



A DCI Deliberation Guide

Book Censorship:

In what contexts should we censor books, if ever? Who gets to decide?

Format for Deliberation

Before the Deliberation

Read this document (Required)

Reflect on your own views as well as the arguments in the Guide.

(Optional) Review some of the sources listed in the footnotes of this document.

During the Deliberation

- I. Setting Expectations - 5 min.
- II. Getting to Know Each Other - 10 min.
- III. What are the arguments for and against **governments** censoring/banning books that are offensive to some people? – 10 min.
- IV. What are the arguments for and against **public schools and public libraries** limiting children's access to certain books? – 10 min.
- V. What are the arguments for and against **publishing companies** deciding against publishing books that may offend some people? – 10 min.
- VI. What are the arguments for and against **editing literature from earlier eras** that some people find offensive today? – 10 min.
- VII. Break – 5 min.
- VIII. Where do **trigger and content warnings** belong in this discussion? - 8 min.
- IX. To what extent does it matter **whether a book depicts but does not necessarily endorse a particular idea** that some may find offensive? - 8 min.
- X. What counts as **proper and improper exposure** to a concept? - 8 min.
- XI. If we should limit access to certain books or ban them in some contexts, **who has the authority** to decide this and for whom? - 8 min.
- XII. How do considerations about the **value of autonomy** play into these questions? - 8 min.
- XIII. Conclusions - 10 min.
- XIV. Reflections - 10 min.

Background

I. Introduction

Who gets to decide what kinds of books the general public has access to? Should there be any restrictions on what books the public can access? Should there be restrictions on the kinds of books that children can have access to, and if so, who has the appropriate authority to make such decisions—the state, the school, parents, or some other group? How should we balance concerns about autonomy to decide what content we have access to? These are some of the questions this Deliberation Guide is designed to help readers and deliberators grapple with. It does not represent every angle on the topic, but rather aims to convey some of the pressing contemporary concerns about the above questions.

The difficulty of engaging with these questions is compounded by the fact that it is contested just what counts as book censorship in the first place. Do calls to remove a book from a school curriculum or from its circulation in school libraries (for children of particular age groups) count as *censorship* or as *curation*?¹ Deliberators may at times disagree about whether an instance of limiting access to a book, or limiting its publication, counts as censorship or as curation. For space purposes, we will refer to all of these possibilities and related examples as potential “censorship” in this Guide, but readers and participants can and should view this label and other labels as arguable, contested and open for discussion. You are welcome to consider and deliberate about these categories during the deliberative process.

In this Deliberation Guide, we will proceed by examining some key examples for the discussion before stepping back to consider other key concepts relevant to the discussion of book censorship.

II. Book Censorship by Governments

In this section, we will explore two examples of book censorship that has occurred or has been considered by state governments for differing reasons. A government may ban a book because it is attempting to protect people from harm, because it is acting in accordance with religious law and outlawing something that is considered blasphemous, because the book is not considered something that ought to be protected as free speech, and other reasons. Deliberators should consider which of these arguments they consider plausible and implausible.

Example 1: *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler

Mein Kampf is a fascist, anti-Semitic memoir and manifesto written by Adolf Hitler while he was in prison and before he rose to power. Some argue that because *Mein Kampf* is a manifesto of Nazism, it incites hatred, as opposed to merely causing offense. This may be a reason to have a

¹ Buck, Daniel. [“Book Curation is not Censorship.”](#) The National Review. 2023.

debate about whether *Mein Kampf* should be banned, and is a potential reason for banning it, especially in a society like Great Britain where there have been recent periods of rising antisemitism.² For example, between January and June of 2014, hate crimes against Jewish individuals rose 94% in the UK.³ Proponents of banning the book also argue that keeping it in print and accessible is not only dangerous for some groups, but also legitimizes the ideas in it.⁴ Insofar as *Mein Kampf* contains hate speech, some might argue that it should be banned on those grounds alone, since they believe hate speech should not be legally protected.⁵

Proponents of keeping the book in print and available to the public argue that the book is worth reading because resisting arguments of the kind that appear in it is an ongoing effort, and we must be exposed to the arguments in order to resist them.⁶ Others argue that college students in particular should be able to access books like *Mein Kampf*. The reasons cited are that access to such books will, by exposing students to ideas that are uncomfortable to sit with, strengthen their intellect, make them less fragile, and enable them to grapple better with difficult, sensitive topics. Students should learn how to be prepared to respond to ideas like those found in *Mein Kampf* when they encounter them in the real world, and exposure to it and other such books is the kind of preparation they need.⁷

Example 2: *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was published in 1988, was a finalist for the 1988 Booker Prize, and received the 1988 Whitebread Award for Novel of the Year.⁸ It explores Islamic religious themes, immigration, and alienation. The novel invited sharp criticism from religious leaders and governments, who advocated banning the book due to its blasphemous references. The primary concern was its reference to the Quranic Satanic Verses, which reference a disputed narrative that the Prophet Muhammad was tricked by Satan into exalting three pre-Islamic goddesses in order to convert them to Islam. The novel also suggests Muhammad was a false deity and gives twelve prostitutes the names of Muhammad's wives.⁹ Due to these criticisms, the book is banned in over twelve countries, including Iran, India, and Kenya.¹⁰ In 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran called for Muslims across the world to kill Rushdie, "so that no one will dare insult the sacred beliefs of Muslims henceforth."¹¹ After the book's publication, Rushdie was forced into hiding; at age 75, the author survived a near-fatal stabbing in 2022, and lost one eye as a result.¹²

² Flood, Alison. "[UK should consider ban on Mein Kampf, says Scottish Labour MP.](#)" The Guardian. 2015.

