I would like to communicate to you as a professional woodworker and experienced carpenter, but I cannot. I am just a hobbyist who tinkers on his deck with a portable table saw. It would probably take me 60 hours to do what a competent carpenter could do in 10 hours, and my work wouldn’t be as perfect. So I mention my simple skill set as encouragement to anyone with the desire and elementary woodworking experience to tackle the rewarding task of building a Little Free Library.

Having built 30 or 40 Libraries and renovated or repaired at least 100 built by others by the time I wrote these words, I hope that Do It Yourself hobbyists and professional carpenters will find these tips helpful, too.

**In the Beginning: Some Basic Principles**

Our first Little Libraries were roughly 20” wide by 15” deep by 18” high, mounted on a sturdy post or secure foundation. Most of them were variations on the idea of a small, one-room building with a gabled roof. Now we’re seeing an almost infinite variety of sizes and shapes, including Libraries that can house two or three shelves instead of just one. You most certainly can vary the dimensions and materials as you see fit. But here are some good general principles:

- Use recycled, salvaged, and found materials if you can.
- Use green building techniques whenever possible.
- Build the Library to last. Most Libraries will be outside by a sidewalk, bike or walking path, so they will need protection from rain, high and low temperatures, wind and snow. The shelves should be strong and the box water-tight. The outside walls, roof or top should be weather-resistant. If they are not, you may need to have an inside plywood lining.
- Screws work better than nails.
- Make it safe. Avoid using glass or any other material that may cause harm to curious children or adults. Use Plexiglas on the door(s) so that passers-by can see the books inside. If you use old wood, be sure it does not have lead paint on it! If you use metal, file off the burrs and rough edges.
- Make sure the signs on your library are easy to read from five to ten feet away. Don’t feel obliged to build your Library exactly like the ones you see. We value creativity!
- Always make sure you register each Library so it’s in the global network map and benefits from all the other promotional and technical support.
Recycle, Repurpose. Reuse
As much as possible I try to incorporate excess building materials, old wood and scraps of metal while trying to repurpose as many parts of the Little Library as I can. My father passed away recently and I have incorporated pieces of our family barn, house, old mail box and other memorabilia into the Library. I see this as a living legacy and it makes me smile to see our family living on in the yards and parks of communities across the country.

- To date I have used the following:
  - Recycled wood from a barn destroyed by a tornado
  - Old garage doors and windows
  - Smashed mail boxes and old corrugated metal
  - Discarded deck railing and plastic lattice
  - Coffee cans, soup cans, old rulers and screw drivers
  - Oak barn stalls, dog and doll houses, fencing, cranberry, milk and apple crates
  - Bells, old electrical fuses and screw driver handles
  - Discarded materials from building sites. (Ask first!)

Different Sizes, Different Purposes and Places
In the beginning, a finished Little Library no larger than 22” wide and 15” deep by 23 “ high was a good size for me. Why? Because it would fit in my station wagon to haul about the country. Plywood was my primary building material. A 4’ x 8’ sheet of 5/8” plywood can be difficult to manage. But when you mention that you’re building Little Free Libraries, friends at lumber yards may even offer to cut the plywood into smaller pieces for you. To get the most from each sheet, I typically ask for pieces 15 7/8” long x 23 7/8 “.

To Keep it Together
I use exterior glue and 1 5/8”-2 1/2” exterior screws to fasten the plywood panels together. I am careful to use a square to make sure all the sides are at perfect angles. My eyes never seem to see things squarely. The next thing I do is cover the entire inside and outside of the box with an exterior stain or paint, paying special attention to the exposed ends and joints. These are the spots vulnerable to water damage.

By this point I have probably figured out what kind of recycled, repurposed or excess building material I can use to cover the Library. In the beginning I just used old barn wood, but water leaked inside. Since then I have used the double wall construction and have not had any problems. This is especially true when I have put a lip of 2” or more above the door to catch rain and keep it from...
dripping inside the door. Wisconsin winters can be hard on any building, but I am proud to report that “during last winter’s 3-foot snowstorms Libraries I built were dry and open for business when all other public buildings were closed.

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I attach the wood to the plywood base with screws and/or nails, always using exterior glue or liquid nails and being careful that no sharp points stick through the other side of the plywood. This prevents a prickly problem that can occur and needs to be fixed with great care. I am speaking from experience. We definitely do not want to wound any of our Library patrons with bloody fingers from nail points.

**Artistic and Architectural Touches**

Some general guidelines learned from the first 20 or more Libraries I have built:

- A 1/4” 4” x 5” piece of plywood makes a great decorative window for the side walls. I nail and glue the window and frame it with a 1/4” piece of contrasting wood trim.

- A 2” wide  x 4/5” thick piece of wood makes an excellent door. This is the size used for decking.

- A single door is stronger, more durable, and leaks less than a double door. It’s easier to open and it doesn’t get chipped or nicked as often.

- Use an exterior hinge or paint an interior hinge with Rustoleum.

- We find the greatest creativity is often reflected in the handle. It can be an antique knob, spindle chair back, thimble, tinker toy or anything else that is easy to use and safe.

- have used many kinds of exterior stains and paints, and like Sikkens products best and Cabot products second best. Whenever we paint a design on a Library, no matter how elaborate, I always use several coats of exterior clear coat. It’s hard to predict how various artistic paints will withstand year-round exposure to the sun and weather. But we know this: interior paints don’t hold up. So be careful. An artist’s creation may peel off or fade if it is not done with exterior paints and not protected by
two or three layers of clear coat.

- The best mounting post consists of a 2” x 6” piece of wood as wide as the library to use as a platform. I buy a 4” x 4” x 8’ post; cedar tone if I can find it. Most home supply or lumber yards sell them. I cut the 4 by 4, five feet long, then cut two 8” 45-degree angled pieces from the remaining 3-foot 4 x 4. I use these angle pieces to mount to the 5’ 4 x 4 and attach to the 2” x 6” platform. 3” exterior screws will hold it in place. Use 3” lag bolts to enhance the holding power.

- Dig a hole about 24” to 28” deep and install the post making sure to use a level and tap the dirt hard with the handle of the shovel. I drill six holes through the bottom of the Library that will match up with the post platform. I then put in six 2” lag screws that are attached to the platform of the Library.

When finished, have someone take pictures of you and your friends who helped with the Library and send them to us. Follow the instructions on Get on the Map on the Little Free Library website. Then try building another Library and giving it away. And then...

It’s much too rewarding to stop now!

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