



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“The signs in a library building set the stage for a hostile or friendly environment, for a helpful or confusing library visit, especially for first-time users.”

-From “SPEC flyer 208,”
K.W. Ragsdale, University of Alabama and D.J. Kenney, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Sometimes when it comes time to put up another sign in the library, we have a conversation about the wording of the sign. I like signs that tell you what to do, rather than what not to do. It can be a challenge to stay with the positive wording, but I think it’s easier to follow and friendlier.

I started thinking about this many years ago after reading one of numerous child-rearing books. This book recommended using positive statements, instead of negative ones, when dealing with children. For instance, instead of saying, “Don’t bite your friend!” say, “When you bite your friend, it hurts her.” Or, “Teeth are for eating.” You get the idea.

Around the same time, I was hired to visit classrooms and observe, among other things, the posted signs. As I visited these classes, I started to realize what a difference it makes how a message is given. In fact, I started reading all the signs around me and trying to

analyze how they were worded and what kind of reaction there might be to them. For example, if you see a sign that says: No cell phones (a common sign, these days), how do you react? Maybe you know from experience that it only means don’t talk on your cell phone in the building or the room. But it could mean you should turn off your cell phone, or maybe even, they are out of cell phones.

On the other hand, if the sign said: Please use your cell phone in the lobby, you would know exactly what to do. You might wonder what difference this makes. But I think it matters, because of the way it affects the people who read it and because of the atmosphere it fosters.

Signs in libraries are particularly important. Most of the time they are not directing actions, but instead are giving information, like “Fiction” or “Non-Fiction” or “Reference Desk.” However, there are also times when the library staff

wants to let patrons know how to behave.

On the University of Waterloo website, I found a PowerPoint presentation on their Davis Library signs. On the whole, they are good examples of positive wording, although I found a couple that could be rewritten.

The first one, “When leaving the library, please present all books and all bags, briefcases, etc. to the attendant for inspection,” is straightforward and clear: When leaving, present bags. Another one, “overdue books must be renewed before they leave the library,” is also easy to follow: Renew, then leave.

A third is worded in a positive way, but seems a little vague to me: “Behave in a manner consistent with University of Waterloo Policy 33, Ethical Behavior.”

And then there is “Please do not remove ergonomic

chairs from designated areas.”

This one could use some work.

My suggestion would be: “Please leave ergonomic chairs in designated areas,” but there are probably other ways to express the same idea.

But my favorite “don’t” sign is the one that appears in red when I’m trying to cross the street. As I’m standing on the curb, “Don’t Walk” will start to flash. Always, my first impulse is to run, which would get me across the street faster and be obeying the sign at the same time. Now that wouldn’t happen if it flashed “Stop!” But even better would be “Stay Put!” Friendly, clear and positive: the perfect sign.