Schaub, Michael. "[Should Britain ban Hitler's 'Mein Kampf'?](#)" Los Angeles Times. 2015.

³ Maddox, David. "[Ban Hitler's Mein Kampf to stop race hate, urges MP.](#)" The Scotsman. 2015.

⁴ Gopnik, Adam. "[Does 'Mein Kampf' Remain a Dangerous Book?](#)" The New Yorker. 2016.

⁵ "[Hate Speech Q&A.](#)" British Columbia's Office of Human Rights Commissioner. Accessed 2023.

⁶ Gopnik, Adam. "[Does 'Mein Kampf' Remain a Dangerous Book?](#)" The New Yorker. 2016.

⁷ Steinberg, Julia. "[Nazis Banned Books. We Shouldn't.](#)" The Stanford Review. 2023.

⁸ "[The Satanic Verses.](#)" Wikipedia. 2023.

⁹ "[Satanic Verses.](#)" Wikipedia. 2023; Week Staff. "[Why The Satanic Verses is still so controversial.](#)" The Week. 2022.

¹⁰ Monks, Kieron. "['The Satanic Verses' and six other books some people don't want you to read.](#)" CNN. 2022.

¹¹ "[Khomeini's Fatwa on Rushdie.](#)" Wilson Center. 2022.

¹² Remnick, David. "[The Defiance of Salman Rushdie.](#)" The New Yorker. 2023.

Nations with theocratic governments and governments that do not protect freedom of expression have tended to ban the book. However, the book sparked controversy in liberal democracies as well. Copies of the book were burned by religious critics in Britain, and some analysts argue that this occurred because there is a type of treason, treason to the faith, recognized by Muslims.¹³ The alleged blasphemy of Rushdie can also be seen as a violation of Muslims' autonomy to practice their religion; allowing such anti-Islamic blasphemy suggests endorsement of it thereby creates a hostile environment that makes living as a Muslim feel like they are under siege.¹⁴ Along these lines, President Jimmy Carter acknowledged that the book "is a direct insult to those millions of Muslims whose sacred beliefs have been violated."¹⁵

Liberal democracy is a form of government in which no one particular religious doctrine or conception of the good life ought to be legally privileged over another. So, one might argue, in liberal democracies, the fact that a text is blasphemous according to any one particular religious doctrine is not the kind of reason that is usually cited in favor of limiting its publication or censoring it. Defenders of keeping the book in print and accessible to the public argue that banning it wrongly limits freedom of expression. Rushdie himself has asserted that we should be free to fiercely criticize the ideas of others, including their religious beliefs, and that it is possible to do so while still respecting them and their religious identities.¹⁶ Many organizations, governments, and individuals have expressed support for Rushdie's freedom of expression; for example, the author Philip Roth said that he may disagree with Rushdie on many questions, "but as to the right to challenge a point of view, we stand together."

Proponents of bans within liberal democracies argue that freedom of expression, which is a shared value of these systems of government, does not function in an ideal way. As Todd Green, a Professor of Religion at Luther College, argues, the "marketplace of ideas" privileges some voices over others, and "the playing field" between these relatively privileged persons and the underprivileged should somehow be leveled.¹⁷ In the context of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie, an ex-Muslim and renowned author, can be seen as a member of the Britain's cultural elite, while many of his critics are working class Muslims who found his depictions of Islam to be deeply insulting and harmful.¹⁸ In this case of unequal and disproportionate cultural impact, some might argue that censoring some voices (Rushdie's) and raising up others (his opponents') might be a legitimate means to "level the playing field."

III. Book Censorship by Public Schools and Libraries

In this section, we will consider book bans and censorship in the context of public schools and libraries. The scope of this section is limited to these public institutions in order to focus the

¹³ Mazrui, Ali A. "[Moral Dilemmas of *The Satanic Verses*.](#)" The Black Scholar. 1989.

¹⁴ "[The Satanic Verses.](#)" Wikipedia. 2023.

¹⁵ "[Rushdie's Book Is an Insult.](#)" New York Times. 1989.

¹⁶ Week Staff. "[Why *The Satanic Verses* is still so controversial.](#)" The Week. 2022.

¹⁷ Green, Todd. "[The Satanic Verses 25 Years Later: Why the Rushdie Affair Still Matters.](#)" Huffpost. 2013.

¹⁸ Ibid.

discussion, since different norms plausibly apply to public schools and libraries than to private ones (we will explore the role of private publishing companies in the next section).

