

# Ready-Made Book Displays

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**Nancy M. Henkel**

 **Greenwood**  
PUBLISHING GROUP

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Nancy M. Henkel

 **LIBRARIES UNLIMITED**

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# Introduction

A friend at a neighboring library says that successful library programs are all about “butts in seats.” The more people sitting in the chairs at an event, the more successful it is.

My philosophy for book displays is similar. It’s all about “books out the door.” A successful book display increases checkouts at my library. Yes, it should be attractive and thought-provoking and informative, and even a simple form of readers’ advisory. But ultimately, success for me comes down to circulation. At their core, displays are for getting books out the door.

I’ve done hundreds of displays over the years, and this book is designed to bring some of the most successful and easy-to-replicate ones together in one place. The display themes can be used as is or as springboards for your own creativity.

If you already do displays, you know that you can spend lots of time and money to create striking and interesting displays. You can also just grab an armful of books and slap them between two crusty bookends at the circ desk.

The interesting thing I’ve discovered is that both types of display increase my circulation. I can spend a few hours to create a lovely display of cozy mysteries decorated with doilies and teapots and lamps with lace-covered shades, and patrons will check out those books. But I can also spend ten minutes and put out a stack of cozies with a nice sign in an acrylic holder and patrons will check out those as well. People will often check out an item just because you’ve called their attention to it.

I’m not saying it is bad or a waste of time to do complicated displays. However, if that isn’t your forte or it isn’t in your budget, you can still do quick and easy displays that get your collection moving. Display marketing works, and if you don’t believe me, see how often you buy something off an endcap display at the grocery store. Often, those items are not even on sale, they are just on display. The grocer has simply drawn your attention to the item, and you bought it.

Another favorite tactic of grocers is to put up massive displays with themes such as “holiday baking” or “big game day.” They use a well-traveled area to promote all manner of items that you can buy to stock your pantry, often without discounting the price. In fact, most retailers use this strategy just to get your attention: put a stack of any item (jeans, bath towels, boxes of lightbulbs) in the customer’s path, and sellers know somebody will buy some of those items, on sale or not. Librarians can use the same logic: draw patron attention to something, and they will likely check it out.

All of the display themes in this book are for fiction titles, many of them concrete topics such as westerns, science fiction, or romantic suspense. I’ve just given them snazzy titles so patrons think they are reading something new. However, many of the displays are themed on esoteric properties, such as the words in the title or the cover art. For example, one of my favorite displays is called “Back in Circulation,” and it comprises books with women’s backs as the cover art. I’ve done a similar one with chairs, feet, and eyeballs. There is nothing similar about the books at all, except the picture on the front. This is where your readers’ advisory skills come into play: use displays to bring together seemingly unrelated titles and even multiple formats that patrons would not have discovered on their own.

For each of the displays in this book, there is either a photo of a complete display or a detail photo showing part of the display. There is also a list of suggested props, a related Dewey

subject list, a section for your notes about displays you create, a reproducible booklist, and, when appropriate, a related media list. One caveat about booklists that are based on the cover art: some of them may have a different cover in a newer edition, in paperback, or in audio. You may also notice that some of the books included do not have original copyright dates listed. This is simply because I have chosen to highlight a newer or more easily available edition.

Booklists are mostly recent titles that will probably be on the shelves of most public libraries or older titles that are classic or readily available. The lists can be used in two ways: as a starting place for you to fill your display inventory and as a reproducible list that patrons can take away with them. Booklists are adult titles only, but you could certainly find many teen and children's books that would contribute nicely to your displays.

There is also an appendix that suggests holidays and times of the year when particular displays would be appropriate. In addition, you will notice an extensive index. Titles with complete annotations included in this book are denoted in bold type. Titles with just a mention, but no annotation, are denoted in regular type.

# Getting Started

If creating book displays is new to you or you are just looking for some new ideas, this section will help you get going. The best way to do that is to lay some groundwork about the philosophy of displays.

