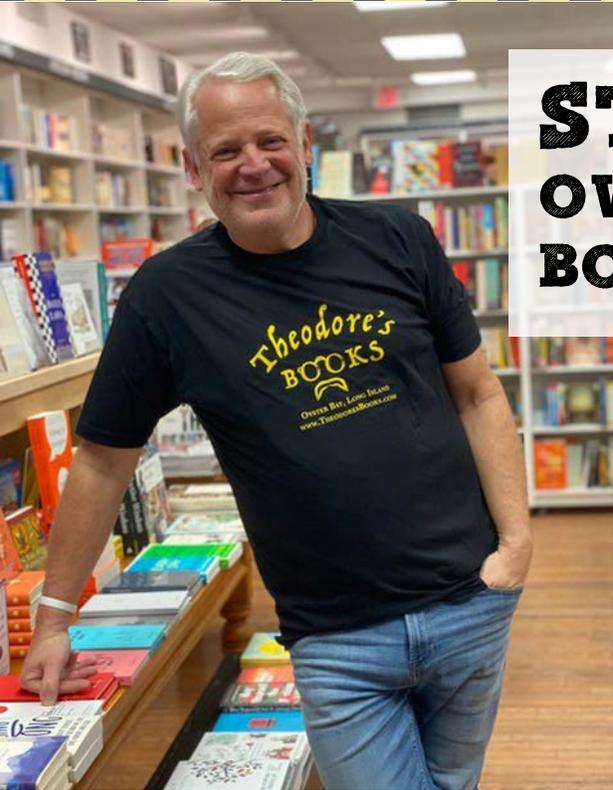
6. Identify yourself as a constituent or community member.

Include ways this bill will personally impact you or your business. Politicians pay more attention to those who can vote for or against them.

7. Keep your statement short and direct

Including a few key points. Staffers are busy and will skim. Some sample points:

- Is the law vague?
- Is it impossible to comply with?
- Does the law fail to define its terms clearly?
- Is it unconstitutional? Does it take away from your rights, the rights of young people, or the rights of people in your community?
- Is the law bad for business?
- How does it impact you? Your family? Your community?



STEVE ISRAEL, OWNER OF THEODORE'S BOOKS, OYSTER BAY, NY

believe government has the responsibility to protect children from woke propaganda? Yes. Where do you draw the line when the left bans books that they find objectionable? Should it matter whether the ban comes from the left or the right? That opens the door to bipartisan dialogue on free expression.

The ABCs of persuasive lobbying

- **A is Acknowledge.** Acknowledge the views of the person you're arguing with. If you're a bookstore owner talking to a Republican who supports book bans, say, 'I acknowledge that there are instances where kids should be protected from certain materials.' When you say that, you reduce [anxiety] levels. You can watch the body language relax."
- **B is But.** But, don't you believe in...? You have to do some research on the person you're talking to. For example, 'But aren't you concerned by big government meddling in the private affairs of families and telling school districts what they can and can't do?'
- **C is Consensus.** 'So can we at least agree that there are many cases where governments shouldn't be banning books, and that we have to respect parents to do their jobs?'

How to get the ear of a Congressperson

"It's all about the relationship. And the relationship has to be two-way. It can't just be you going in and telling a Member what you want. It has to be you saying to the official, 'We're going to provide value to you. Come to my store and hold a town hall. Come and meet customers and tell them what authors have influenced you. Come and read to kids in our children's section.'"

Steve Israel is a former Congressional Representative and owner of Theodore's Books in Oyster Bay, Long Island.

On book bans now vs. historical book bans

"This trend began shortly after the printing of the Gutenberg Bible. Book bans are almost as old as the printing press. But [right now] it is more severe, more widespread, and more acceptable in some quarters than it ever has been. A record number of bills have been introduced in state legislatures and local governments to ban, censor, or sanitize books. So yes, it's deeper, more severe, and more pervasive than it ever has been in the American experience."

Fighting book bans can be bipartisan

"When I talk to my former colleagues on the right, they'll say, 'Why should we submit our children to this woke propaganda?' I say to them, 'OK, you

WRITE AN OP-ED SUPPORTING THE RIGHT TO READ

An Op-Ed is a short article targeting a specific problem and calling its audience to a specific action to address it. It can also be a statement of a position for or against something and the author's rationale for holding that position, in which case the "call to action" is for the reader to change the way they think of something. They can be placed in online or print newspapers, magazines, or other periodicals, which can be of national or local interest.

WHY WRITE AN OP-ED?

An op-ed is a chance to change someone's mind, raise awareness of an important issue, or call someone to action.

PLACING YOUR OP-ED

Consider whom you want to reach. To whom is this topic relevant? Who is in a position to do something about it? What is the publication that most closely targets this audience? Does it publish op-eds?

OP-ED VS. LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A letter to the editor responds directly to an article in a previous issue, adding context and either expressing support or offering a rebuttal. An op-ed can be about any current event or issue relevant to the target audience. It may be helpful to link to other articles in the publication, but it is not required.

THE ELEMENTS OF AN OP-ED

Note: Want to see examples of these steps? They are marked in a sample op-ed below, written by ABA's Advocate Associate Manager.

1. Outline the issue.

When did you start hearing about the bans or challenges that concern you? What do you think is problematic about them? Where are they occurring? What is the timeline for their impact?

