

Starting a Grassroots Organization to Fight Literary Censorship

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

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Introduction: What is Literary Censorship?

In recent years, there has been a growing movement toward literary censorship in the United States. This movement aims to remove books from public schools and their libraries through actions known as **book bans**, thereby limiting or entirely eliminating access to certain titles.

What is a book ban? [PEN America](#) defines a book ban as “any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished.” For further information about book bans, see this [comprehensive report](#) from PEN America.

What books are being targeted? The purpose of the current censorship movement is to remove certain topics, ideas, and historical events from the public education curriculum, and thereby prevent students from learning about them, whether in the classroom or in school libraries. Accordingly, book bans have been shown to target specific content areas. PEN America’s [Index of School Book Bans](#) lists the main areas targeted by book bans as:

- LGBTQ+ themes
- Racial diversity (books with people of color as prominent characters)
- Sexual content
- Issues of race and racism
- Themes of rights and activism
- Religious minorities

What can I do? While literary censorship is a daunting and serious problem, there are ways that you, as a citizen, can help combat it. This resource will guide you through the process of forming your own anti-censorship grassroots organization, based on the model of the [Florida Freedom to Read Project](#), an anti-censorship organization based in Florida.

The main tool through which a grassroots organization can collect information about book bans is a **FOIA request**. According to the **Freedom of Information Act** (FOIA), passed in 1967, public institutions are required to release their internal information to citizens upon request. By filing an FOIA request, also known as a public records request (PRR), you can access documents from public schools, including the agendas and minutes of school board meetings and emails sent by members of the school system. These documents are crucial to collecting information about book bans: they can identify the parties who initiated challenges against books, their reasons or motives for doing so, and the process by which these challenges resulted in bans, restrictions, or other forms of censorship.

This resource will guide you through the process of starting your own grassroots anti-censorship organization. Section I and Section II cover the basic framework and tools needed to create and manage a nonprofit organization, such as a website, social media accounts, and funding. In Section III, you will learn how to collect information about book bans through FOIA requests and various other methods. Section IV will show you the most effective ways to raise awareness for your organization and increase support for your cause. At the end of this resource, you can find answers to Frequently Asked Questions and links to further resources for fighting censorship.

Part I: Getting Started

The first step in starting a grassroots organization is to lay the basic logistical and technological framework. You will need to select a name for your organization, find leaders and assign roles, and create a website and social media accounts. This section will guide you through these preliminary steps.

1. NAME YOUR ORGANIZATION

The first step to starting an organization is to **select a name**. This name can include the area in which you will operate (e.g. your state, district, or city). It should make your organization's purpose clear. For example, the Florida Freedom to Read Project's name communicates both its purpose—protecting the freedom to read in schools—and the area in which it is based.

2. FIND LEADERS AND ASSIGN ROLES

To start your organization, you will need ideally **three to five people** to serve as its leaders. You can then divide the tasks and responsibilities of your organization among these leaders based on individual interests, experience, and skills.

The tasks involved in managing an anti-censorship organization can be categorized into **three roles**. These are Growth and Engagement, Research and Data, and Planning and Events. You should appoint at least one person to act as the leader of each area. They will then oversee and take responsibility for the tasks involved. Here is what each role entails:

- The **Growth and Engagement** leader manages your organization's social media profiles, communicates with its members, and maintains relationships with other organizations. Their tasks include posting on social media, admitting new members to your online group, and sending updates or calls to action to members. They will also maintain relationships with other organizations and activists, both in your area and nationwide. Finally, they will look for fundraising opportunities and—if possible—apply for grants in order to grow your organization.
- The **Research and Data** leader is in charge of gathering and compiling data related to censorship. They will search for attempts and occurrences of censorship through FOIA requests, BoardDocs, and the other methods discussed in Part III, and then record this information.
- The **Planning and Events** leader plans, organizes, and oversees the events held by your organization. They will decide the times and locations of events, manage the logistics of these events, and contact leaders of external events (such as Pride parades) to organize collaboration. They will also participate in the management of your organization's funds by planning fundraising events and designing merchandise to sell at events.