Example 3: *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe

In 2022, the state of Florida passed the “Stop W.O.K.E. Act,” or the “Individual Freedom Act,” which prohibited certain teachings related to critical race theory.¹⁹ Since the law makes prohibitions against what can be taught in schools, this resulted in widespread state reviews of book content and removal of books from schools.²⁰ Florida also passed a Parental Rights in Education Law, dubbed the “Don’t Say ‘Gay’” law by its critics, which prohibits the instruction in schools of sexual orientation and gender identity through the third grade, and was later expanded to grade twelve.²¹ After the law was passed, approximately 300 books were removed from schools.²² Some of these books include *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison and *Anne Frank’s Diary: The Graphic Adaptation* by Ari Folman.²³ The activist group, Moms for Liberty, has challenged the American classic, *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, on the grounds that it contains sexually explicit language, including a depiction of bestiality.²⁴ Critics of the Florida laws and of Moms for Liberty argue that liberty crucially involves respecting other people’s privilege to have free access to information and literature, especially ideas that are unorthodox or unpopular.²⁵

Another book challenged in Florida on grounds of sexual content is *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe. The book is an illustrated memoir and about coming out to family and friends and contains some sexually explicit content. In 2020, it won the Alex Award from the American Library Association, an award for books that hold special appeal for young adults aged 12-18.²⁶ It has been banned in more states than any other book, according to a National Public Radio piece.²⁷ Moms for Liberty has criticized numerous books because of the inclusion of sexually explicit content, including *Gender Queer*.²⁸ *Gender Queer* is an illustrated book, and critics argue that the illustrations are too explicit in order for the book to be freely allowed in schools and public libraries; children should need at least parental permission to access such a book, or the

¹⁹ Education and Employment Committee. [CS/HB 7: Individual Freedom](#). The Florida Senate. 2022.

²⁰ [Florida Book Ban Facts](#). PEN America. 2023.

²¹ Alfonseca, Kiara. [“So-called 'Don't Say Gay' rules expanded through 12th grade in Florida.”](#) ABC News. 2023.

Diaz, Jaclyn. [“Florida’s governor signs controversial law opponents dubbed 'Don't Say Gay'.”](#) NPR. 2022.

²² Lavietes, Matt. [“Florida school districts removed roughly 300 books last school year.”](#) NBC News. 2023.

²³ Rodrigues, Gabi. [“Roughly 300 books were removed from school libraries in Florida last year. Here’s the full list.”](#) NBC Miami. 2023.

²⁴ [Moms for Liberty challenge to 'Slaughterhouse-Five,' an AP English staple, raises concerns in Brevard](#). Florida Today. 2022.

²⁵ Whitehead, Julia A. [“An Open Letter to the Moms For Liberty and Bayside High School Leadership.”](#) Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library. Accessed 2023.

²⁶ Alter, Alexandra. [“How a Debut Graphic Memoir Became the Most Banned Book in the Country.”](#) New York Times. 2023.

²⁷ Martin, Rachel and Reena Advani. [“Banned Books: Maia Kobabe explores gender identity in 'Gender Queer'”](#) NPR WUUNC. 2023.

²⁸ Gallion, Bailey. [“Brevard teacher’s ‘banned book’ drive raises over \\$5,000, angers Moms for Liberty.”](#) Florida Today. 2022.

book should be banned from public schools and libraries altogether because its content is too obscene, even pornographic.²⁹ Henry McMaster, the Governor of South Carolina, wrote to his state’s Superintendent of Education that “even a cursory review” of the book would have found that it contains sexually and pornographic depictions that would “easily have met or exceeded the statutory definition of obscenity.” A concerned parent asserted, “Pornography is offensive to all people. It is offensive to common decency,” and was particularly concerned about an illustration depicting the author fantasizing about an older man sexually touching an apparently younger boy. In her view, this image depicting pedophilia and others showing masturbation and oral sex should not be available in high school libraries.³⁰

Defenders of keeping the book accessible agree that the book may *seem* obscene at first glance, without paying attention to context—after all, it contains mentions of masturbation and sexual arousal, an illustration of a naked person, and a depiction of oral sex. However, they argue that these kinds of depictions do not suffice for the book to be banned, because they are a crucial part of exploring the main theme of the book, which is sexual and gender identity.³¹ The fact that sexuality is a taboo subject in American culture does not, according to the book’s defenders, count as a good reason to make it inaccessible to a wide audience; it is a violation of students’ rights to ban a book that only some parents find objectionable.³² Moreover, some defenders of keeping the book in circulation in schools and libraries argue that there is a backlash against LGBTQ+ themes in particular, and that the effort to limit children’s exposure to *Gender Queer* and other books like it is not about parents’ rights, but an ideological fight about whether children should be exposed to LGBTQ+ themes in the first place.³³ Kobabe had hoped the book would resonate with young adults who themselves wrestle with gender identity.³⁴

Example 4: *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic of American literature that won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961. Since that time and in recent years, there have been proponents of banning the book. Criticism of the book has focused on the appearance of a common racial slur against African American people, its focus on rape, and its use of profanity. Other critics claim that the book’s Black characters are shallow and that the book promotes the “white savior” archetype, a character who ultimately marginalizes Black characters even as he or she attempts to advocate for their civil rights.³⁵ Criticisms and requests to remove the book from circulation in libraries

²⁹ Schell, Carlton. [“The Unjustified Banning of Gender Queer: How One Act of Censorship May Snowball.”](#) The Tower. 2023.