2. Identify yourself.

Are you a store owner, bookseller, librarian, parent, or student? Do you have relevant expertise or experience regarding free expression, education, or literacy?

3. Offer your perspective.

Why do you think the book ban or challenge is inappropriate? Perhaps you think it is ideologically motivated, misunderstands the challenged material, violates the First Amendment, or is bad for society. Perhaps books like the ones being challenged were formative to you. Choose one approach and make the point as clearly as possible.

4. Concession.

A rhetorical concession is both a way to demonstrate good faith by engaging with an opposing view. It is also a chance to control the narrative and speak to misgivings your reader might have about your argument. It can also be used as a way to set up part of your own argument. For example, you might say, "I understand that some parents might be concerned about their children encountering inappropriate reading material at school. What these parents might not know is that every state and school district already has a review process and guidelines for teachers and librarians that work effectively."

5. Call to action.

The call to action is an intersection of two things: what needs to be done, and what can your reader do. Maybe there

needs to be a societal change in how an issue is understood. In that case, your reader just needs to change their mind. Maybe a dangerous legislative ban has been introduced to the state legislature. In that case, your reader should call their congressperson. Maybe you are calling on a specific person (a judge, a governor, etc.) to use the power of their position to stop a ban from taking effect.

WHERE CAN I FIND EXAMPLES OF OP-EDS?

Here are three excellent ones:

- [“Don’t stand by as books are banned; stand up for libraries,”](#) by Sara Jones. In the *Seattle Times*, Aug. 24, 2023. Sara is the Washington State Librarian and writes of the public role of the library and the recent challenges in Columbia County, OR.
- [“Op-Ed: Book Bans Are Just the Start of a Dangerous Trajectory for Texas,”](#) by Kennedy Tackett. In the *Texas Signal*, June 6, 2023. Kennedy is a college freshman who details speaking at a school board meeting and the dangers of Texas HB 900.
- [“Op-Ed: Why inappropriate books are the best kind,”](#) by David L. Ulin. In the *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2022. David is a contributing writer to the Opinion page who writes of the particular, transformative value of “inappropriate” books.

You can also check out our sample op-ed, below.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out these resources from [The Op-Ed Project](#), which is dedicated to increasing the diversity of voices represented in op-ed pages.

Interim Library Director Ellen Brigham,
The Seattle Times



SAMPLE OP-ED

Note: Use this as an example of an op-ed that you can write to your own local paper when a book ban enters your community!

Op-Ed: Texas' HB 900 Would Disadvantage Independent Booksellers and Pave the Way for AI-Driven Censorship

Not to be dramatic, but the robots are coming for our books. Not in the form of e-readers or e-commerce or [AI audio narrators](#). In the form of book bans.

¹The ironically named READER Act, Texas HB 900, was signed into law on June 13, 2023, by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott. By the letter of the law, it would require anyone selling books to school districts to assign ratings of “sexually explicit” or “sexually relevant” to every book sold. The requirement is retroactive: booksellers would not be able to sell to school districts without reviewing and rating all previously sold material in active use, issuing recalls for anything assigned a rating of “sexually relevant” or “sexually explicit.”

²As the Advocacy Associate Manager of the American Booksellers Association, a former professor of Contemporary Civilization at Columbia University, and a transgender woman, I find HB 900 extremely concerning on several levels. It abridges the First Amendment rights of booksellers and students. By chilling free expression, it threatens the diversity and strength of our democracy. And by imposing content-based restrictions on expression about Queer and trans people like myself, it violates the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees equal protection to all citizens regardless of identity.

³Besides violating the First and Fourteenth Amendments, it is an impossibly onerous task. No independent bookseller, nor even a larger traditional bookseller like Barnes & Noble, has the resources to review their entire inventory and assign these highly subjective ratings. The only ones who do are massive corporations like Amazon and Google who can (and may already have plans to) develop AI tools to assign content ratings. They also have troves of customer reviews and the ability to crowdsource ratings.

If HB 900 is allowed to go into effect, it would almost require that AI rating systems and those who own them will determine what America's children are allowed to read, simply because nothing else will be able to rate content on the necessary scale. In doing so, the law would create yet another competitive disadvantage to independent booksellers by establishing a requirement beyond the scope of what small businesses can accomplish.

Maybe this explains why independent booksellers, free speech organizations, and even bigger retailers like Barnes & Noble [have raised the alarm](#) against Texas HB 900, but Amazon has been publicly silent. They have no reason to oppose a bill that would ultimately help them.

⁴Some might say this is just a problem of access. If AI is needed to make these ratings practicable, stores should still be able to use more widely available tools to make the task easier. After all, the last year alone has seen rapid advancement in AI technology available to the public.

1 Outline the issue.

2 Identify yourself.

3 Offer your perspective.

4 Concession.

The problem is that even if access to these tools were more widely available, the result would be dystopian and undemocratic.

If we hand the right to assign content ratings to AI, it will assign them using methods only understandable to a technocratic elite. Some AI systems are “black boxes”: we know what goes in, we know what comes out, but it’s difficult to say what happens in between. This is especially true of proprietary systems. But even open-source AI systems are complex enough that the average citizen could not determine how a certain outcome was reached.