While each leader will have a different role, **collaboration** is crucial for a successful and unified organization. Make sure that everyone has a clear and shared understanding of what the goals and values of your organization are, and always keep these goals and values in mind. It is also important to maintain regular **communication**, whether online or in person. Keep one another updated on your respective tasks and responsibilities to ensure that everyone's work is geared towards a common purpose, and ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or unsure.

3. MAKE A WEBSITE

Next, make a website to serve as the virtual **home base** for your organization. On this website, you can compile the key information about your organization into an accessible and navigable resource. This information should include:

- **Statements** of the values and purpose of your organization, such as combating literary censorship and protecting the freedom to read in public schools
- **Event information**, such as the times and locations of upcoming rallies, read-ins, and other events
- **Donation links** and other information for potential donors, such as a Paypal button
- **Social media links** to your organization's online platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook
- **Contact information**, including the email of your overall organization and the individual emails of its leaders

Some examples of organized and informative websites are those of the [Florida Freedom to Read Project](#), [PEN America](#), and [Red, Wine, and Blue](#). These websites contain key information about their respective organizations, including statements of their values, information about events, contact information, and places to donate.

4. MAKE ACCOUNTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Social media accounts are extremely useful tools for raising awareness about censorship in your area, expanding the reach of your organization on both a local and national level, and gathering support for your cause. The main accounts you may want to create are:

- A **private Facebook group** for members of your organization to communicate and plan events. This group must be closed, and individuals should only be admitted after a screening process. This process should include a few basic identifying questions, such as the prospective member's name, location, and email address. You should also look at the person's Facebook profile or search their name on Google to ensure that their identity is authentic. This screening process will protect the privacy and safety of your organization's leaders and members.
- A **public Facebook page** to post updates and information about your organization and its events. This page will help increase the reach of your organization in your community by encouraging people to join as members, participate in your events, or donate. If you do not wish to use Facebook, you can use Google Groups or another platform instead.
- A **Twitter account** to post updates, images, and links to articles related to your cause. This account will also allow you to connect with any reporters, journalists, and leaders of other anti-censorship groups who are present on Twitter and to form relationships with them.
- An **Instagram account** to post images, infographics, and short videos. This platform can help increase your reach on a larger scale.

5. SET UP A STORAGE SYSTEM

The final step in starting your organization is to set up a storage system for recording data. You can use Google Drive or another cloud-based storage system (such as Dropbox, Nordlocker, or Microsoft OneDrive). This storage system will serve to compile and organize the data you gather through your research—such as instances of censorship found through FOIA requests—and make it accessible to members. For detailed instructions, see [this guide](#) on how to set up Google Drive for organizations.

Part II: Getting Organized

Now that you have established the basic framework for your organization, the next step is to get prepared for your work. This includes filing for nonprofit status, considering funds, and making a system to organize information from your research. The following section will guide you through these steps.

1. FILE FOR NONPROFIT STATUS

In order to establish your organization as an official and recognized nonprofit, it is necessary to file for nonprofit status. There are two types of nonprofit status: 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4). Each of these statuses has its own benefits and drawbacks, and the appropriate choice will depend on your mission and the activities your organization intends to engage in.

- **501(c)(3) organizations** are defined as public charities. They must be completely nonpartisan: they cannot endorse candidates for school boards and other public offices or advocate for specific policies. While they can make statements, they cannot write to legislators or issue calls to action. The political activity of 501(c)(3) organizations is therefore limited. However, a benefit of this status is that donations made to 501(c)(3) organizations are tax-deductible, which makes it easier for them to collect funds. Some examples of 501(c)(3) organizations include [We Need Diverse Books](#), [PEN America](#), the [National Coalition Against Censorship](#), and [Media Coalition](#).
- **501(c)(4) organizations** are defined as social welfare organizations. They can engage in partisan activity more freely: they can endorse candidates for public offices, lobby for government action, and have meetings with school boards and legislators. While these organizations thus have more latitude for partisan political activity, the main drawback is that donations made to them are not tax-deductible, making it more difficult for them to collect funds. Some examples of 501(c)(4) organizations include the [Florida Freedom to Read Project](#), [Fight for the First](#), and [Red, Wine, and Blue](#).