³⁰ [Author of 'Gender Queer,' one of most-banned books in U.S., addresses controversy.](#) NBC News. 2021.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Alter, Alexandra. [“How a Debut Graphic Memoir Became the Most Banned Book in the Country.”](#) New York Times. 2023.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Russell, Jason. [“The Failed Campaign to Kill *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”](#) Reason. 2022.

Seekford, Brett. [“To Kill a Mockingbird, The Help, and the Regendering of the White Savior.”](#) James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal. 2017.

and schools have come from both Black and white Americans, and include concerns about harm to children if they were to read the book or discuss it in school.³⁶

Proponents of keeping the book in print and accessible both to children and adults argue that the book is valuable precisely because it frames the discussion of race in the U.S. in ways that allow us to approach this issue in a productive way. Some critics of the book advocate for its removal from required school curriculum, but do not argue that it should be banned or restricted, and argue that teachers should still be allowed to teach it.³⁷ Others claim that the book should not be removed from school curriculum at all, arguing that exposure to it helps promote critical thinking.³⁸ Still others argue that the book should remain required reading in schools because we must admit the existence of prejudice and confront it, and being exposed to the book enables us to do so, even though it may make us uncomfortable because of the language used.³⁹ According to this line of thought, the discomfort adults and children may feel in being exposed to a book is not sufficient reason to ban it or to restrict our access to it, because we must be exposed to ideas that make us uncomfortable in order to grow and to develop our abilities to confront those phenomenon, such as racism, that we find objectionable or intolerable.

IV. Book Censorship by Publishers: Canceling New Publications

Governments, schools, and libraries are not the only entities that have the power to censor books. Publishing companies also have the capacity to do so, based not on their legal or political authority but on their cultural and economic power. In recent years, these private companies have come under increasing pressure to cancel their plans to publish certain titles and in some cases have indeed done so. The reasons for these cancellations vary and are often context-dependent, but they can be grouped into two (non-exhaustive) categories.

The first category involves concerns about the character, behavior, or views of the book's author. For example, Simon and Schuster cancelled its publication of Milo Yiannopoulos' book, *Dangerous*, after a recording of the author was made public in which he appeared to endorse pedophilia.⁴⁰ Similar calls for publishers were made – often by their own employees – to cancel the publication of books by Mike Pence (unsuccessful), Josh Hawley (successful), Naomi Wolf (successful), and Woody Allen (successful).⁴¹ We will explore the case of Woody Allen in Example 5 below.

³⁶ [“Banned and Challenged Classics.”](#) Banned and Challenged Books, American Library Association. 2023.

³⁷ Buhain, Venice. [“To Kill a Mockingbird’ in the Hotseat at WA School District.”](#) Crosscut Cascade PBS. 2022.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The Editorial Board. [“Why ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ Should be Required Reading, Not Banned.”](#) Philadelphia Inquirer. 2017.

⁴⁰ [Milo Yiannopoulos book deal cancelled after outrage over child abuse comments.](#) 2017.

⁴¹ [Naomi Wolf’s Publisher Cancels U.S. Release of ‘Outrages.](#) New York Times. 2019; [Josh Hawley’s book deal cancellation comes after a year of social debates in publishing.](#) Vox. 2021; [Thousands of supporters join staff at Mike Pence’s publisher in campaign against book deal.](#) The Guardian. 2021.

The second category focuses on concerns about the possible harm caused by either the content of the publication or the identity of the author. The content may be employing “stereotypes, outdated tropes, or unrealistic character sketches” that are perceived as harmful or dangerous.⁴² Likewise, some argue that harm can be inflicted if the author of the book is writing about a topic that they do not have personal experience with (e.g., a white woman writing about the challenges of being a black woman).⁴³ Examples of both successful and unsuccessful efforts to cancel publication of books for these reasons come from both academic presses and fiction publishers. One such case, *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, is discussed in Example 6 below.

Example 5: *Apropos of Nothing* by Woody Allen

In 2020, the Hachette Book Group announced that it would not publish Woody Allen’s autobiography, *Apropos of Nothing*, after some of its employees staged a walkout and demanded the book’s cancellation.⁴⁴ Allen is an American director, writer, actor, and comedian who has won three Oscars for best original screenplay and one for Best Director (and been nominated for Oscars 19 other times).⁴⁵ The complaint against Allen centered on accusations that he had sexually abused his daughter when she was seven years old.⁴⁶ Controversy has also surrounded Allen’s sexual relationship with his partner Mia Farrow’s adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Previn, which began when she was 21 and he was 57 (they have been married since 1997).⁴⁷

Proponents of the autobiography’s cancellation stated that they were standing in solidarity with those harmed by Allen and all survivors of sexual assault.⁴⁸ The publisher did not provide a specific reason for withdrawing the book, but it stated that it was committed to “offering a stimulating, supportive, and open work environment for all our staff” and after “extensive conversations with our staff and others...we came to the conclusion that moving forward with publication would not be feasible.”⁴⁹ Ronan Farrow, a journalist and Allen’s son, suggested that publishing the book was akin to assisting “in efforts by abusive men to whitewash their crimes.”⁵⁰

Opponents of the cancellation cited the fact that Allen had not been charged with sexual assault after two investigations decades ago; one commentator wrote, “we use the courts to punish people rather than censorship to punish people...even convicted murderers get to write books,” citing a unanimous Supreme Court decision upholding their right to do so.⁵¹ Before deciding to

⁴² [Booklash: Literary Freedom, Online Outrage, and the Language of Harm](#). PEN America. 2023.

