Ethical Cataloguing in UCD Digital Library

Guidelines compiled by
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Introduction

UCD Digital Library is committed to describing material accurately, respectfully, and in a way that will not cause distress or offence, while abiding to open access principles, where material is as open as possible and only restricted when necessary. These principles are enshrined in our Access and Re-use Policy.

We are also committed to following the Cataloguing Code of Ethics, produced by the Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee, and the Archives & Records Association (UK & Ireland) Code of Ethics.

The above policy and codes have contributed to the development of our Ethical Cataloguing Guidelines. In the interests of transparency, we are sharing these guidelines and we welcome feedback on any aspects of these guidelines. The guidelines are not exhaustive and will grow and adapt as new collections are deposited and new issues arise. When ethical issues are identified in a collection, we undertake research to see how other libraries, archives, or museums have handled similar issues.
Whenever practically possible the opinions of the community who are the subject of the collection are sought. We acknowledge that comprehensive consultation is not always possible.

Note that these guidelines were developed in 2021 and collections published prior to 2021 may not comply with these guidelines. We are hoping to retrospectively apply these guidelines to our previously published collections.

**Sensitivity criteria**

Each collection is assessed for potentially sensitive material, that is, material that has the potential to cause harm, offence, or distress or material that could have legal or regulatory issues. The following criteria are considered when assessing a collection:

- Personal data
- Commercially sensitive data (e.g., patent/IPR issues, financial information)
- Cultural sensitivity (e.g., discriminatory and/or derogatory imagery and language, content that may be offensive to the originating culture, descriptions that do not adequately contextualise the content or credit the originating culture)
- Physical harm (e.g., risk of personal attack, damage to property)
- Reputational harm (e.g., risk of exposure to malicious gossip, hatred, or contempt)
- Distressing/offensive content (e.g., medical/surgical images, sexually explicit content, animal cruelty, derogatory language, death and dying)

These criteria are adapted from the Wellcome Library’s [Access to Personal and Sensitive Information Within Our Collections](https://www.wellcome.ac.uk/research/access-personal-sensitive-information-within-our-collections).

**Language in descriptive records**

The information in UCD Digital Library’s descriptive records is based on finding aids, catalogue records, and other descriptive records for collections which we have received from our depositors and source repositories. The provenance of any descriptions is stated in the **Record Source** field in any of our records. These descriptions may have been created many years ago and may contain language that is not considered acceptable today. Existing descriptive records are reviewed for language that is outdated, offensive, and/or harmful particularly in relation to age, sexual orientation, gender identity, race or ethnicity, religion, country of origin or residence, ability or disability. Descriptive language is generally updated and revised unless it provides important context about the collection and the attitudes of the creators, or society, at the time of creation. Where such language is retained, additional context is added explaining why it was retained. Additionally, such language is retained when:

- it is the official title of an item.
- it is the name of an organisation or an event.
- an individual identifies themselves using a term that is no longer favoured by people within that group.

We endeavour to follow these guidelines, which have been adapted from Tufts University Digital Collections & Libraries [DCA Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description](https://library.tufts.edu/dca/statements/potentially-harmful-language-archival-description) and
Temple University Libraries SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging.

- Balance any benefits of re-using the pre-existing description, such as providing important historical context, with the potentially negative effects it may have on users reading that description or on the communities/people being described.
- Clearly indicate (through use of quotation marks around contentious terms and/or a content advice note) what language comes from an external source or is legacy/older description.
- When terms in LCSH are unsuitable/contentious, identify and use alternative thesauri that may include more appropriate or community-oriented language. See the section on LCSH below.
- Research how communities describe themselves and their own histories, use their preferred terms and language whenever possible. If possible, discuss issues directly with the communities who created or are described by the materials. If direct contact with the community is not possible, discuss any concerns with the depositor/source repository.
- Assess how other institutions have dealt with similar collections or issues - the List of statements on bias in library and archives description in the Resources section is a useful starting point.
- Respect individuals’ self-identification regarding name, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Strive for transparency and evidence-based description by including citations and notes to document all decisions and adding notes detailing changes that have been made to the original description.
- Create biographical and historical notes that avoid re-creating or reinforcing previous inequities and over-valuation of traditionally privileged groups.
- Issues brought to UCD Digital Library’s attention should be assessed with our policies and these guidelines in mind and remedied as quickly as possible. Communicate transparently about any changes or corrections made, or to explain the reasons why no changes were made.