2. THINK ABOUT FUNDS

The activities your organization engages in—whether hosting a website, holding events, or filing FOIA requests—will cost money, and it will thus be necessary to raise funds to cover these costs. There are numerous methods through which your organization can find funding.

- **Sell merchandise.** This might include customized shirts, hoodies, stickers, pins, and other items. While selling merchandise is unlikely to raise large amounts of money in itself, it can help spread awareness about your organization and encourage donations. When someone wears a branded shirt, for example, it will serve as a conversation starter to introduce people to your organization and your cause. Consider fulfillment sites like [Bonfire](#) or [TeePublic](#).
- Hold **fundraising events**, such as [bake sales](#) or [walk-a-thons](#). In addition to raising funds, these events will also increase awareness about your organization in your community. See [this link](#) for more ideas for fundraising events. **Tabling events**, discussed further in Part V, can also help raise funds—when tabling, you can sell merchandise and hand out information cards to encourage donations.

Part III: Filing an FOIA Request

Now that your organization is fully prepared, you can start researching censorship in your area. The following section will guide you through the process of filing a FOIA request.

1. HOW TO FILE A FOIA REQUEST

FOIA requests are typically filed by email to the **records department** of the school district. The most important thing to remember when filing requests is to **be specific**. In your email, include the types of documents you are looking for—such as school board agendas, meeting minutes, or emails—the timeframe for these documents, and (if known) any individuals or departments relevant to your search. It is also important to list **all possible statuses** which may be applied to censored books, including “challenged,” “removed,” “restricted,” and “reviewed,” to ensure that you receive the most possible information from your request.

To make the process of filing requests easier and more efficient, you can make **templates** for emails. Two templates are provided below, one with informal language and one with formal language. In general, **informal language** tends to receive better results, but formal language can be useful if you encounter difficulties or obstructions in the filing process.

Informal email template:

Hello,

I would like to make a public records request to your school district for the following records:

[insert terms]

Any documentation (electronic versions) related to library (media center or classroom) and school curriculum that has been challenged, reviewed, restricted, or removed (even temporarily) since **[insert date]**.

This request includes bulk lists of books submitted by parents or organizations, completed challenge forms, inventory lists provided by request of specific books, meeting notes, minutes, and forms from review committees, and memos, presentations, and directives that instruct or give guidance on the review or removal of library books (this includes library checklists).

Thank you in advance for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
[insert name]

Formal email template:

Dear **[insert school district]** Records Custodian,

Pursuant to **[insert relevant article of law or state constitution]**, I am requesting to inspect or obtain electronic copies of public records (including, but not limited to, emails, documents, memos, and meeting notes) that involve challenging, removing, withholding, and/or limiting access to books in the school or classroom libraries during the **[insert year]** school year with at least two of the following parties included in the record:

[insert relevant parties]

If there are any fees for searching or copying these records, I request a waiver of these fees for this request, as the disclosure of the information I am seeking is not in my commercial interest and is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government, making the disclosure a matter of public interest.

Should you deny by request, or any part of the request, please state in writing the basis for the denial.

I will contact your office within 48 hours to discuss when I may expect fulfillment of this request. If you have any questions in the interim, please contact me at **[insert phone number]** or **[insert email address]**.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
[insert name]

After you have filed a request and received the documents from the records departments, record this information in your spreadsheets as outlined in Part III.

2. MAKE CONNECTIONS

Since you will be communicating with them regularly, get to know the representatives at the records departments in your school districts and develop good relationships with them. Keep your email replies friendly! You also might want to send weekly follow-up emails asking about updates and possible delivery schedules for your FOIA requests.

You can also connect with local **media outlets**. Media outlets often receive documents from FOIA requests faster than citizens. If possible, reach out to local media outlets and see if they would be willing to make requests and share their information with you.