Nor can AI meaningfully consider the educational, scientific, or artistic merit of what it bans. This is an essential prong of the “Miller Test” for obscenity established by *Miller v. California* (1973): to dub something obscene and thus not subject to First Amendment protection requires that “the matter, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” And even if tech giants like Amazon or Google had humans moderating the process or used crowdsourced user reviews, private companies would be performing a task that should be reserved for the people — especially those trained for the task, such as librarians.

Finally, unlike a human, there is no way to ask an AI what its rationale was for a decision. Since you can’t reason with a program, you can’t have the rational discussions that are the bedrock of democratic decision making.

Don’t take our word for it. Just look at what happened recently in Mason City School District in Iowa following Senate File 496, Iowa’s equivalent of a “Don’t Say Gay” bill that limits discussion of gender identity and sexuality in classrooms and prohibits sexual content in school books regardless of age. Overwhelmed with the scale of the task, the district used ChatGPT (famous for writing lousy student papers) to do it for them.

The result? A list of books banned even from high school students, including *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Beloved*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, among others.

I’m sure Amazon would be happy to help Texas legislators violate students’ First Amendment rights more efficiently. Until then, it will be left to an AI program that can’t even write a decent essay about *Beloved*, much less determine its educational value.

Either way, Texas HB 900 and bills like it are a danger to intellectual freedom and small business and must not be allowed to stand. The American Booksellers Association, along with Blue Willow Bookshop, BookPeople, and a coalition of authors and publishers, have filed a suit against HB 900 to stop it. The judge has issued a scathing preliminary injunction to prevent the law from taking effect. ABA is hopeful that the judge will issue a final injunction on the law.

⁵In the meantime, citizens of Texas and beyond should not accept book bans at all, and especially not those shaped by an obscure technology most of us do not understand.

Philomena Polefrone, PhD
Advocacy Associate Manager
American Booksellers Association

5 Call to
action.

HOST A BANNED BOOK READ-IN

WHAT IS A "READ-IN"?

A read-in is a peaceful protest in which protesters read thematic material related to the reason for the protest. It is inspired by a sit-in, and sometimes is staged in a place or manner that disrupts the normal operations of an institution or organization being protested.

WHY HOST OR ATTEND A READ-IN?

To demonstrate that laws or movements promoting censorship will not be obeyed. To educate yourself about the content of banned material and make your own judgment as a reader, parent, or citizen. To raise awareness about the rising tide of book bans. To build community. To mobilize people toward a more concrete action. To read literature on the cutting edge of the social questions defining our time.

WHAT SHOULD BE READ AT A READ-IN?

For a banned books read-in, the answer should be obvious: banned books! Consider reading books targeted by your local school district (if applicable) or nearby districts. This way, your read-in can inspire people to more direct local action (like speaking at a school board meeting).

Consider having people donate books or funds for books so your read-in can be open to everyone. Giving away banned books is also its own form of activism!

WHERE SHOULD A READ-IN BE HELD?

This depends on your goals and what you will personally find appropriate and comfortable. Regardless, the location should be spacious, appropriate to your goals, and visible. You should make sure to choose a location that will not leave you liable to extreme penalties — note that bringing so-called “obscene material” into a school could lead to extreme legal consequences if these laws are allowed to stand.



Protesters from The Texas Freedom Network hold a read-in protesting HB 900 in the middle of the Texas Capitol rotunda. (Mikala Compton, Mikala Compton/American-Statesman)

SAMPLE READ-IN IDEAS

Here are three approaches, labeled **MILD**, **MEDIUM**, and **SPICY**:

LEVEL	LOCATION	GOALS	TIPS
MILD	At your store or library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds community • Raises awareness about book bans • Gives people a chance to learn about the banned content for themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread the word by word-of-mouth and online • Tie it to a Banned Books Week display (if in-store) • Coordinate with the store owner or library director
MEDIUM	In a visible public place, like a park, town square, or anywhere people pass on foot	<p>The above, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invites curiosity from the wider community • May draw press attention, amplifying your message further 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain any necessary permits in your city or township • Have clear signage to invite engagement • Consider contacting the press ahead of time
SPICY	Where the bans are occurring, like a state capitol building, local government office, or school board meeting	<p>The above, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes decision-makers directly aware of public opposition • Likely to draw press attention, raising awareness of your issue even further 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure you have enough committed participants! A small crowd can backfire. • Secure and distribute books ahead of time • Make participants aware that direct action can come with intimidation, discomfort, and even arrest

ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND:

- **Obey all laws:** breaking the law could end your protest early and discredit your movement
- **Be respectful:** a single regrettable action can be recorded and go viral, discrediting the movement or seeing you branded as “rioters”
- **Center reading-as-resistance:** chants or yelling can distract from the point of the read-in, which is to center reading banned material as an act of civil disobedience

K. KERIMIAN, THE NONBINARIAN BOOK BIKE, BROOKLYN, NY, ON BUILDING COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE THROUGH READ-INS

The People's Beach at Jacob Riis Park in Queens, NY, better known to its regulars as The Queer Beach. Signs painted on pillowcases reading "RIIS READS. ALL WELCOME. Bring yr book." A "reading nook" made of tents and towels, like something out of a slumber party. And dozens of queer readers, in various states of beachwear, reading the kinds of books — queer, trans, intersectional — that are being banned in droves around the country.

