



National Preservation Office

## Guidance for exhibiting archive and library materials

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## Introduction

The exhibition of archive and library materials has the potential to damage documents and can even lead to loss if security measures are inadequate. Custodians of holdings should be aware of the risks involved from exposure to inappropriate environmental conditions, unsafe support methods and inadequate security provision and strive to maximise the safety of items during periods of exhibition. Areas of concern should include temperature, relative humidity, light, support structures, security measures and disaster risks. Each of these areas can be complex and extensive in terms of choosing the right parameters and equipment and making provision for a suitable and secure environment.

In order to achieve this, one objective must be to remove hazards that are unacceptable and to reduce any remaining risks to a degree that is considered tolerable bearing in mind the need to provide access to the exhibits.

This document is intended to give guidance in providing for the safe exhibition of archive and library materials. It is not exhaustive and not a standard. For further information see the attached bibliography.

## The Environment

Temperature, relative humidity, light and atmospheric pollution should all be considered carefully in terms of what a document can tolerate before unacceptable damage occurs. Where necessary, the environment of the accommodation as well as the exhibition case/s should be assessed.

### **Temperature**

- Temperature should be as constant as possible and account should be taken of this when positioning the exhibition case or any equipment that might produce temperature gain, i.e. lighting arrangements and local heat sources.
- Taking into account the need to accommodate people, the temperature may be higher than that normally recommended for storage but should fall within the range of 18<sup>o</sup>-21<sup>o</sup>C.

### **Relative humidity (RH)**

- The materials of which the exhibits are made and their special needs should be carefully considered, e.g. paper can tolerate drier conditions than materials made from animal skins. Parchment and vellum for example may contract violently and unevenly if displayed in too dry an environment, or if moved to an environment drier than that in which it has been stored.
- An RH band of 50-60% is generally considered acceptable provided there are no violent fluctuations.

### **Light**

- All light is harmful to images and text. The wavelength, intensity and duration each contribute to degradation and collectively determine the rate of deterioration. Light with a wavelength below 400nm (ultra-violet radiation) should be eliminated. Daylight and most fluorescent tubes emit UV radiation.
- Control can be applied with the use of UV screening filters and/or blinds on windows or by removing the harmful light source.
- The light falling on exhibited items should be measured and controlled if necessary. What may be tolerated will depend on the inks or pigments being exposed and the duration of the exhibition time. The level of illuminance on manuscript inks, light-sensitive pigments and materials such as some photographic processes, should be no more than 50 lux. Account should also be taken of the total exposure as light damage is cumulative. Measures can be taken to reduce exposure by covering an exhibition case out of hours if lights have to be left on, or by using viewing time switches to minimise exposure.
  - Tolerance of low level illumination by those viewing an exhibition can be helped by reducing ambient light levels to a level lower than that falling on the exhibit.

### **Harmful fumes**

Items should not be exposed to harmful substances such as off-gassing from materials used in the construction of the exhibition case and/or fabrics used for lining the case. Wood and fibreboard can give off harmful fumes and should be separated from the display section of an exhibition case by lining relevant surfaces with an impermeable barrier film. Fabrics applied to line or decorate the case, and any adhesives used in the process, should also be tested to determine any risk.

### **Exhibition Cases**

- Cases used for display should be constructed from 'safe' materials, be reasonably well sealed to minimise air leakage, be secure against theft and penetration through accidental contact and generally protect the contents as far as is possible from external disaster risks e.g. water leakage.
- Display cases should be positioned away from sources that may result in local heat gain or a disaster spillage. They should also be in a position that provide a clear line of sight for any security presence.
- Cases should not have any light source located within or underneath the exhibition space. This avoids heat gain and unnecessary fire risk. The parts of lighting systems that do not generate heat, e.g. fibre optics, may be placed inside the exhibition space.
- If, because of an unsatisfactory climate in the exhibition room or building, there is a need to achieve humidity control within a display case, this may be achieved through the use of silica gel or a similar substance as a desiccant or humectant. However, the compartments containing the exhibits and the controlling substance must be well sealed from the external atmosphere and there must be a sufficient exchange of air between the substance used and the compartment being controlled. Expert advice should be sought.

### **Display Methods**

- All items displayed should be adequately supported, when necessary through the use of supports and book cradles. These should be made only from inert

materials and provide support for the physical form taking into account both the binding and text block.

- When parts of a book construction, such as the pages, need restraining, only inert materials should be used and they should be in a form and position that does not itself cause damage, e.g. cotton thread should not be used to restrain pages in an open display as it risks cutting into the paper. A common and safe method is to use 12mm wide transparent strips cut from polyethylene, polypropylene or polyester and secured around the cradle or support.
- Bound volumes should not be displayed at an angle greater than 30° from the horizontal and the angle of opening should not unduly strain the binding structure.
- Where appropriate, books displayed open should have the opening changed as often as is desirable (e.g. once a week) to limit exposure to light and to spread any strain on the binding structure.
- Textblock supports should be used in conjunction with book cradles where the textblock is greater than 1/2 inch, or where the textblock sags visibly.
- Mounts and window mounts cut from museum board can be used to support and enhance the display of single sheet or folded items. When items are to be framed, the use of window mounts also prevents the item from coming into contact with the glass.

