Caring for your Books

The book is an ingenious invention. Compact and portable, it has been the primary means of transmitting and preserving mankind’s accumulated knowledge for hundreds of years.
Causation of damage

These organic materials can be damaged by light, fluctuating and extremes of temperature and humidity, dirt and dust, poor shelving and handling.

- Light causes rapid deterioration and fading. All lights cause some damage but daylight, containing high levels of ultraviolet radiation, is the most harmful.
- Hot and dry conditions desiccate and embrittle leather and paper; damp conditions encourage mould and insects. Accumulation of dirt and dust can trigger chemical degradation.
- Shelves and handling can also cause physical and chemical damage. Most of the dirt on book covers and pages is accumulated grime from oily fingertips. Invisible finger grime becomes too visible as it oxidises and collects dirt.

Books packed tightly on a shelf are difficult to remove without harming them; removing a book by pulling on its headcap is apt to break it. Leaning books place stress on the entire book structure. Opening a book flat on a table stresses the structure, flattening the spine and stretching the joints. Placing books face down onto a flat surface, for example during photocopying, break the binding.

- Felt tip pens and biros may stain; self-adhesive slips (post it notes) leave an ‘foxed’ and brittle paper, stains, worm holes, mould all require attention.

Signs of damage

Torn and loose pages, text blocks out of their covers, broken and detached spines and joints, yellowing self adhesive tapes or discoloured repair papers, ‘foxed’ and brittle paper, stains, worm holes, mould all require attention.

- Reduce exposure to light by keeping lights turned off in rooms that are not in use; block daylight by using curtains or blinds.
- Prevent exposure to rapid changes or extremes in temperature and humidity by keeping books away from sources of heat such as radiators and fireplaces.
- A cool, dry and stable environment is ideal. Temperatures between 13–19°C and a relative humidity of 45–60% are recommended. Avoid placing them near external walls. Good air circulation is imperative to prevent stagnant air pockets, where condensation will collect and mould might grow. For this reason it is best not to push books right to the back of the shelf.
- Ensure that books standing vertically on shelves are upright and supported by neighbouring books or bookends. It is best to lay large books horizontally in stacks of two or three.

Finding a conservator

IPC operates a professional accreditation scheme to protect the users of conservation services, whether individuals or large public institutions. The scheme is run in partnership with other conservation bodies. Accredited members are designated as ACR MIPC.

IPC supplies free of charge, the names and addresses of ACRs either by geographical area or particular expertise. This service is open to both individuals and institutions, for a single item or for a large and diverse collection. ACRs may also give advice on preventive conservation, disaster planning, storing and display.

The Institute of Paper Conservation is the leading organisation devoted solely to the conservation and care of paper, books and related materials. email: information@ipc.org.uk

The recommendations in this leaflet are intended as guidance only.IPC does not assume responsibility or liability.

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What you can’t do

- When it is too late for preventive conservation and the damage is already done, there is little that you as a collector can do. Resist the temptation to do home repairs with any of the wide variety of self adhesive tapes as these are likely to cause further damage and are difficult to remove.

Contact an accredited book conservator through the Institute of Paper Conservation and they will advise on the most appropriate treatment for your book.

When opening a book on a flat surface, protect the structure from stress by supporting the covers and the spine.