The scene is a typical one for "Riis Reads", a monthly read-in series that began meeting in the summer of 2023. It began when K. Kerimian (they/them), founder of The Nonbinarian Book Bike, was at Riis with friends and noticed the preponderance of readers at the beach. A friend said they wished they could document it, but they weren't comfortable approaching people to ask what they were reading. Kerimian, energetic and a self-described "cartoon," responded, "I do feel comfortable! C'mon, gang!" and waded into the crowd.

Kerimian's instincts are to build community. A bookseller at Greenlight

Bookstore, they founded the Nonbinarian Book Bike in 2023 to expand access to queer books to those who might not otherwise be able to find them. The bike's front is a bright pink box that unfolds into a

book display full of donated LGBTQ+ books. Most weekends, Kerimian can be found posted in various parks around Brooklyn, calling, "Free Books! They're gay!" (Very occasionally, they are joined by their dog, C.K. Dexter Haven.)

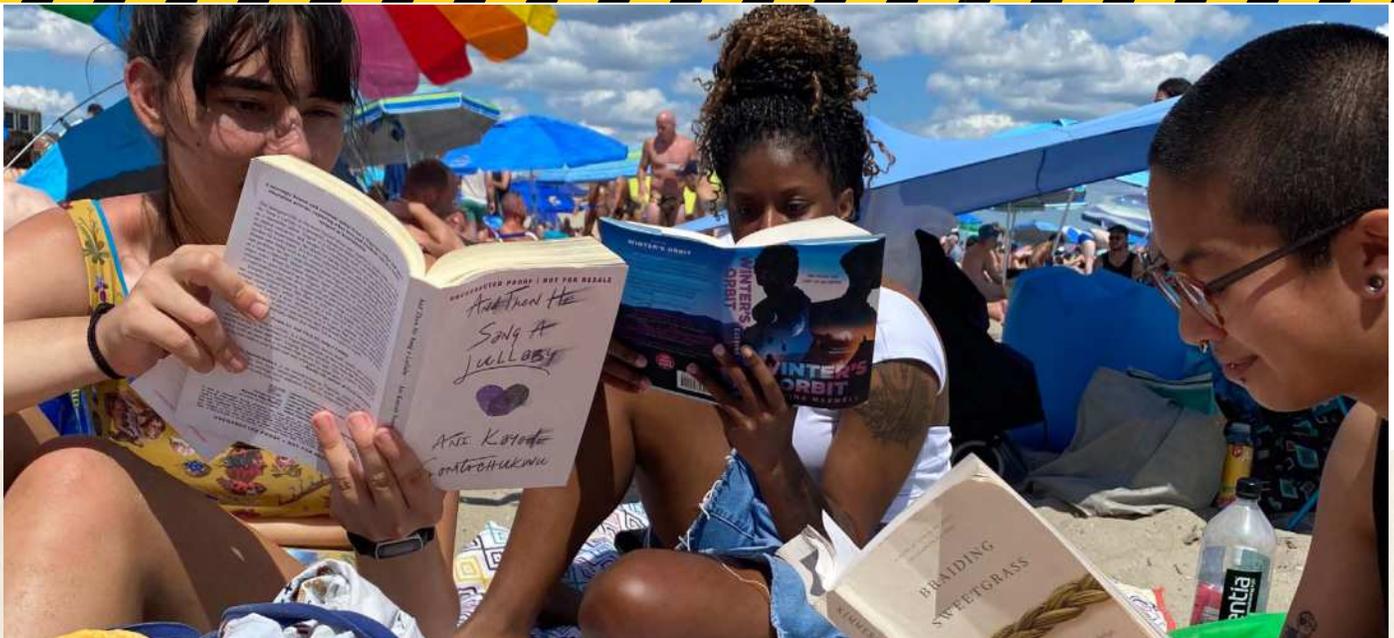
Riis Reads came out of the community created by the book bike, but it wasn't exactly planned. By the time they reached the water that day at Riis, Kerimian had collected an Instagram carousel's worth of pictures, dozens of conversations

with readers, and who knew how many book suggestions. Somewhere along the way, Liysa, a new friend, suggested making an event called "Riis Reads." The seeds of the read-in series had been planted in the sand.

Soon after deciding to make the event happen, Kerimian reached out to Fayola Fair at Reading for Black Lives, which distributes free BIPOC books, and Amelia Goodman of Bookworm, a reading-tracking app. A couple of hours in a group-chat later, it was organized.

To most people, Riis Reads probably doesn't look like a read-in, and may not even look like activism. But the combination of the task, the location, and the community make it exactly that. "It's so





interesting to think what a read-in sounds like and what it might be,” says Kerimian. “You envision it set at a summit or your local politician’s office, and that is its history as a political act. This inadvertently became that, but more out of queer community and joy than anger.”

It couldn’t happen anywhere but the Queer Beach. “It is a landmark queer site in New York that goes back far enough that it feels like you’re walking on a little piece of history. Not history that is of the past and is gone, like Stonewall sometimes feels — like visiting a ghost of history. It feels like contributing to a future history.”

The site is also a rite of passage for queer New Yorkers, a place of discovering oneself and community. For Kerimian, these acts are themselves ones of resistance. “Being queer is inherently political. And I think that’s part of everyone’s

journey, whatever that means to them. Whatever level of engagement in self-study it entails. We’re not taught our history in the classroom, so we have to self-educate. It doesn’t feel like homework. It feels like unlocking something inside yourself.”