In the early and middle part of the twentieth century, a librarian in India named S. R. Ranganathan was very busy. He devoted his life to libraries and librarianship, and he created a book cataloging system called the Colon Classification Scheme. He also penned the “Five Laws of Library Science”:

Books are for use.

Every reader, his or her book.

Every book, its reader.

Save the time of the reader.

The library is a growing organism.

These five laws serve as a philosophical basis for librarianship. I’ve always been fascinated by Ranganathan and by a theory that is still so relevant even after more than eighty years, so I decided to write the “Five Laws of Book Display.” Like Ranganathan’s laws, they provide a theoretical grounding for an important aspect of our work.

## Five Laws of Book Display

### **Every book accessible.**

Putting books in a locked display case or behind the staff counter doesn’t increase your circulation. Tempt your patrons with great books and put them out where people can get at them.

### **It’s not about the props.**

Props can really enhance a display, but use them selectively. The display should be more about getting people to check out the books than it is about admiring the stuff displayed around them.

### **Every display has a theme.**

Unite the items in the display under one theme, but orchestrate some serendipity into it. Combine fiction and nonfiction, use multiple formats, and add some books that are unexpected. A theme that resonates with patrons can be used over and over again.

### **Educate the reader.**

Use themes that are timely, interesting and thought-provoking. The longer patrons stop and look, the more they will check out. When appropriate, include supplemental booklists or pathfinder information so the reader can pursue the topic further.

### **Location is everything.**

Locate your displays near book shelves, checkout stations, reading areas, or where people are browsing or waiting. A good display is visible when patrons are already choosing books.

Once you have the philosophical grounding, you may need some concrete reasons as to why you should do displays, particularly if you have difficulty getting time off the desk for special projects. The main reasons to do displays are as follows.

### **Increase your circulation.**

As mentioned in the introduction, displays are all about circulation. Books on display are more likely to circulate than books on a shelf. If you don't want your books to sit on a shelf, take them to a point of checkout and show them off.

### **Practice readers' advisory.**

Readers' advisory is all about connecting people with books. Much of it happens when folks ask for your help finding a book. Unfortunately, some of our patrons never come to the service desk and never speak to a librarian. Use your displays as a way to share ideas for great books with your patrons, even if they won't come and ask you.

### **Give patrons a reason to come back.**

Some libraries do displays as part of their regular routine. Patrons enjoy them and even come to expect them. Each time they visit the library, they detour to the display just to have a look at what you've got in it. Think of this as your version of the Macy's Christmas window display—people come every year just to see what they've done this season.

### **Highlight collections, programs, authors, etc.**

Displays can be a great way to draw attention to a special collection you have in your building that patrons may not be aware of. They are also a great way to make a connection between your collection and any programs or author visits you may have coming up. This is just another great way to educate your patrons.

### **Create "I had no idea" moments.**

There is a wonderful feeling that happens when someone walks past your display, sees something on it, and says, "Wow! I had no idea the library had books about . . ." Displays help you introduce your patrons to your collection specifically and to the wealth of items available in libraries in general.

Once you've decided to do displays, a main consideration is where you might position them so that they are most effective. The seven main places to situate a display are as follows.

### **Point of Checkout**

This is right at your circulation desk or at your self-checkout machines, if you have them. This is like gum and candy at the grocery store: patrons are already checking out a book, why not just take another one? If your circ desk is cluttered with pencil holders, library card applications, and other miscellaneous items, brainstorm with your staff about ways to consolidate these items so you have a little space for books as well.

### **Endcap**

Endcaps are another great place to put up displays because they are usually visible from a distance, located near browsing shelves, and they have a nice backing on which you can put up photos or other display decorations.

## **In Shelf**

Because of space limitations, shelf displays usually can't be as elaborate as some of the other types of displays, but they can be just as effective. If patrons are wandering through your fiction shelves and find a book display waiting for them, they are likely to look at it and even take some books off of it.

## **Table Top**

This is what I call display in-the-round. Patrons can see and approach it from all sides. Even a small table set in a well-traveled part of your library will be noticed and may encourage people to check out your materials.