3. DEALING WITH INVOICES AND PAYMENTS

FOIA requests often come with an **invoice**, with a payment due based on the amount of time it takes for the resulting search to be conducted. This is typical, and you can pay for these charges with your organization's funds. However, here are some tips to reduce invoice amounts:

- Always ask for **electronic copies** rather than physical documents.
- **Avoid requesting emails** when possible. Emails require redaction of certain information, which is time consuming and can consequently lead to larger invoices. If you do need to request emails, be as specific in your terms as possible, narrowing down the parties and timeframe for your search, to reduce the time the process will take and the price it will cost.
- Know the **free threshold**. Most records departments will have a 15-to-30 minute threshold for free returns. If they can email a specific department and ask for documents that are readily available, you likely will not be charged. In order to keep your requests within the free threshold, try to keep the search terms specific and the timeframe narrow.
- Play the **“Express Aisle” game**. Instead of submitting a single request for a large amount of information, submit multiple requests for smaller amounts of information. This will allow you to limit the payments due from invoices, since small requests are more likely to remain within the free threshold.

4. DEALING WITH INCOMPLETE RETURNS

- After you file a request, you may still not receive the information you were looking for. In that case, here is what you can do:
 - **Look for “breadcrumbs.”** Even in incomplete returns, you can still find breadcrumbs: hints or pieces of information in the documents that can lead to more fruitful sources. Examples of breadcrumbs might include **speaker notes or handouts** that are referenced in presentations but not included in the documents you received, **missing pieces** in email threads or references to emails that were not included, or attachments to emails (such as images) that were not included.
- **Try again.** Send an informal response stating that you did not receive the information you were looking for, and rephrase the request in another way. Try to be more specific.

Part IV: Where Else to Look

In addition to filing FOIA requests, there are other ways that you can find information about censorship. These include using BoardDocs, recruiting whistleblowers, and looking for evidence of bias in the public school system. This section will guide you through these various tools.

1. BOARDDOCS

[BoardDocs](#) is an online platform used by many school districts to house their board policies and meeting agendas. It is open access, so you can see these documents. In addition to filing FOIA requests, try looking here for information, as these documents can be helpful in identifying and tracking censorship. Here are some specific things you can do with BoardDocs:

First, you can download copies of policies related to books or censorship in order to keep track of changes that are made in the future. Only current policies are housed on BoardDocs, so downloading these policies will allow you to access them when they have been changed and record these differences.

Next, you can look at the agenda items of school board meetings. This is where you can find information about budgets, policy updates, and documents related to any reviews of books that are on upcoming agendas.

2. OTHER SOURCES

Outside BoardDocs and FOIA requests, there are other places where you can find information worth collecting and sharing.

- **School board websites.** Some school boards post minutes of their meetings on their websites, which might include discussions of censorship or reviews of books.
- **Social media posts.** If there are any particular individuals or groups leading censorship in your area, take screenshots of any relevant posts on social media platforms. These can be shared on your organization's social media accounts in order to expose the source of censorship and increase accountability.
- **Articles.** Find links to any articles covering censorship in your area. These can be used to collect information and can also be shared on social media to raise awareness.

3. WHISTLEBLOWERS

Whistleblowers refer to people within the school system, such as teachers or media specialists, who are willing and able to collect and share information on censorship in their workplace with your organization. They can be extremely helpful in providing an inside look into the process of censorship in schools and identifying the individuals or groups leading calls for book bans.

Make sure to keep whistleblowers **anonymous**. When collecting information from your calls or texts with them, leave out all possible identifying information, such as their name, email, and phone number. Also be sure to remove identifying information from any documents, images, screenshots, or other materials they provide.

4. EVIDENCE OF BIAS

Look for **evidence of bias** in the challenge and censorship process. This will help you identify the people or groups leading calls for censorship and expose any corruption or malpractice that may be occurring in the process. Here are some questions to ask:

- Are there any **outspoken members** of the school board who have shared pro-censorship views during board meetings? These members may be the source of book bans or supporters of them. If you are attending a board meeting in person, record the name of the member and the statement expressing their views. If you are watching a recorded meeting, take a screen recording of the statement.
- Are **documented policies and processes** being followed? Does the policy of the school board allow for books to be removed while under review? If not, is this still happening? If there is a committee to review challenges made against books, are their reviews available to the public? Are public statements supposed to be issued once a decision about a challenged book has been reached? If so, are they being issued?
- Is the challenge process **clearly defined and communicated** to the public? Who is responsible for reviewing challenged books? Is there a literacy council or a similar body? If so, are all stakeholders represented in this body? What is the expected timeframe for a decision on a challenged book to be reached?