Riis Reads invites bookish queer folks to do just that, and to do it while building community. It is as welcoming as possible, establishing clear signals for those who do and do not want to be engaged. They ask everyone to ask for consent before approaching someone. But they invite readers to come alone or with friends, however they are able and comfortable.



The future of Riis Reads looks encouraging. The series plans to come back in 2024. Meanwhile, Kerimian doesn’t mind thinking bigger. “I’d love for it to be an organized National Day where people go and do this. And the point would be awareness. The point would be an act of rebellion.”



**WHAT
ABA IS
DOING >>**

WHAT WE ARE DOING

HOW ABA FIGHTS FOR THE RIGHT TO READ

Education

Right to Read panels at Education Conferences (Winter Institute and Children's Institute) and Regional Association Trade Shows

Recordings hosted

BookED, the ABA Podcast

Here are just a few episodes...

- [Ci2023 Featured Talk with Jonathan Hamilt: Fighting for Queer Stores and Seeds of Change](#)
- [Ci2023: A Child's Freedom to Read](#)
- [Wi2023: Keynote on Book Banning: Stores, Authors, and Communities: What Can We Do?](#)
- [Local Organizing to Combat Book Bans](#)

Resources

Archive of advocacy resources

Banned Books asset to educate customers

An interactive PDF

ABFE's Free Expression Resources

Banned Books Week kits (Physical and Digital)

Right to Read Toolkit

Organizing

Direct support for booksellers facing free expression challenges

Outreach to grassroots organizing. [Tell us who we should talk to in your area!](#)

Advocacy team in attendance at regional trade shows

New hire focused on right to read communications and organizing

Political Advocacy

Direct outreach to Senators and House Representatives about book bans and right to read

Active membership, financial support, and participation in free expression coalitions

- Banned Books Week Coalition
- Free Expression Network
- Kids' Right to Read Project
- Media Coalition
- Unite Against Book Bans

Regular contact with school boards to object to book challenges (with NCAC/KRRP)

Investing in new tools to monitor book bans on local, state, and national level

Legal Challenges

Filing Lawsuits

1. Meet with Media Coalition
2. Determine merit and viability of case
3. Identify plaintiffs
4. Vet plaintiffs and get their input
5. Prepare plaintiffs for public pressure and press
6. Create talking points
7. Identify legal team within the state
8. Respond to legal team questions
9. Determine the best course of action
10. File Suit

VICTORIES

Preliminary injunction for Arkansas Act 372!

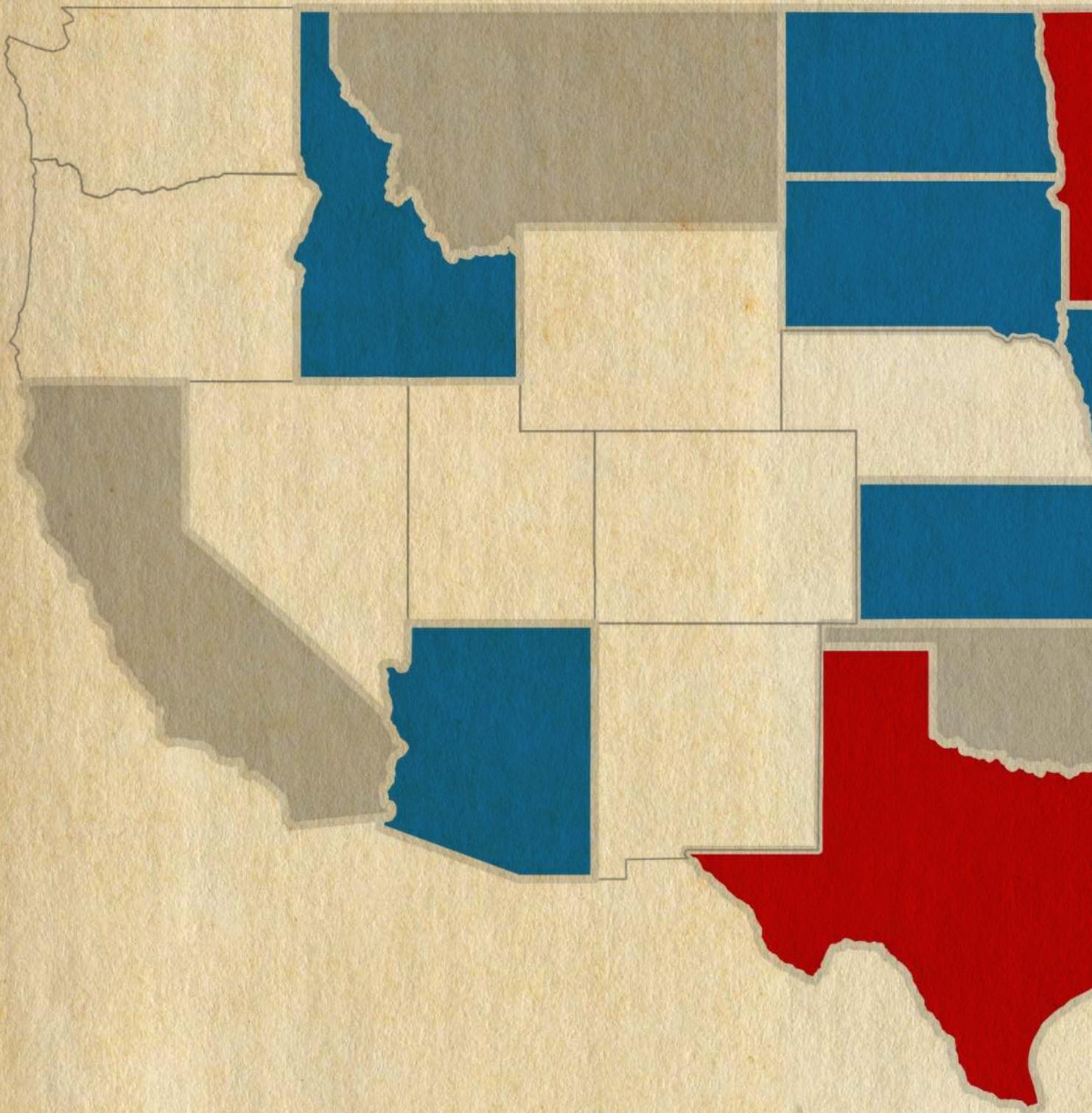
Preliminary injunction for Texas HB900!

