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# 10 Top Tips for Organizing Your Bookshelf

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## Unpacking Your Library: 10 Top Tips to Organise your Bookshelves

By Anne Welsh

Whether working, furloughed or simply unable to go out and socialise as much as usual, Covid-19 has given many of us more time at home. Many people have been unpacking their libraries (to use Walter Benjamin's phrase), building reading nooks and reorganising their shelves. There's a great tradition of writing to help us in doing this, and especially on the impact that sorting through our books has on us.

If you want to know how to organise your personal library and bookshelves, here are ten top tips based on practical experience and from ten of my favourite books.

### 1. Be realistic about your storage space.

Almost no-one has enough space for their books. Good storage helps to keep books in good condition and can also guide organization. In Leah Price's edited volume on

*Writers and Their Books* (Yale University Press, 2011), which includes glossy pictures of the interviewees' home libraries, Steven Pinker offers some practical experience: 'My shelving consists of an enormous matrix of white cubes ... They make it easy to categorise and find books, and they do away with the need for those awful things called bookends.'

## 2. If you do have enough space and budget to commission shelves, think carefully about what you need.

Fixed shelves are stronger, but less flexible over time. Most high-street store bookcases are designed for moderate or small homes – designing on a larger scale needs different inspiration. There are some beautiful pictures, as well as an historical overview, in Mark Purcell's *The Country House Library* (Yale University Press, 2017), published for his former employer and custodian of hundreds of such libraries, The National Trust. In such large buildings, there are decisions to be made around how much space should be devoted to books and how much to other things. Should all the cases be flat against the wall, or do you want to create bays with your bookcases? Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone had strong opinions in favour of bays, which he installed first in his Temple of Peace at Hawarden Castle and then in St Deiniol's Library (now Gladstone's Library), which he established as a retreat from busy life for scholars and clergy (and is now a residential library and boutique B&B).

## 3. Your library will evolve over time.

That's not only inevitable, it's desirable. The fifth of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science (Madras Library Association, 1931), is that 'The library is a growing organism.' In Oscar's Books (Penguin, 2009), Thomas Wright describes how Oscar Wilde's library in London came to be his 'Holy of Holies,' although still a working library of only two thousand volumes, and with some of its books having had much less salubrious surroundings before. 'Disorder seems to have been the keynote of his bachelor libraries,' he writes, 'one friend was horrified to find a precious volume among a lot of rubbish.' Jonathan Lethem talked to Leah Price about how his bookcases in younger days 'were tottering Rube Goldberg structures, made of bricks, milk crates, other books, and salvaged scraps of lumber,' but now he has built-in wooden shelves everywhere.

## 4. You don't need to feel guilty about getting rid of books.

In Phantoms on the Bookshelves (MacLehose, 2010), Jacques Bonnet summarised the fears of many book owners: 'Whereas a collector frets obsessively about the books he does not yet possess, the fanatical reader worries about no longer owning those books – traces of his past or hopes for the future – which he has read once and may read again some day.' I can't read that phrase without hearing Fumio Sasaki's advice,

‘Let go of the idea of ‘someday.’ While I’ll never be a minimalist by any stretch of the imagination, the concept that everything I keep is costing me in terms of space and cleaning and maintenance has stayed with me since I read his self-help book [Goodbye Things\(Penguin, 2017\)](#). Certainly, I’d say don’t keep books for the reasons he says he did – to project an identity of himself as well-educated. Marie Kondo writes well on this in [The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up \(Ten Speed Press, 2014\)](#), keeping books in her ‘personal Hall of Fame,’ giving the example of *Alice in Wonderland*, which she says she has ‘read repeatedly since primary school.’ Her definition of the purpose of books is quite narrow – ‘You read books for the experience of reading,’ – and is clearly focused on leisure. However, it’s usually easy to identify the books we need for work (our working library) and beyond those, we should, of course, keep the books we love.