## **Open Case**

An open display case might be an actual display space, or it may just be a range of shelves that you've emptied out for that purpose. Although you probably won't be able to do much in the way of props, this is a great time to do a display based on cover art because the covers will be so prominently seen.

## **Windows**

Window displays can be effective for drawing patrons into your library, for highlighting a specific collection, or for when you would like to use a valuable prop that would be vulnerable to theft if it were in a more open display. Window display cases are popular at mall libraries, and many school libraries have them as well.

## **Locked Display Case**

In terms of increasing your circulation, this type of display is the least desirable. However, if you want to do an elaborate display with a lot of props, this is a good way to go. If you must lock up the books, try to have a table or a book cart nearby with copies that patrons can check out, or use color copies of the covers in the display rather than the actual books.

Once you have an idea about the what, why, and where of book displays, you need to start gathering ideas. An easy way to start is with the main fiction genres: fantasy, science fiction, western, mystery, and romance.

However, to make them more interesting, create a name for the display that generates a little excitement. For example, for a display of science fiction, call it "Boldly Go . . ." and include some Star Trek books to make a link with the display's title but you can include other SF titles as well. For a display of traditional westerns, call it "Louis L'Amour and More." The title makes a connection to an author with whom most people will be familiar and then introduces other authors that write similar books.

Another way to get ideas is to play off current events. In March during the running of the Iditarod, do a display about dog fiction and include nonfiction about the race such as *Winterdance* by Gary Paulsen. In December, I often do a display called "Season's Readings" with fiction about Christmas and other winter holidays. In May, I do a display of horse fiction to coincide with the Kentucky Derby. When a well-known author dies, I do a display of his or her work as well.

I also have a number of ready-made fliers with generic themes that can be used for quick displays. Examples of these include "Great Books, No Waiting," "I Love to Read," "Our Shelves Are Crowded," and "Have You Read . . .?" For these displays, just pull duplicate fiction titles or any books that make your shelves feel full. There isn't anything special about these books, but I've drawn patron attention to them, so they usually get checked out.

Other quick display ideas include:

“Think Globally, Read Locally” — a display of authors from your area

“Prize-Winning Fiction” — a display of books that have won various awards

“Books. Always in Good Taste” — a display of food fiction or cookbooks

“Walk a While in Someone Else’s Shoes” — a display of biography or biographical fiction

“Truth Really Is Stranger than Fiction” — a display of books on odd topics

“Lavender, Mauve, Lilac” — a display of books with purple covers

Once you’ve done a display, take a photo of it and make a list of the books included so you don’t have to reinvent the display the next time. You can also make a theme flier for displays that you do and keep them in a file. When you need an idea, simply flip through them to see what hasn’t been done for a while.

You may also wish to keep a display log to track the effectiveness of particular displays. Include the name of the display, the number of books in the starting display inventory, the number of books that were checked out off the display, and the number of days the display was left up.

One year I kept an extremely careful log of displays at one specific checkout station so that I could prove what I believed anecdotally, which was that this particular spot made a great display space. That year I put up 27 displays for an average duration of 6 days. The total book display inventory for the year was 1,177 books, 952 of which were checked out, for an effectiveness rate of 80.88%. On page xiii is a sample log you can use to track the success of your own displays. It can be easily recreated as an Excel document to include the formulas.

Another step to successful displays is to involve your staff. This can be done in several ways. One is to make them aware of where you are putting up a display and what the theme is. Store your extra display inventory in a convenient place so that other staff members can fill in the display holes when you aren’t there. You can also elicit ideas for displays from your staff and even invite them to be involved in the setup or inventory gathering. A school librarian once pointed out that students at her school are like her staff members and that they love to help with displays as well.

Something else to keep in mind about doing book displays is that you may have to educate your patrons about them. If you do a lot of displays in locked cases or behind a staff desk, put up a little sign letting people know they can ask for them. If you have an elaborate display with lots of props, you may find patrons unwilling to mess it up by taking something off of it. Vigilant monitoring of displays might be required for a bit until patrons realize that you actually want them to take the books.