Amicus briefs on other cases

For example, in the 2022 Virginia Beach obscenity complaint

OPPOSITIONS MAP

ABFE tracks every bill that threatens the right to free expression. Explore the [interactive map on BookWeb](#) to see the bills ABFE has sent oppositions to.



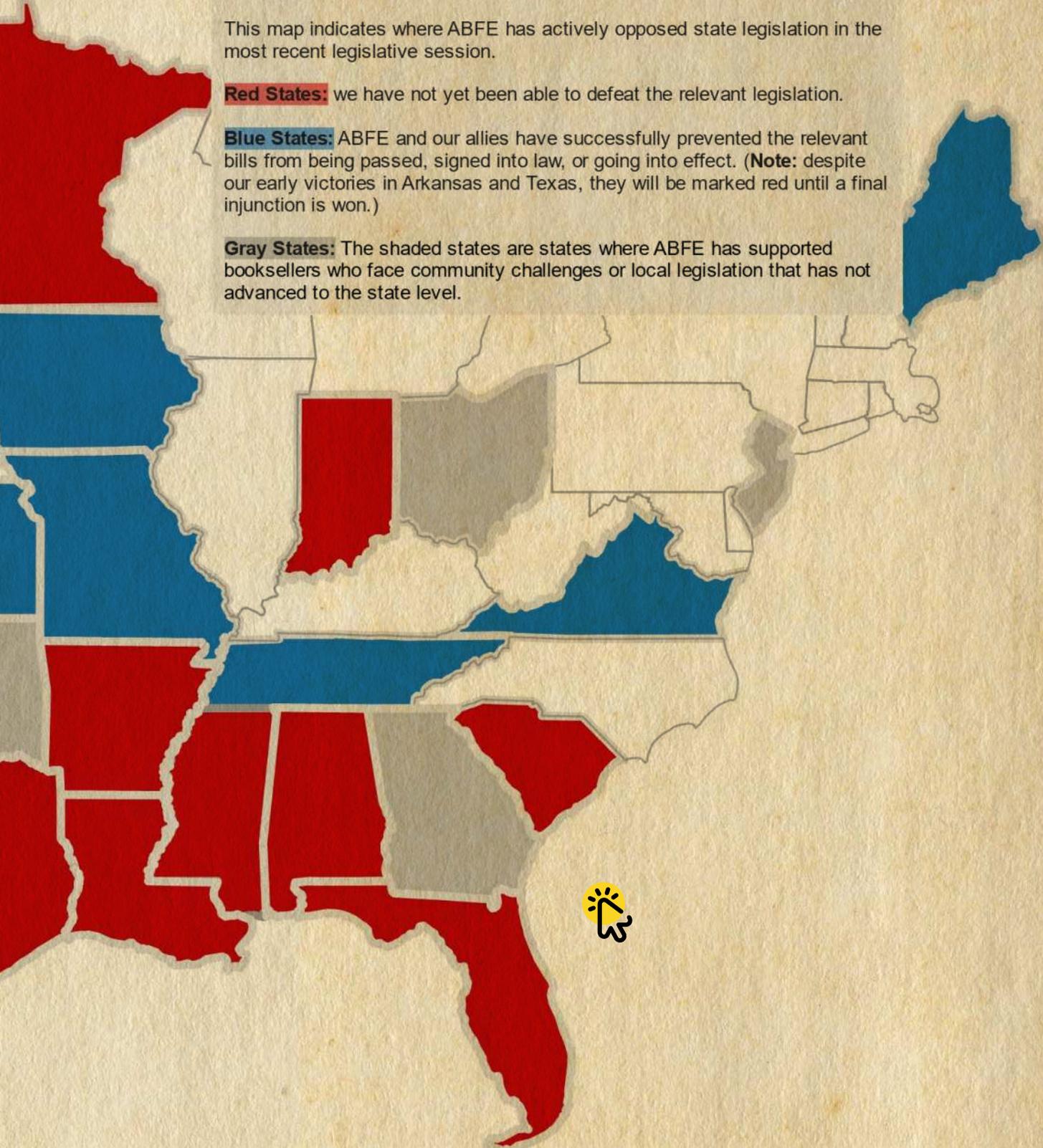
Actively Opposed State Legislation

This map indicates where ABFE has actively opposed state legislation in the most recent legislative session.