## Security

- Exhibition cases should have at least two secure locks and be glazed with a material that prevents or greatly hinders penetration and that when broken does not risk shards of glass falling on the exhibits.
- The exhibition area should be patrolled during exhibition hours.
- Exhibited items are usually of special interest and therefore demand a high level of security to reduce the risk of loss from theft or vandalism. The building and exhibition area should be secure and protected by intruder alarms, sited at building entry points and in internal areas. A 24 hour security presence should be considered when the most precious items are exhibited.
- Intruder alarms should be fitted at entry points to the building and be active when the building is not occupied.

## **Exhibiting outside the institution**

When meeting any request for the loan of items to be exhibited in another institution, consider and determine the minimum requirements for permission to be granted. Concerns will include the following:

- site security
- building security
- exhibition case security
- environmental control inside the exhibition case
- environmental control in the building
- uv radiation and light levels
- fire risk, detection & suppression
- flood risk (including water carrying installations)
- disaster response capability
- handling, protection and security of material in transit.

It may be considered necessary to visit and inspect a proposed venue to ensure that satisfactory protective measures are in place or can be provided.

## **Handling exhibition loan applications**

### **A framework for documentation**

Using a well designed application form, with supporting documents, will help to assess and control applications to borrow items from your holdings more effectively. The form should reflect the lending policy, the conditions attached to a loan and the storage and display needs of objects in the collection. A good set of documentation would include:

- a loan application form
- conditions of loan
- a facility report form
- a guide to borrowing.

### **1. Loan application form**

This is used to record the details of the borrower, their exhibition and the item(s)

they wish to borrow. It should include:

- name, address and contact details of the institution making the application
- name and address of venue for the proposed exhibition (if different from above)
- name, address, position and contact details for a single person who will act as a day to day contact for the application
- title, dates and a brief description of the exhibition
- details of the items requested, including shelfmark and openings to be displayed
- date of application
- details and signature of applicant
- deadline for return of completed applications.

## **2. Conditions of loan**

These should list all the requirements that would have to be met for you to approve the loan. A responsible member of the borrowing institution should sign to accept the conditions. They could include clauses to cover the following:

- the borrower undertakes to pay all expenses incurred in planning for and making the loan, including photography, conservation and preparation, packing and transport, courier expenses and insurance
- only the lender's nominated representative may handle the loan items. On installation, the display case will be locked and will remain locked until the representative returns to remove the loan
- the borrower will not carry out any photography of the loan item(s), without specific prior permission from the lender
- the loan is being made solely for the purpose given on the application form
- the borrower will arrange and pay for insurance of the loans from start to finish, against the lender's valuation and will provide the lender with a certificate of insurance prior to the loan
- the lender reserves the right to refuse the loan and withdraw the items without notice
- the borrower will provide full details of the facility and conditions in which the items will be exhibited and will notify the lender of any changes immediately
- name, position and signature of responsible member of the borrowing institution.

### **3. A facility report form**

The applicant should be asked to supply full details of the facility in which they are proposing to display the loans. Some regular borrowers will keep a completed facility report form on file and so will be able to send you the required information quite quickly. The UK Registrars Group produces a *Standard Facilities Report* which you could adopt and send out to applicants (contact details through the Museums Yearbook).

In a facility report, the borrower should supply details covering:

- security - building, gallery and display cases
- fire risk, detection and suppression
- exhibition case design, materials and construction
- display environment including temperature, relative humidity, UV radiation and visible light
- methods of environmental control
- methods of support/hanging
- disaster plan.

To support the information in the report, the applicant should be asked to send charts showing environmental conditions in the gallery or display cases for a period equivalent to that for the proposed loan. Drawings and photographs of the gallery area and display cases, and samples of materials used in the fitting out of the cases would also be useful in assessing the facility.

Even when a detailed report is provided, you should expect to have to enter into often extended correspondence with potential borrowers to ascertain what conditions and arrangements will be in place for the exhibition.

### **4. A guide to borrowing**

A guide to borrowing from the lending institution would provide applicants with a commentary to these official documents. Set out the different steps involved in the application process describing the requirements for the transport and display of the loans. Give a detailed description of a range and kind of costs that the borrower can expect to have to pay and perhaps more importantly, give a good idea of the information you will require in order to process an application. Most museums and galleries, and some libraries and archives have in house documentation and loan forms and may be prepared to supply copies to assist drafting your documents.

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