⁴³ [Booklash: Literary Freedom, Online Outrage, and the Language of Harm](#). PEN America. 2023.

⁴⁴ [Hachette Says It Won’t Publish Woody Allen’s Book](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁴⁵ [Woody Allen Awards](#). IMDB.

⁴⁶ [Woody Allen, Mia Farrow, Soon-Yi Previn, Dylan Farrow: A Timeline](#). New York Times. 2021.

⁴⁷ [Woody Allen marries Soon-Yi Previn](#). History Channel.

⁴⁸ [Hachette Workers Protest Woody Allen Book With a Walkout](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁴⁹ [Hachette Says It Won’t Publish Woody Allen’s Book](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁵⁰ [‘Imagine This Were Your Sister,’ Ronan Farrow Tells Woody Allen’s Publisher.](#) New York Times. 2020.

⁵¹ [The Woody Allen book 'Apropos of Nothing' has the right to be published — and to not be read](#). NBC News. 2020.

cancel the book's publication, Hachette's CEO said that "there's a large audience that wants to hear the story of Woody Allen's life as told by Woody Allen himself."⁵² PEN America asserted that the withdrawal of books from publication deprives "readers of the chance to make their own judgments" about the material.⁵³

Example 6: *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins

In 2020, Jeanine Cummins published the book, *American Dirt*, which portrays the life of a Mexican bookseller who emigrates to the United States with her son to escape cartel violence.⁵⁴ It became a *New York Times* bestseller and an Oprah's Book Club pick, but criticism about it led to the cancelation of Cummins's entire book tour due to safety concerns.⁵⁵ The book was criticized by author Myriam Gurba and others for "appropriating genius works by people of color," making them palatable for Americans, and "repackaging them for mass racially 'colorblind' consumption."⁵⁶ Gurba also takes issue with Cummins for her "overly ripe Mexican stereotypes, among them the Latin lover, the suffering mother, and the stoic manchild" and cliques that evoke a "landscape of carnage" in Mexico.⁵⁷ She also asserts that Cummins lacks the qualifications to write *Dirt*, as she is still "breaking-in her Latinx-ness" (Cummins has a Puerto Rican grandparent and three white grandparents) and should have "referred readers to the primary and secondary sources she plundered."⁵⁸ This critique echoes more general arguments from the #OwnVoices movement; as one supporter put it, "Stories about the civil rights movement should be written by black people. Stories of suffrage should be written by women. Ergo, stories about boys during horrific and life changing times, like the AIDS EPIDEMIC, should be written by gay men. Why is this so hard to get?"⁵⁹

Defenders of the book include Latina author Sandra Cisneros, who called it "the great novel of las Americas."⁶⁰ Cisneros argued that the book will be able to reach those who are "maybe undecided about issues at the border," who want "to be entertained, and the story is going to enter like a Trojan horse and change minds. And it's going to change the minds that, perhaps, I can't change."⁶¹ More generally, PEN America argues that the "identity-essentialist approach to literature" that asserts "writers can only responsibly tell the stories that relate to their own identity and experiences" is "incompatible with the freedom to imagine that is essential to the creation of literature." It also "denies readers the opportunity to experience stories through the eyes of writers offering varied and distinctive lenses."⁶² One host of a literary podcast, who proclaimed *American Dirt* is a "once in a lifetime read" with "absolutely captivating language,"

⁵² [Hachette Workers Protest Woody Allen Book With a Walkout](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁵³ [Hachette Workers Protest Woody Allen Book With a Walkout](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁵⁴ [American Dirt](#). GoodReads.

⁵⁵ [On 'Oprah's Book Club,' 'American Dirt' Author Faces Criticism](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁵⁶ [Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature](#). Tropics of Meta. 2019.

⁵⁷ [Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature](#). Tropics of Meta. 2019.

⁵⁸ [Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature](#). Tropics of Meta. 2019.

⁵⁹ [Booklash: Literary Freedom, Online Outrage, and the Language of Harm](#). PEN America. 2023.

⁶⁰ [As the 'American Dirt' backlash ramps up, Sandra Cisneros doubles down on her support](#). LA Times. 2020.

⁶¹ [As the 'American Dirt' backlash ramps up, Sandra Cisneros doubles down on her support](#). LA Times. 2020.