Part V: Raising Awareness

Now that your organization has gathered information about censorship in your area, the next step is to **raise awareness** about this issue. As a nonprofit organization, the main avenues through which you can raise awareness and fight back against book bans are your local school boards, social media, the news, and in-person events. This section will guide you through each of these methods.

1. INTERACT WITH SCHOOL BOARDS

The **school board(s)** in your area are the first and most important authorities to reach when combatting censorship. The main way to reach school boards is by attending meetings. It is ideal to attend these meetings in person: this will allow you to speak up directly for your cause and establish yourself as a familiar face among board members and other attendees. It can also help you connect with sympathetic parties in your community, such as parents or teachers, and tell them about your organization.

At school board meetings, there are usually **two opportunities** to speak: comments on agenda items and comments on non-agenda items. If an issue related to censorship (such as a challenge against a book or a policy revision) is on the meeting agenda, you can make a **public comment** on this item when it is raised. A public comment is an opportunity to champion your cause and express your standing on a specific issue to the school board: you can defend a book that has been challenged, propose new policies, or emphasize existing policies that protect the right to read.

If censorship issues are not on the agenda, you can still make a **non-agenda comment**. Time for these comments is typically provided at the start or end of meetings, but the specifics may vary based on your local school board. A non-agenda comment is an opportunity to raise awareness about any censorship issues that have not yet been brought before the board. For example, if a book has been removed from schools without the formal challenge process being followed, you can identify this problem. Alternatively, if there are no specific issues you wish to discuss, you can use your non-agenda comment to share your concern over the general rise in censorship and draw attention to this trend.

If you can't attend a board meeting in person, you can submit a **written public comment** in the days beforehand to express your concern. When writing a public comment, you can follow **this framework**:

- An **introduction** that describes who you are, your connection to the school district (such as parent or guardian, student, teacher, or other citizen) and one statement to summarize your concern.
- A **body** that describes your concern in more detail, providing evidence where possible. You can include any relevant information you have gathered in your research, such as challenges made against specific books.
- A **conclusion** that proposes a resolution—that is, what you would like to see happen in response to the concerns expressed and information provided in your body.
-
- In addition to making a written public comment, you can also **email members of the school board** directly to express your concern, either over specific issues or on general topics . In

your email, be sure to tell the board member who you are, describe your concern, and provide evidence if necessary. You can follow the same framework provided for written comments above.

2. INCREASE YOUR PRESENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a very useful tool to increase the reach of your organization and gather support. When hosting in-person events, promote them on your Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts to encourage people to attend. Similarly, if you design merchandise to sell, you can promote it and post links on social media to encourage people to purchase it.

You can also use social media, particularly Instagram and Twitter, to **publicize the information** you find during your research. For example, if you discover that a book has been challenged or removed from schools, posting about the ban on these platforms will spread the word and encourage people to support the book. If you find a clip from a school board meeting in which a member expresses pro-censorship views, you can circulate this clip online to demonstrate the bias in the challenge process. You can also post infographics, screenshots, and—on Twitter and Facebook—links to news articles about censorship in your area.

For examples of social media posts, browse through Florida Freedom to Read's [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts and PEN America's [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts.

In addition to raising awareness, social media, especially Twitter, also allows your organization to **connect with prominent figures**, such as journalists, reporters, and other anti-censorship groups and activists. Many journalists and reporters are on Twitter, and you can tag them in posts or message them directly to draw their attention to both your organization and specific issues that you think should be in the news. This will help provide you with media coverage. It is also helpful to connect with anti-censorship organizations in other areas or states, with whom you can form a network for mutual support and collective advocacy.