Red States: we have not yet been able to defeat the relevant legislation.

Blue States: ABFE and our allies have successfully prevented the relevant bills from being passed, signed into law, or going into effect. (**Note:** despite our early victories in Arkansas and Texas, they will be marked red until a final injunction is won.)

Gray States: The shaded states are states where ABFE has supported booksellers who face community challenges or local legislation that has not advanced to the state level.



WHEN DOES ABA FILE A LEGAL CHALLENGE?

(A FIRST AMENDMENT FAQ)

The First Amendment is a core aspect of American democracy, as its counterparts are for other liberal democracies. It protects individuals from government overreach in the form of both restrictions to speech and compelled speech. In other words, citizens cannot be prevented by the government from expressing their thoughts, nor can they be forced to say something they would not say of their own free will.

ABA challenges a bill or law when it violates free expression in a way that negatively impacts or could negatively impact booksellers and when the law is vulnerable to challenge. Still, it is not always clear from the outside why we file challenges and not others. This FAQ will address some common areas of confusion.

Does the First Amendment protect all speech?

No. Some categories of speech that are not protected, include incitement to violence, threats, defamation, and obscenity.

What makes something legally “obscene,” and how does this definition apply to recently challenged books?

“Obscenity” charges are especially relevant now, when many book bans are based on the false claim that there is “pornography” in school libraries. These claims are generally spurious. There is a three-part test to qualify something as legally obscene: it must (1) Appeal to prurient (excessively sexual) interests, based on common community standards; (2) Depict sexual conduct in an offensive way; and (3) Lack serious artistic, literary, political, or scientific value. Recent

claims of obscenity almost always ignore this last condition and falsely claim that works of art and literature are pornographic (and thus lacking serious non-prurient merit).

Doesn't it violate the First Amendment when booksellers only include liberal content and ignore conservative voices?

No. Booksellers are not governments. Furthermore, they have a right under the First Amendment to curate their collections however they see fit. Deciding not to include someone in your collection or not to share your platform with someone does not violate the First Amendment, but is rather an expression of your own First Amendment liberties in the form of curation.

What about hate speech?

Hate speech is discriminatory and pejorative speech targeted at individuals or groups based on aspects of their identity, including race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and more. The First Amendment does not prohibit hate speech unless it falls into one of the other categories of exception to the First Amendment. Just because the First Amendment protects hate speech, however, does not mean ABA has to. ABA asserts its own First Amendment right not to participate in hate speech in our materials, including box mailings and promotions.

HOW TO HELP ABA WITH LAWSUITS

RESPOND TO OUR CAMPAIGNS

We sometimes put out calls to our members to mobilize as much support or opposition as we can for measures impacting the right to read. In many cases, the best strategy is to interrupt a bill before it becomes a law, and the best way to do that is by organizing. But our calls to mobilize are only as effective as the response to them. Here is how you can help:

- Watch our newsletter, [Bookselling This Week](#), for news and campaigns, and click through to advocacy topics
- Sign our petitions
- Use our templates to contact your representatives
- Support us on social media and amplify our campaigns
- Donate so we can afford to mount additional legal challenges

VOLUNTEER TO BE A CO-PLAINTIFF

When we file a lawsuit challenging a law we believe to be unconstitutional, the first thing we need is a co-plaintiff with clear standing to challenge it — that is to say, a member store who stands to have their rights of expression or their ability to conduct business threatened by the law. Here is what it entails:

- ABA is part of Media Coalition, which watches for legislation that is dangerous to free expression and seems vulnerable to legal challenge. When a piece of legislation challenges booksellers specifically, ABA will identify 1–3 bookstores to act as plaintiffs based on the needs of the case.
- Plaintiffs are determined based on the needs of the case, the impact of the law on the store, and the store's previous position and work on banned books.
- Whether a potential plaintiff works out depends on several factors: the bandwidth of the store's owners and community, the store's ability to travel to give deposition, and the store's experience with press.
- Plaintiffs should be prepared to field many press inquiries as the case progresses, as well as the attention (positive and negative) that can come with it.
- The plaintiff will have to coordinate public communications about the suit with ABA and the coalition's lawyers. This will sometimes mean staying strategically quiet in sensitive moments of the process.
- Even if you're not a plaintiff for a case in your state, you can volunteer to help ABA with press, education, and/or social media.