⁶² [Booklash: Literary Freedom, Online Outrage, and the Language of Harm](#). PEN America. 2023.

asked, “Since when do authors have to actually be like the characters they portray in fiction?”⁶³ In defending her selection of the book on her book list, Oprah Winfrey stated, “I fundamentally, fundamentally believe in the right of anyone to use their imagination and their skills to tell stories and to empathize with another story.”⁶⁴

V. Book Censorship by Publishers (Editing Existing Publications)

Publishers can also censor books not by canceling them outright but by revising them instead. Some people advocate for the removal or alteration of content that may be perceived as offensive, inaccurate, or perpetuating harmful stereotypes, either pre- or post-publication.⁶⁵ Some examples of authors whose work was edited for these considerations include Agatha Christie, Richard Scarry, and Ian Fleming.⁶⁶ Publishing houses often employ sensitivity readers to scan for potentially offensive content, and they may decide to alter existing content potentially because that will make the books less offensive to contemporary audiences. Critics of this practice argue that classic texts are part of our artistic and historical record, and that it is a disservice to the public to alter this record.⁶⁷ Two examples of such editing are introduced below.

Example 7: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

In 2023, the Daily Telegraph reported that future editions of Roald Dahl’s books will include “hundreds of changes” to the original text based on suggestions from sensitivity readers hired by the publisher, Puffin Books.⁶⁸ For example, the word “fat” has been removed from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (e.g., “the fat shopkeeper shouted” has been changed to “the shopkeeper shouted”).⁶⁹ References to toy pistols were also removed. Other changes include changing “the crazy prince” to “the prince,” “Charlie experienced a queer sense of danger” to “Charlie experienced a strange sense of danger,” and “like all extremely old people, he was delicate and weak” to “like most extremely old people, he was delicate and weak.”⁷⁰

Critics of these changes included Salman Rushdie, who called them “absurd censorship.”⁷¹ PEN America’s Chief Executive suggested that those who agree with some of the specific edits should consider how this editing power could be used by “those who do not share their values

⁶³ [In Defense of AMERICAN DIRT... and Just Being a Nice Person](#). Medium. 2020.

⁶⁴ [On ‘Oprah’s Book Club,’ ‘American Dirt’ Author Faces Criticism](#). New York Times. 2020.

⁶⁵ [“Sensitivity readers: what publishing’s most polarising role is really about.”](#) The Guardian. 2023;

[“Agatha Christie novels reworked to remove potentially offensive language.”](#) The Guardian. 2023.

⁶⁶ [Bowdlerized: 8 Famous Authors Whose Works Have Been Rewritten by Their Publishers](#). Mental Floss. 2023.

⁶⁷ [Editing the Classics: Should Classic Works of Literature Be Edited to Make Them Less Offensive?](#) Issues and Controversies. 2011.

⁶⁸ [The Re-Writing of Roald Dahl](#). The Daily Telegraph. 2023.

⁶⁹ [The Re-Writing of Roald Dahl](#). The Daily Telegraph. 2023.

⁷⁰ [The Re-Writing of Roald Dahl](#). The Daily Telegraph. 2023.

⁷¹ [Roald Dahl’s Books Are Rewritten to Cut Potentially Offensive Language](#). New York Times. 2023.

and sensibilities.”⁷² Ideologically motivated changes could follow such revisions, which in PEN America’s view, ignores the fact that books are reflections of their time – “changing them is, in a sense, revising history.”⁷³

Supporters of the changes include the organization who suggested them, Inclusive Minds, which employ a network of “Authenticity Advocates” who are “people with many different lived experiences who... can provide valuable input when it comes to reviewing language that can be damaging and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.”⁷⁴ The organization cites “the very real negative impact and damage caused to self-worth and mental health from biased, stereotypical and inauthentic representation.”⁷⁵

Example 8: *Huckleberry Finn*

In 2011, Alan Gribben, a professor of English at Auburn University, published a new edition of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* that replaces the N-word, which appears more than 200 times in the book, with “slave.” Gribben reports his motivation was that the novel was being removed from reading lists and curricula, and his hope is that educators would be more willing to use his edition in the classroom.⁷⁶ Since publishing the revised version, he has found that some students have opted to read it instead of the original.⁷⁷ Keith Staskiewicz argues that “if this puts the book into the hands of kids who would not otherwise be allowed to read it...then maybe we shouldn’t be so quick to judge.”⁷⁸

Michiko Kakutani argues that such a change is a mistake – for one thing, it labels the character Jim “as property, as the very thing he is trying to escape.”⁷⁹ These revisions also violate the original text’s status as the author’s “sacrosanct intellectual property,” and is patronizing to readers, suggesting that they are fragile, need protection and can’t think for themselves.⁸⁰ Author David Bradley adds that using “slave” changes the meaning of the text; “Slave is a condition, I mean, anybody can be a slave. And it’s nothin’ for anybody to be ashamed of.” But for Bradley, the n-word is connected to shame and actively “calling somebody something;” it is “what made slavery possible.”⁸¹

⁷² [Roald Dahl’s Books Are Rewritten to Cut Potentially Offensive Language](#). New York Times. 2023.

⁷³ [Booklash: Literary Freedom, Online Outrage, and the Language of Harm](#). PEN America. 2023.

⁷⁴ [About Inclusive Minds](#). Inclusive Minds.

