What does it mean to challenge or ban books? Why are books banned or challenged? What impact does banning books have on young people, schools, libraries and society?

**Book Bans and Challenges**
“Challenging” a book means that a person, group or institution is trying to remove or restrict access to a book because they object to the book's content, ideas, or themes. These challenges can be initiated by parents, schools, school boards,
political/religious groups, librarians, teachers, elected officials, and students. Challenging a book doesn’t necessarily mean it will be removed; it depends on what happens with the challenge. When a book is challenged, the book may be investigated further. The book may be kept or removed. A book is considered “banned” when individuals, government officials, organizations or others remove books from libraries, schools, bookstores or online and the book is no longer available for use. Essentially, it means people are no longer able to read that book.

Many people don’t realize this but banning books has been happening for centuries. From political viewpoints to religious and cultural expression, there are many reasons given for why certain books are challenged and banned. These explanations often have a larger context and reflect what’s happening in society.

**ALA’s Top 10 Most Challenged Books**

The American Library Association (ALA) is very critical of book bans. They work to make sure that people have free access to information and books. Every year, ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) receives reports from libraries, schools, and the media on attempts to ban books in communities across the country and produces The Top 10 Most Challenged Books.

These “Top 10” lists are only a snapshot of book challenges. There are many more challenged books beyond what is included in the Top 10 list. Surveys suggest that 82-97% of book challenges are unreported and receive no media attention. If you look at the top 10 lists over time, you may notice that there are many books about race and racism, as well as books with LGBTQ+ characters and themes. In fact, for the 2020 Top 10 challenged book lists, six out of ten most challenged books are about race and racism and by authors of color, most of whom are Black.

**Children’s Books Should Reflect Our Society**
Books for young people should serve as both mirrors and windows to reflect and represent children and people in our society and world. This helps young people see themselves and feel valued (mirrors) and provides opportunities to learn about the experiences of people who are different than they are (windows). Over the last ten years, there has been progress in the publishing of more diverse books and by authors who represent that diversity. However, this pattern of challenging and banning books by authors of color and LGBTQ+ authors threatens those important advances.

Since the 1980’s the ALA has sponsored “Banned Books Week,” which is an annual event celebrating “the freedom to read.” It is usually held during the last week of September and highlights current and historical attempts to challenge and ban books in libraries and schools. It brings together the entire book community—librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types—in shared support of the freedom to learn about and express ideas, even those some may consider untraditional or unpopular.

Here is a video of Jason Reynolds, an author of middle grade and young adult books and ALA’s Honorary Chair of Banned Books Week 2021, sharing his thoughts about book banning.

Age

9 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- How did you feel about what you learned about book challenges and bans? What thoughts came to mind?
- Why do you think there have been book bans for centuries?
- Have you ever been told that you couldn’t read a particular book or kind of book? How did you feel?
Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- Are there any patterns or common themes you notice on the list of books that are challenged and the reason for those challenges? If so, what are those patterns or themes?
- Why do you think the American Library Association (ALA) dedicates a week every year to books that are challenged or banned?
- What are some actions you can take if you don't agree with a book challenge or ban?

Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Help to organize a teach-in or forum at school about book banning. Discuss the importance of diverse literature, the history of book banning, why books are banned, and what you can do about it, either as individuals or as a school community.
- Research whether there have been book challenges or book bans in your school, library or community. If you uncover book challenges and bans, work with others through organizing and activism, to push back on those book bans. This can include writing letters to officials, speaking out, protesting or addressing on social media.
- In addition to pushing back on the effort to ban books, engage with local stakeholders to increase the diversity of books and books about important
social issues in your classroom, school and community libraries and bookstores.

**Additional Resources**

- **Why are Children’s and Young Adult Books Challenged and Banned?** (Lesson Plan)
- **Books Matter: The Power of Children's Literature**
- **Why We Need Diverse Books** (Table Talk)
- **Diverse and Complex Narratives Cultivate Empathy and Action**
- **Banned & Challenged Books** (American Library Association)