

Packing and storing books safely is primarily a matter of good housekeeping and handling. The kinds of damage commonly suffered by books in storage – due to mould, insects and poor packing – are largely preventable. These guidelines outline an effective preventative approach to the problems of book storage.

Preparing books for packing

It is important that books are clean and dry before they are packed. Books that feel damp or have a musty odour should be aired and dried in a well ventilated room. Surface dirt and dust should be removed with a soft brush, outdoors if possible, using a disposable face mask. Mouldy books should be treated by a conservator, as mould can cause serious damage to books, and there are health risks associated with inhaling mould spores.

Insects can do considerable damage to paper-based material in storage, and books should be carefully checked for evidence of infestation. Unhatched insect eggs resemble poppy seeds (their colour varies from pale to black) and are often hidden in the gutters between the pages. Remove these with a soft brush and discard them before packing the books.

Leather-bound books packed side-by-side can stick together if subjected to sufficient moisture. As a precaution, they should be wrapped in a good-quality archival or 100 per cent rag paper.

Leather bindings that are degraded and powdery will stain other items and should also be wrapped in archival paper.

Packing books

Boxes for book storage should be strong, clean, dry and able to be closed. Ordinary cardboard cartons are suitable. Do not use boxes previously used to hold food, as food residue and odours will attract pests.

Small or medium-sized books can be packed either lying flat or standing upright. Large heavy books should be stored lying flat. Never store books resting on the spine or the fore edge (the front edge opposite the spine), as this can seriously damage bindings.

Books stored upright should be packed securely enough to prevent them leaning at an angle but not crammed together in a way that subjects them to excessive pressure and makes unpacking difficult. Books stored upright should not have items stacked on top of them.

Where heavy books are packed flat, one on top of the other, they should be arranged with spines and fore edges alternating. Pack larger, heavier books at the bottom of the box, with smaller, lighter ones on top. Do not over-pack so that books are crushed. Allow space for air to circulate.

Storage boxes should not be too big. It is better to use several smaller boxes rather than one large unwieldy box which is difficult to move safely, and in which books risk being damaged. Boxes should be closed for storage.

Storing books

The storage area must be dry, with a stable environment. The most common causes of damage to stored books are mould and insects, due to damp and unmonitored storage conditions. Moisture causes mould spores to germinate and bloom and encourages insect eggs to hatch. If the storage area, containers and the books themselves are dry, there is little likelihood of mould growth. The storage area should also be monitored for the presence of insects.

Do not place boxes directly on the floor. They should be stored on pallets or blocks to aid air circulation and as a precaution in case of flooding. Do not stack them against exterior walls, as moisture can be transferred and absorbed from outside. Any building maintenance issues affecting the storage space should be dealt with quickly and effectively.

Stored material should not be subjected to extremes in temperature and relative humidity. This is why attics, garages, basements and outhouses are unsuitable for book storage.

Insecticides and mothballs are not recommended, as they can have harmful effects on human health as well as on stored material. A dry, clean and stable storage environment and suitable containers are the most effective means of preventing damage.

Further information

Visit the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials website for more information about commissioning a conservator.

For advice, please get in touch with our Ask a librarian service at www.slv.vic.gov.au/visit/ask-librarian.