⁷⁵ [About Inclusive Minds](#). Inclusive Minds.

⁷⁶ [The Man who Changed the N-Word in Huck Finn](#). The Collegian. 2019; [Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You](#). New York Times. 2011.

⁷⁷ [The Man who Changed the N-Word in Huck Finn](#). The Collegian. 2019.

⁷⁸ [New Version of Huck Finn Will Erase N-Word and "Injun"](#) Business Insider. 2011.

⁷⁹ [Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You](#). New York Times. 2011.

⁸⁰ [Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You](#). New York Times. 2011.

⁸¹ ["Huckleberry Finn" and the N-word debate.](#) CBS News 60 Minutes. 2011.

VI. Stepping Back: Related Issues and Considerations

So far, we have looked at several major examples of attempted book censorship, including both attempted and successful book banning. These examples help to make clear how complex even the issue of censoring one particular book can be. But there are, as is often the case with issues of public concern, issues that can be raised without focusing on any particular example. This section explores some of the other complexities surrounding book censorship.

Content Warnings

Some argue that original texts should not be altered, but that they should remain in publication with attending material, including content warnings and trigger warnings. For example, the publishing company Pan Macmillan decided to publish a new edition of *Gone with the Wind* with both a content warning about harmful language used in the book and a critical essay in which Philippa Gregory (author of *The Other Boleyn Girl*) argues that *Gone with the Wind* promotes racism and glamorizes white supremacy.⁸² Norton Critical Editions famously include literary criticism and interpretation alongside each book. One might argue that books like *Gone with the Wind* ought to be accompanied by similar works, with essays that critically examine the book's content.

Rating Systems

Others argue that books, especially out of concern about the kinds of content children and young adults can be exposed to, should be subject to a rating system that is similar to what is used in many countries to rate movies and TV shows.⁸³ If we recognize that, in these contexts, some subject matters are only acceptable for certain maturity levels or age ranges, then we should recognize that this is the case for books, too. Some organizations, like Moms for Liberty, recommend immediate removal of books with obscene content, arguing that these are not protected by the First Amendment due to the ruling in *Miller v. California*, a case in which obscene content is defined as depiction of sexual content or excretory functions in an offensive manner.⁸⁴ But Moms for Liberty does endorse a rating system for other books.

Who Says?

In the discussion about whether some books should be censored, banned, or be in limited circulation, we can always ask who has the proper authority to make this decision. Publishing companies have taken it upon themselves in recent years to decide whether a book gets

⁸² Stolworthy, Jacob. [“Gone with the Wind publishers brand novel ‘racist’ and ‘harmful’ at start of new edition.”](#) The Independent. 2023.

⁸³ [Book Rating System](#). BookLooks.org. 2022.

[Library 101](#). Moms for Liberty. 2023.

⁸⁴ You can find a letter template from the Moms for Liberty organization making this argument here:

<https://www.momsforliberty.org/files/4544/>.

[“Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 \(1973\).”](#) Justia, U.S. Supreme Court. Accessed 2023.

published or not due to broadly ethical concerns. In one example, a professor's publishing contract was retracted even after he made the edits that the publisher requested, for fear of backlash regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion worries.⁸⁵ In another example, the estate of Dr. Seuss and his famous children's books decided to cease publication of his early work, *And to Think I Saw on it on Mulberry Street*, because it included an offensive depiction of a Chinese person.⁸⁶ In the case of *The Satanic Verses* (above), there is a question about what kind of government, if any, has the proper authority to ban a book.

What is Depicted, and What is Endorsed?

Do books endorse what they depict? It is one thing to argue about exposure to certain ideas, but what about ideas that are endorsed or condemned by a particular book? Does mere exposure to some content warrant limiting people's access to it, or should we pay attention to whether a book endorses that content? One historical example of a book that depicts poverty, including a poor prostitute, for example, is *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens. But in his own time, Dickens was perceived as a champion of the poor classes in England.⁸⁷ Another classic example is Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Although *Macbeth* depicts murder, Macbeth the character "deteriorates morally in a quest for power."⁸⁸ Children's stories, like the Grimm's Fairytales, depict both good and evil characters, but they are not intended to endorse evil.⁸⁹ If books don't necessarily endorse what they depict, we may ask ourselves whether book censorship should be focused on what is depicted at all, as opposed to what is endorsed. However, what a book or any work of art endorses is usually a matter of interpretation.⁹⁰

Autonomy

This guide considers arguments for and against book censorship by states, public schools and libraries, and publishers. It considers arguments for and against censoring or banning books for people under 18 years of age as well as for adults. Parents argue that they should be able to exercise their parental autonomy to get books removed from schools, because they should have a say over what their children can read. Others argue that students' autonomy and rights matter, too, and that what some parents deem unacceptable should not make those books inaccessible to other children. Some governments have banned books on grounds that they are blasphemous, suggesting that they violate believers' autonomy to practice their own religion, while others uphold the value of citizens' personal autonomy to choose what they read over

⁸⁵ Blackman, Josh. ["The Volokh Conspiracy."](#) Reason. 2021.