**WHAT
CAN »
I DO?**

PLAYBOOK: WHAT TO DO WHEN A BOOK BAN COMES TO YOUR COMMUNITY

- Tell ABFE.** Write us at abfe@bookweb.org. We can help you make and complete the rest of your plan. We can also pass the information along to the allies most suited to helping directly.
- Look for local organizers.** Ask the target of the challenge (the library, store, etc.) if there are any organizations supporting them. In the case of a library, try searching “Friends of the ___ Library.” Groups like this sometimes hold fundraisers or accept donations.
- Investigate the source of the challenge.** Ask around. Are the talking points similar to those posted by Moms for Liberty? Is the challenger connected to any other groups of that kind? This is useful information in your own local organizing and to give to ABFE.
- Learn about the school board and superintendent.** Research the school board and the superintendent on the district website and learn what you can about the members. Ask around. See what you can learn about their election campaigns. How are they interpreting state and local laws and putting them into action? Are they following all necessary procedures and doing so in a fair and equitable way?
- Identify the next school board meeting, library meeting, or town board meeting.** Make sure you attend the soonest meeting you can to ensure decisions aren’t made before you can share your perspective.
- Spread the word to local allies.** Many of these challenges go through when nobody is paying attention. Many potential allies just don’t know what is happening. Let them know of the date of the next meeting and the details of the challenge.
- Contact local press.** Where do your neighbors get their news? Journalists often (not always) fall on the side of free expression and can give you a good platform. Ask if you can write an op-ed or if they can report on the book challenges.
- Bring as many allies to the school/library/town board meeting as possible.** You will make a bigger impact at the meeting if you show that you represent a meaningful segment of the community.
- Speak respectfully and firmly in support of the right to read.** Make logical arguments and remember that school board members are volunteers. Flood the meeting with positive support for the right to read to counteract your opponents’ invective. See our How-To guide for attending a school board meeting.
- If the challenge escalates, contact your state representatives.** In some cases, national groups will mobilize locally and on the state level simultaneously. See our How-To for tips on contacting your representatives.
- Keep us in the loop.** Write to abfe@bookweb.org early and often. We may be able to help in different ways or your information may help us with strategy or education for other stores.

BE PROACTIVE: HOW TO BE READY BEFORE A BAN ARRIVES

FOR BOOKSELLERS

- ❑ Stock banned books in your store.
- ❑ Create a Banned Books display, highlighting any local bans. Use our How-To as a starting point.
- ❑ Have a banned book list on your Bookshop.org page.
- ❑ Host a Banned Books Read-In at your store or elsewhere. Use our How-To as a starting point.
- ❑ Train your staff to deal with book challenges in your store. Use our How-To as a starting point.
- ❑ Make an event safety plan, distribute to your staff, and hold trainings. Use our How-To as a starting point.
- ❑ Make an online harassment plan, distribute to your staff, and hold trainings. Use our How-To as a starting point.

FOR EVERYONE

- ❑ Sign our [Petition Opposing Book Bans](#).
- ❑ Put banned books in [Little Free Libraries in your area](#).
- ❑ Get to know your school board. Watch school board meetings online or in person. Thank the board for any work they are doing to support diverse voices and support student reading.
- ❑ Support banned authors on social media.
- ❑ Contact your representatives at the first sign of any censorship through legislation. Use our How-To as a starting point. Finally, [report the action to ABFE](#).
- ❑ Write to President Biden to thank him for committing to hire a Coordinator to fight the outbreak of book bans and encourage him to name one quickly.
- ❑ Create opportunities for your customers to get to know local election candidates who support the right to read.
- ❑ [Donate to ABFE](#). We will use your donation to fund legal challenges to book ban legislation, defend small businesses, and create resources for booksellers.
- ❑ Show your support for everyone's right to read with [ABFE's official merch](#): I Read Dangerously and FREEDOM T-shirts, hoodies, and youth tees.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT

We work with these organizations as part of coalitions defending the right to read, as partners in lawsuits, and as general allies in the fight for free expression. After supporting ABFE, consider supporting these important allies:

- [ALA's Unite Against Book Bans initiative](#)
- [The Banned Books Week Coalition](#)
- [Kids' Right to Read Project](#)
- [Free Expression Network](#)
- [Media Coalition](#)
- [PEN America](#)





APPENDIX



ANSWERS TO “WHY WAS THIS BOOK BANNED?” QUIZ

1. **B, Sexual content.** Kirkwood School District, Missouri, 2022. Missouri law bans “sexual content.” Per *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*
2. **A, “EDI” (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) content.** Banned in school districts in New Jersey, Florida, Texas, and Utah, while it is banned pending investigation in many more school districts. Per PEN America.
3. **D, We don’t know, because AI made the decision.** Mason City School District, Iowa, 2023. Per “Book Club,” *The Washington Post*.
4. **D, Author was confused for a different Bill Martin, author of “Ethical Marxism” — which, by the way, is also constitutionally protected free speech.** Texas State Board of Education, 2010. Per *The Dallas Morning News*.
5. **C, Includes an accurate definition of the term “oral sex.”** Menifee Union School District, California, 2010. Per *The Guardian*.
6. **Any.** Banned in school districts in Missouri, California, and Utah. Stated reasons (per PEN America) include “LGBTQ+ content, providing sexual education, claimed to be sexually explicit.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SPONSORS

In addition to the hundreds of ABA members who donated to ABFE when they renewed their ABA membership, thank you to ABFE’s generous sponsors:

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PARTNERS

Thank you also to Media Coalition, National Coalition Against Censorship, Banned Books Week Coalition, The Authors Guild, Association of American Publishers, and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund for their continued partnership in fighting this good fight.

PRINTABLE PDF DOCUMENTS

- [Quiz: “Why Was This Book Banned?”](#)
- [How To: Write an Op-Ed](#)
- [How To: Deal with “Book Challenges” in Your Store](#)
- [Keep Your Events Safe in a Charged Climate](#)
- [Deal with Online Harassment](#)



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