A few other things to consider when creating displays are how you can add height or dimension to your displays to give them depth and add visual interest, how you can use color to enhance your theme or to better highlight your book covers, and how good placement can minimize how much of the “backstage” part of your display the patrons see. As you get more experienced with displays, these factors become even more important.

So, to sum up, the steps for creating displays are to pick your theme and your place, gather your inventory and any props you may be using, involve your staff with the maintenance, then photograph it, log it, and finally dismantle it. When people ask me what elements go into a great display, I always tell them that the best displays are cheap, quick to create, easy to maintain, and, most important, they are effective. If you follow the steps above, your displays will hopefully be all those things and much more.









# Booklist

Bernard Cornwell. *Sharpe's Trafalgar*. Perennial/HarperCollins, 2001.

In this installment of Cornwell's best-selling series, British Army officer Richard Sharpe finds himself on a ship that is witness to Lord Nelson's bloody battle off Cape Trafalgar.

Clive Cussler. *Pacific Vortex!* Bantam, 1994.

What's a nautical adventure list without Dirk Pitt? This time around, Cussler's famous NUMA agent is investigating a mysterious stretch of ocean that seems to have swallowed up a nuclear super-submarine.

John Drake. *Flint and Silver: A Prequel to Treasure Island*. Simon & Schuster, 2009.

The title says it all. Drake imagines how Long John Silver lost his leg and how he became fast friends then bitter adversaries with Captain Flint. Swashbuckling, pirate shenanigans with some treachery, murder, and a runaway slave girl thrown in. This is the first in a series of books that takes place before the Robert Louis Stevenson classic.

Alexander Kent. *Colours Aloft!* McBooks Press, 2000.

One in a long series of popular books about British Royal Navy officer Richard Bolitho, set during the Napoleonic Wars.

Dewey Lambdin. *A King's Commander*. McBooks Press, 2008.

One in a series of novels about Alan Lewrie, a rather rakish, nontraditional British Naval captain who rises from the poorhouse in his infancy eventually to become a capable and respected officer.

Herman Melville. *Billy Budd*. Tor Classics, 1992.

Often overshadowed by Melville's other little tome *Moby Dick*, this is the tragic story of a handsome young sailor loved by all save for the cruel master-at-arms who frames him for treason.

James L. Nelson. *Glory in the Name*. Morrow, 2003.

Author of several nonfiction titles about early American Navy history, this time Nelson tells the story of the dramatic marine battles of the Civil War. This is the first of two books featuring Samuel Bowater and his tugboat-turned-Confederate-gunboat, *Cape Fear*.

Arturo Perez-Reverte. *The Nautical Chart*. Harcourt, 2001.

Best known for his series about sword-for-hire Captain Diego Alatrisme, Perez-Reverte takes to the sea for a story that combines suspense, love, and the search for a sunken treasure ship.

David Poyer. *Korea Strait*. St. Martin's Press, 2007.

Seemingly ripped from the headlines, this thriller is one in the series featuring U.S. Navy captain Dan Lenson. This time he is chasing unidentified nuclear subs that may be an invasion force from North Korea.

Richard Woodman. *The Disastrous Voyage of the Santa Margarita*. Severn House, 2008.

Mutiny! Typhoons! Scurvy! This story has all the elements of the worst sea voyage ever, and it is based on real events. Also check out Woodman's British Naval series featuring Nathaniel Drinkwater.

## Back in Circulation



This is a quirky idea that can easily work as a point-of-checkout, an in-shelf, or even a tabletop display. Similar to “Put Your Best Foot Forward” and “The Best Seat in the House,” this display idea was born in the stacks. I was spending some time in fiction and came across at least three books that had women’s backs on the cover. When I saw two others the next day, I knew I had the makings of an eye-catching display that didn’t need much more than the book covers to make it work.

To easily increase your inventory, look at romance novels because the covers often include women’s backs on them. The paranormal romance title *Butterfly Tattoo* by Deidre Knight shows a man’s very muscular back with, naturally, a butterfly tattoo on it, so men’s backs are also cover fodder. Clearly, the possibilities are very rich for this display.

