

Special Collections and Archives Outdated, Offensive and Harmful Language in Archival Description Policy

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Overview

The Outdated, Offensive, and Harmful Language in Archival Description Policy details Cline Library Special Collections and Archives' (SCA) commitment to using inclusive and respectful language in archival description and lays out a framework for addressing offensive, outdated, or harmful language which may be present in SCA's existing products of archival description, such as finding aids and descriptive metadata.

To learn more about archival description at SCA more generally, please consult the [Arrangement and Description Policy](#).

Language Use in SCA's Archival Description

Archival description (noun) - Informational tools crafted to identify and represent an archival collection or a component thereof, used for the discovery and management of archival materials. Examples include finding aids, bibliographic records, and descriptive metadata. Descriptions often detail physical characteristics, formats, informational content, and functional purpose.

Archival description (verb) - The process of creating an informational tool to describe an archival collection or a component thereof. The process of describing archival resources can include analyzing, organizing, and recording details about the formal elements of a record or collection of records, such as creator, title, dates, extent, context, and contents, to facilitate the work's identification, management, and understanding.

SCA staff who create, revise, and maintain archival description(s), including finding aids available through [Arizona Archives Online](#) as well as descriptive metadata in the

[Colorado Plateau Digital Collections](#), commit to utilizing inclusive and respectful language when crafting archival descriptions. SCA staff who create, maintain, and remediate archival description continually consult established and emergent best practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in archival description, such as the [Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#), Archives for Black Lives Philadelphia’s [Anti-Racist Description Resources](#), and Harvard’s [Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description](#).

SCA staff are responsive to feedback from individuals and communities regarding language use in archival description. Where possible, SCA staff actively engage donors of archival materials, creators of archival materials, and community members represented within archival materials to produce respectful and inclusive archival description. Recognizing that preferred terminology and archival descriptive standards continually change and evolve, SCA staff endeavor to continually revisit existing products of archival description to evaluate whether they adhere to contemporary best practices.

SCA adheres to the guidelines laid out in the [Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#) (2006) in all its activities, including addressing offensive, outdated, or harmful language used in archival description of materials pertaining to Native American and Indigenous communities. As suggested by the [Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#), wherever feasible, SCA staff consult with institutional and cultural partners to develop culturally appropriate and accurate archival descriptions.

SCA staff may choose to retain outdated, offensive or harmful language in archival description when such language is original to the archival material being described and reflects the historic context(s) of the material, including the biases and prejudices of the material’s creator(s). For example, SCA may choose to use original annotations on items or folders as title information in finding aids or descriptive metadata in order to convey how the creator categorized, organized, and maintained their materials. In these instances, SCA staff aim to clearly indicate the source of such language and whether it is original to the materials in their archival description(s).

SCA staff may also choose to utilize outdated or offensive language from archival materials in staff-created archival description when the inclusion of such language has high historical or contextual value and/or significantly facilitates the discovery of said archival materials.¹ Some examples include:

¹ SCA’s framework for assessing whether and when to include outdated, offensive, and harmful language is based upon [Drexel University Libraries’ “Statement on Harmful Content in Archival Collections”](#) (accessed online May 2022).

- Including current as well as historic organization names and/or acronyms, including those which include outdated or offensive terms (e.g. using “NAACP” as well as “the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People” or “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries” as well as “STAR”);
- Including historic terms utilized by particular communities to identify themselves which may no longer be widely used within those communities (e.g. “homophile”);
- Including current as well as historic terms for Native American communities and tribal lands, including both archeological terms and terms for federally recognized tribes (e.g. using “Tohono O’odham Nation” as well as “Papago Indian”).

Outdated, Offensive, and Harmful Language in Finding Aids

[Finding aid](#) - Archival description that typically consists of contextual and structural information about an archival resource. Often a finding aid places archival resources in context by consolidating information about the collection, such as acquisition and processing; provenance, including administrative history or biographical note; scope of the collection, including size, subjects, media; organization and arrangement; and an inventory of the series and the folders.

[Legacy finding aid](#) - A tool intended to facilitate archival discovery but which was created using earlier, sometimes outdated, standards and formats.

As detailed in its [Arrangement and Description Policy](#), SCA recognizes that producing and maintaining archival description is ongoing, iterative, and responsive work. Many of SCA’s current finding aids available via [Arizona Archives Online](#) were created by staff before the formal development of archival descriptive standards such as [Describing Archives: A Content Standard](#). These legacy finding aids often contain outdated, offensive, and harmful language which has been carried forward through various data migrations over the decades. Such language may be original to the archival materials or have been created by SCA staff at a previous point in time.

Additionally, SCA has historically utilized Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) as controlled vocabulary access points in its finding aids. The department recognizes that LCSH pertaining to historically marginalized communities are often outdated, offensive, and harmful. Please see the Outdated, Offensive, and Harmful Language in Descriptive Metadata section of this policy to learn more.

Outdated, Offensive, and Harmful Language in Descriptive Metadata

***Controlled vocabulary** - An enumerated list of terms preselected from natural language and chiefly used to aid discovery in information retrieval systems, including subject headings and authority records, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH).*

***Descriptive metadata** - Information that refers to the intellectual content of archival material and aids discovery of such materials; can include finding aids as well as structured data provided about digital surrogates within digital collections.*

***Digital collections** - Digital collections are collections of digital surrogates of archival materials that are available for remote (digital) access over the internet. They may include analog materials that have been digitized, as well as items that are born-digital.*

While much of SCA's descriptive metadata for digital materials in the [Colorado Plateau Digital Collections](#) is more contemporary and better aligns with archival descriptive standards, SCA-produced descriptive metadata may still contain outdated, offensive, or harmful language. Such language may be original to the archival materials or have been created by SCA staff at a previous point in time.

SCA has historically utilized Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) as access points in the Colorado Plateau Digital Collections. The department recognizes that LCSH pertaining to historically marginalized communities are often outdated, offensive, and harmful. Where appropriate, SCA staff commit to utilizing alternative controlled vocabularies and/or creating a local controlled vocabulary for use in the Colorado Plateau Digital Collections.

Remediating and Updating Offensive, Outdated, and Harmful Language in Archival Description

***Reparative description** - Remediation of description practices or descriptive metadata (including archival description and finding aids) that exclude, silence, harm, or mischaracterize marginalized people in the data created or used by archivists to identify or characterize archival materials.*

SCA is committed to reparative description projects and practices to address offensive, outdated, and harmful language in its archival descriptions, particularly through the lens of the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*.

As of 2022, SCA has begun a multi-year project, led by the Archivist for Discovery, to systematically review and update legacy finding aids to ensure that they adhere to contemporary archival descriptive standards and professional best practices, including remediating and/or updating outdated, offensive, and harmful language.

Similarly, SCA is working to implement new policies and procedures for the creation and maintenance of descriptive metadata for the Colorado Plateau Digital Collections, led by the Archivist for Discovery and Archivist for Digital Programs.

Researchers who identify offensive, outdated, or harmful language in SCA-produced archival description, including finding aids available through [Arizona Archives Online](#) as well as descriptive metadata in the [Colorado Plateau Digital Collections](#), are encouraged to contact SCA staff to suggest corrections or enrichment of existing information.

To learn more, please [contact the department](#).

Portions of this policy have been adapted from Emory University Rose Library's "[Harmful Language in Finding Aids](#)" policy, last updated in 2022, as well as Drexel University Libraries' "[Statement on Harmful Content in Archival Collections](#)", accessed online May 2022.