

## Turn Students into Collection Developers

Feature

---



When I talk with fellow school librarians about collection development, the topic that comes up most often is the responsibility they feel to make sure they spend their budgets on high quality books that students actually want to read. And, that is true whether the budget is healthy or it is based purely on donations. Instead of guessing at what your students want to read, get them involved in the process. Not only will you get the benefit of student-curated lists for purchase or donation, but students get to learn more about the art of selecting books and are also able to take ownership of what is available in their library.

I had great success with presenting this collection development opportunity as a lesson when working with reading classes when I was a high school librarian, but it could be easily adapted to a variety of grade levels and used with various resources. This lesson allows students to not only explore options to add to your library, but also to learn what is already sitting on your shelves.

### **Consider Policies and Guidelines**

First, I provide students with our collection development guidelines. If your library does not have these, explain to your students the guidelines you personally follow. We discuss why these guidelines are important and what I do to meet them. (Side note: if your school or district does not have a collection development guideline or policy, you may want to look into creating one.)

For example, in our district, one component of our materials selection policy is that the item must be recommended by reputable, unbiased, professionally prepared selection aids; specialists from various curriculum departments and grade levels; or district library media selection committees. Typically, the school librarians meet this criterion by locating *at least* one positive professional review. I personally use reviews that I find when looking at Titlewave from Follett or on Amazon, but your students can use other resources as well.

### **Construct a Search**

Next, I instruct students how to find titles they may be interested in reading that fit our school's grade levels. I have used NovelList Plus in the past to help with this process. Our state library commission provides access to this resource, in which students can search for the following:

- Fiction or nonfiction by age group, which is then broken down into subcategories
- Genre
- Books on a certain topic
- Title read alike
- Author read alike
- Mood

Students can then filter results by audience age level, publication date, genre, theme, character, tone, storyline, etc. I found that the filtering system was not complicated for students to use if I took a moment to explain to them how it worked. Most were able to navigate it on their own after a few practice runs we did together. If you do not have access to NoveList Plus, many different school and public library websites have topic and read alike suggestions.

"I think that it helps the librarian get to know me better so that she can help me find more books that I will like." –third grader

### **Review and Understand Selection Criteria**

It is important to review the collection development criteria with students before they compile their lists. Based on the district's policy, I ask that the book be published within the last five years, be grade level appropriate, be something they feel other students will want to read, and have at least one positive review. Luckily, NoveList Plus also provides reviews for books in their database, so students do not need to navigate to an outside page. But, if you are using a different site, you could easily have students check reviews in Amazon.

The importance of finding positive reviews is stressed when I introduce the collection development guidelines. We look through several reviews together so students understand how reviews are written and what they should look for to determine if the review is positive, negative, or somewhere in the middle. I also emphasize that students need to read through all the reviews available to make sure that they agree with each other. We discuss scenarios such as what students should do if they encounter a book where one review is positive, but five others are not.

### **Browse Titles**

Armed with collection development guidelines and a resource for finding books, students are now ready to explore the many options available to them. I generally task students with selecting five to ten books they might be interested in reading. Students can put any book they would like on the list as long as it meets the criteria. Once students have created their lists, they must check the online catalog to determine if the school already owns the book or if another school in the district owns the book. This is an important step in the process as it keeps books that we already own off an order list and gives students the opportunity to find books they want to read that are already in our library. On many occasions, the books students added to their interest list were actually on the shelves in our library.

### **Get Currently Held Titles into Students' Hands**

I make sure to include time on list check day to allow students to locate and check out any books they have on their list that are available in the library OR to put a hold on anything that has already been checked out by another student. Getting a book immediately into the hands of a student is incredibly satisfying for them and for me.

If students encounter a book they are interested in reading but it is marked as lost or missing in the library catalog, I have them indicate it on their graphic organizer. I can then use this information when building my order list to determine if I want to order replacements.

We have interlibrary loan between schools in our district, so I have students mark books that may not be in our library but are available at another school on their graphic organizer as well. I submit borrow requests on list check day to other schools for books students are interested in reading right away. I pay attention too if multiple students want to borrow a certain title to determine if we need to add a copy to our library's collection.

A sixth grader asked for some manga titles that our district typically only has in secondary schools (Naruto, Bleach, etc.). Instead, I found manga-style graphic novels that would fit our elementary readers (Pokemon, Legend of Zelda). He asked me almost every day for about four weeks if they were in the library yet. How long it takes an order to process and be delivered from a vendor is not what students are used to today! He explained, "I was excited when the books arrived. Even though they weren't exactly what I wanted, I still liked reading them."

### **Finalize, Purchase, and Promote**

The books left on the list at this point should be ones that are not available in our school or in our district. I make sure to double check that students met the criteria accurately. Does it fit our collection development guidelines? If so, I add it to a purchase or wish list. And, I make sure to let students know that if a book they suggested is bought or donated, they will be the first one able to check it out. Keeping track of who recommended what may take a bit of record keeping, but students appreciate that the hard work they put into their recommendations is rewarded in this small but significant way.

Once the student has read the book and tell me they like it, I ask if I can display it with a tag that says, "Recommended by \_\_\_\_\_" with a small blurb as to why the student enjoyed it if they want. Adding this step, helps students continue to feel ownership over their choice long after the initial activity is complete.

### **Why Invite Students to the Table?**

The benefits of turning students into collection developers are many! I can use the time I would have spent scrolling through recommendation lists and reading reviews to plan lessons or library programming. I can still look for titles on my own, but with students helping, this process is not as time consuming. And importantly, students take ownership of the library collection. The books on the shelves are not just ones the librarian thought would be good. These are books THEY thought would be good based on selection criteria. A recommendation by a fellow student can often be influential when students are choosing books to read on their own.

MLA CITATION

Pentland, Courtney. "Turn Students into Collection Developers." *School Library Connection*, May 2020, [schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2209702](https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2209702).

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2209702?topicCenterId=2247902>

Entry ID: 2209702

COPYRIGHT 2025 ABC-CLIO, LLC