#### 5. Give yourself plenty of time.

[Walter Benjamin’s essay, ‘Unpacking My Library’](#) covers many aspects of book collecting, and is well worth reading in its entirety, as he takes us on a perambulation round some of his favourite bookshops in Europe. However, one thing that is clear is that it takes a lot of time – and you need a combination of strictness with yourself and allowing yourself enough scope to enjoy the memories your books evoke as you move them around. Benjamin describes a full twelve hours going through a relatively small number of packing cases, and even then says he found it difficult to stop.

#### 6. Don’t think you have to set your books out like a public library.

‘The unpacking of books, perhaps because it is essentially chaotic, is a creative act,’ points out Alberto Manguel in his paean to his last library in France, [Packing My Library\(Yale University Press, 2018\)](#). He shares how he ordered his books ‘according to [his] own requirements and prejudices ... A certain zany logic governed its geography.’ My current favourite quote about book arrangement is from Tracey Emin, who shared in Steffans and Neumann’s collection on *Artists and Their Books* (Yale University Press, 2017) that she has her ‘Star Trek annuals under the subject of travel, which a journalist once said was very optimistic.’

#### 7. It’s OK to organise your books by colour and size and alongside other things.

Gladstone highlighted the gains to be made in space by shelving according to size. In fact, it’s bad for very small and very large books to be shelved next to each other as over time the larger book will splay over the smaller one and damage its spine. In [Bookshelf\(Bloomsbury, 2016\)](#), [Lydia Pyne](#) describes the presence of things other than books on shelves – bookends and ornaments, for example. So the first division is between books and what she terms ‘not-books,’ including also attachments like book ladders in larger home libraries. Again, think about any potential damage these categories of things could do to each other. Wangechi Mutu described her library to

Matthias Neumann as ‘very artsy ... I have a visual memory. So I know where my *Flash of the Spirit* is because it has a red spine.’ For her, organizing books by colour ‘make[s] them accessible through the visual of the spine.’

#### 8. There is such a thing as too many books.

‘At best, I might know which room in the house a book *might* be in.’ [Jill Lapore, interviewed in the \*New York Times\*](#) expresses the experience of many booklovers. In response to Jillian Tamaki’s question, ‘What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?’ she replies, ‘People could find a particular book on my shelves? I sure can never find what I’m looking for.’

#### 9. But you may prefer to organise your library for serendipity rather than retrieval.

Gary Shteyngart told Leah Price his books were ‘all over the place! ... I want to be surprised every time I look at the shelves. Who knows where anything is?’ Gladstone, despite being a great classifier, admitted to giving perhaps undue weight ‘to determining in what company a book shall stand,’ preferring to place books by one author near those of others with whom they were sympathetic in their life outside the page. Manguel writes of the way that books ‘placed on a shelf shed their original identities and acquire new ones through random associations’ with their neighbours. Edmund White described a more organic approach to Leah Price: ‘I don’t have that many books and they’re not arranged in any particular order. I think for a while I had the Genet and the Proust books together, and they attracted other unrelated titles in French.’

#### 10. Don’t worry.

In response to Jo Steffans’s question, ‘Do you ever feel like you have too many books?’ Tracey Emin said, ‘Yes, I do, but there are worse things to own.’ Philip Pullman confessed to Leah Price, ‘Every time I go into town I accidentally buy two or three books,’ which along with gifts have overtaken his shelf arrangement. ‘Now it’s just memory and guesswork that guide me to this pile or that shelf or that corner of the floor. I’m often delightfully surprised by a book I’d totally forgotten.’

No-one ever has enough space, nor enough time, for all the books they want to read, but don’t despair about your To Be Read pile. Juno Diaz described to Leah Price, ‘at least a hundred-book margin between what I own and what I’ve read. I’m not sure that I, personally, could cope with that much, but he describes it as fun, catching up with himself, ‘buy[ing] too much and the race starts again.’

**Anne Welsh** wrote the core textbook, [Practical Cataloguing \(Facet, 2012\)](#). After a decade teaching the next generation of rare books librarians, she now runs [Beginning Cataloguing](#), which

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