3. GET MEDIA COVERAGE

In addition to connecting with journalists and reporters on social media, there are other ways to get media coverage for your organization. You can **reach out to local newspapers** with tips or information for articles and ideas for stories on censorship, as well as submit your own op-eds. Most newspapers will have links on their websites for these purposes. These websites may also provide contact information (such as email addresses) for individual reporters or journalists, and you can reach out to them directly with ideas or information for stories. Look for those who are already writing stories on censorship in your area—these are good contacts to reach out to with your ideas and information.

4. HOLD IN-PERSON EVENTS

Holding in-person events will not only increase awareness about your organization, but also raise funds. In addition to fundraising events (as discussed in Part II), **tabling** is a great strategy. You can table at Pride events, fairs or festivals, conventions, and various other venues. Some items to have at your table are a sign-up sheet to gather the contact information (such as names and emails) of potential members, information cards to hand out, a box or other place to collect donations, and merchandise for sale. For further information on tabling, see this guide from Amnesty International.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. HOW SHOULD MEMBERS BE ADMITTED TO OUR ORGANIZATION?

As discussed in Section I, new members can be admitted to your organization by being added to your private Facebook group after a brief screening process. The importance of caution in this process bears repeating: ensure that all new members answer your screening questions before being accepted into the group, and always look at their profiles to verify their identity. This is crucial to protect the privacy and security of yourself, your organization's other leaders, and all your members, especially whistleblowers within the school system. Maintaining a screening process will also help prevent spies or intruders from pro-censorship groups from joining your organization and gaining access to your information.

2. HOW PUBLIC SHOULD OUR EVENTS BE?

When you hold an in-person event, how public should it be? Should attendance be limited to trusted circles, or should anyone be admitted? These are important questions to consider when planning events and posting about them on social media. The answers depend on your specific situation, particularly the amount of support your organization has and the overall political climate in your area. As a **general rule**, events can be more public if your organization has broad support or if the climate in your area is generally opposed to censorship, and less public if your organization is not well-known or when your area is highly pro-censorship or conservative.

3. HOW CAN I REACH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?

You can reach elected representatives simply by calling them. First, you will need to find your representative and their phone number, which you can do using the [House of Representatives website](#). It is likely that the phone will not be answered by your representative themselves, but a member of their staff. Tell your representative who you are, express your concerns to them, and urge them to act against censorship. For further information on calling representatives, see these guides from the [American Psychological Association](#) and [ProLiteracy](#).

If you are hesitant to speak with your representative or their staff directly, you can also leave a voicemail. Try calling on the weekends or outside regular working hours (late in the evening or very early in the morning), when nobody is likely to answer. Include similar information in a voicemail as you would in a call: state your name, express your concerns about censorship, urge your representative to act, and leave your phone number.

4. IS ONLINE ENGAGEMENT ENOUGH?

While social media is an amazing tool to raise awareness, online engagement on its own is not enough to create real change in schools. For this, you will need to transition online engagement into real-life action by encouraging people to attend school board meetings, contact their board members and representatives, and come to your organization's events. If public events are safe in your area (see question 2), you can increase attendance by providing information about them on your website, promoting them on social media, and encouraging members to invite their friends. Finally, to increase attendance of school board meetings, you can send email updates to members providing information about upcoming meetings (the time and location) and urging them to come.

Further Reading

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES:

Guide to book bans: <https://pen.org/issue/book-bans/>

Index of book bans: <https://pen.org/index-of-school-book-bans-2022/>

Unite Against Book Bans toolkit: <https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/toolkit/>

Book Riot toolkit: <https://bookriot.com/how-to-fight-book-bans-and-challenges/>

ALA challenge support: <https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport>

Further resources: <https://diversebooks.org/resources/book-banning-resources/>

ORGANIZATIONS:

American Library Association: <https://www.ala.org/>

Fight for the First: <https://www.fightforthefirst.org/>

Media Coalition: <https://mediacoalition.org/>

National Coalition Against Censorship: <https://ncac.org/>

PEN America: <https://pen.org/>

Red, Wine, and Blue: <https://redwine.blue/>

Unite Against Book Bans: <https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/>

We Need Diverse Books: <https://diversebooks.org/>