⁸⁶ Alter, Alexandra and Elizabeth A. Harris. ["Dr. Seuss Books Are Pulled, and a 'Cancel Culture' Controversy Erupts."](#) New York Times. 2021.

⁸⁷ ["What was Dickens' Attitude Toward the Poor?"](#) The Dickens Project. 2012.

⁸⁸ ["With Book Bans on the Rise, Prof Examines the Importance of Banned Books Week."](#) Davidson College News. 2023.

⁸⁹ Zipes, Jack. ["How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale."](#) Humanities, National Endowment for the Humanities. 2015.

⁹⁰ ["Interpreting Literary Works."](#) University of Central Florida. 2021.

["What is Literary Interpretation?"](#) Pressbooks. 2023.

any particular religious considerations. Publishers make decisions about what gets printed in the first place in part by considering their own public image as well as their own autonomy to publish (and not publish) what they see fit. Ultimately, the broader debate may in some ways be a debate that pits competing arguments about autonomy against one another: Who gets to choose what information and art is out there to be experienced? Deliberators are invited to discuss answers to this question below.

I. Setting Expectations (5 min)

In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Deliberative Dispositions,” and “Conversation Agreements” below.

Expected Outcomes of the Conversation

The purpose of this deliberation is to deepen our understanding of the arguments regarding the nature of book censorship, and how we should change our behavior or regulations in light of the best arguments about this topic. Over the course of the deliberation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow deliberators as well as share our own experiences and beliefs related to this topic. By the end of the conversation, we will have deliberated about the strongest and weakest arguments about our topic. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

Deliberative Dispositions

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a *commitment to egalitarianism, openmindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation*, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

Conversation Agreements

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgments
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to

practice empathy

8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

Please note: In the course of this deliberation, we ask that participants withhold their personal judgments about the topic as much as possible until the Conclusions section. At that point, we will turn to personal opinions and conclusions, however provisional they may be, after we have surveyed the various arguments about book censorship.

II. Getting to Know Each Other (10 min.)

In this section, we will take less than a minute to once again share our names, where we are currently located, and answer one of the questions below.

1. Other than your current profession/career path, what profession interests you the most and why?
2. What is one thing you would change about yourself if you could?

III. Governments & Book Censorship (10 min.)

Now that we have introduced ourselves, **we will discuss the arguments for and against governments censoring/banning books.** We will each take up to one minute in turn to address the question below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: What are the arguments for and against governments censoring/banning books that are offensive to some people?**

IV. Public Schools, Libraries, & Book Censorship (10 min.)

We will now **discuss the arguments for and against public schools and libraries censoring/banning books.** We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: What are the arguments for and against public schools and public libraries limiting children's access to certain books?**

V. Publishing Companies & Book Censorship (10 min.)

We will now **discuss the arguments for and against *publishing companies censoring/banning books***. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: What are the arguments for and against private publishing companies deciding against publishing books that may offend some people?**

VI. Publishing Companies & Book Editing (10 min.)

We will now **discuss the arguments for and against *editing books from earlier eras that some people find offensive today***. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: What are the arguments for and against editing literature from earlier eras that some people find offensive today?**

BREAK (5 min.)

VII. Trigger & Content Warnings (8 min.)

We will now **discuss the arguments for and against trigger and content warnings in relation to book censorship**. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: Where do trigger and content warnings belong in this discussion?**

VIII. Content Endorsed vs. Content Depicted (8 min.)

We will now **discuss the idea that books may not endorse what they depict, and its relation to book censorship**. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: To what extent does it matter whether a book depicts but does not necessarily endorse a particular idea that some may find offensive?**

IX. Proper & Improper Exposure to an Idea (8 min.)

We will now **discuss the idea that there may be proper and improper kinds of exposure to certain content and its relation to book censorship**. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: What counts as proper and improper exposure to a concept? In your answer, draw on examples that you think illustrate the difference between proper and improper exposure to an idea.**

X. Authority to Censor and Ban (8 min.)

We will now **discuss the question of who has the proper authority to censor or ban books**. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: If we should limit access to certain books or ban them in some contexts, who has the authority to decide this and for whom?**

XI. Questions of Autonomy (8 min.)

We will now **discuss the idea of autonomy and its relation to book censorship**. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

- **Key Question: How do considerations of the value of autonomy play into these questions?**

XII. Conclusions (10 min.)

At the beginning of this deliberation, we held our judgment until this section so that we could survey the arguments about book censorship. **We will now turn to the conclusions we have drawn at the end of this deliberation**. We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

Key Question: What conclusions, however provisional, have you come to at the end of this deliberation? Why have you come to those conclusions?

XIII. Reflections (10 min.)

While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, figuring out how to understand the problem of book censorship and its relation to autonomy will take time and commitment.

Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then answer in less than one minute one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. How has your own position changed? Have you strengthened the views with which you started out, have your views been called into question, or are you in the same place where you started? Why do you think your view has been impacted—or has not been impacted—by our discussion?
 2. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
 3. Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
 4. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today? Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problem and its potential solutions?
 5. Was there anything that was said or not said that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
 6. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations on issues related to book censorship?
 7. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?
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About This Guide

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The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.

DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they become even more valuable when they lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative and email dc@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.