The following examples from Emory University Rose Library’s Harmful Language in Finding Aids detail why offensive language may be occasionally retained in descriptions:

- Terms considered derogatory by some have been reclaimed by others, and the creator of the collection uses such a term to self-identify.
- Terms regularly used by a community to describe themselves historically have fallen out of use or out of favour.
- We use national standards like Library of Congress Subject Headings to enable standardized searching and access across our holdings, and some of these headings are outdated and offensive.

When editing descriptions, we try to distinguish between the ‘voice of the curator’ and the ‘voice of the creator’. Descriptions by curators can be edited, replacing contentious language with meaningful, accurate, and searchable terms and notes added to explain any edits. Descriptions by the original creator of the collection or object could have important contextual and historical information and are generally kept, but contentious language is placed in quotation marks to differentiate it from current terms and/or the current term is added within square brackets.

Under-represented communities in descriptions

Care is taken when we are cataloguing to include in descriptions all those who are represented by a collection, and not just the main creator or collector of a collection. We try to take particular care to
include in the description under-represented communities who are the subject of the collection, or who contributed significantly to the collection. Legacy finding aids or descriptions may have been created many years ago and may not have included under-represented communities in the description or may use language that is no longer acceptable. For example, a woman may be described using only her husband's name (Mrs. John Smith, rather than Jane Smith, or using her maiden name) and may not be included as prominently in a description, even when her contribution was equal to her husband's. Wherever possible, such descriptions are updated to give each contributor or subject equal prominence and to use the fullest form of name possible. See also the section below on Guidelines for medical, disability, and related collections.

Language/imagery in the content

Due to the historical nature of the material in UCD Digital Library, there may be content that could cause distress or offense, or material that would be considered culturally sensitive or inappropriate today. Such content is made available, in its original form and context, in the interests of historical integrity and for research purposes. The descriptive record accompanying such material should provide contextual information for the material. In addition, we add content warnings advising users of the presence of sensitive material and, in a small number of cases, we may place restrictions on access to content. The types of warnings or restrictions we use are:

Content advice note: these appear directly below the Abstract at the start of a record. A content advice note warns users about particularly sensitive content so that they can decide for themselves if they wish to view potentially offensive or harmful content, or to give them the opportunity to prepare themselves for viewing material that may be distressing.
For example: Republican newspapers from the Free State era

Viewer discretion advisory: UCD Digital Library records include thumbnail images giving a preview of the content. For particularly sensitive material, this preview thumbnail is replaced with a "Viewer Discretion Advised" thumbnail. This prevents particularly sensitive content being viewable in our search results. The material is still openly available, but the user has to actively choose to view the material by clicking on the thumbnail to open or download the material.
For example: Desmond FitzGerald Photographs (gallery section includes items with viewer discretion advisory)

Redaction and suppression: In line with our policy of “as open as possible, only restricted when necessary”, redaction or suppression only occur as a last resort when there are potential legal issues with content, rather than for sensitive/offensive content. Redaction is the preferred method and only the minimal amount of content possible is redacted (e.g. to redact the name of a person if the content is potentially libellous or defamatory). Redaction is only done to an access copy; the original preservation copy is never redacted. For images suppression may be more appropriate rather than redacting parts of images. In this instance, only the image is suppressed, and the metadata is still visible. The details of the content affected and the reasons for the redaction or suppression are described in an Access Restrictions note.
For example: Register of 1557 students admitted 1911-1922
**Access Restrictions**: Under our policy of “as open as possible, only restricted when necessary”, applying access restrictions is a rare occurrence. Restrictions are generally for legal/privacy reasons, rather than due to potentially offensive material. Access restrictions are only applied in cases where redaction is not possible due to legal or practical reasons (e.g., redactions would be so extensive the content becomes unusable). The reasons for the restriction are explained in an **Access Restrictions note** or **Rights note**. For example: [Slade Harbour point cloud](#)

**Controlled vocabularies**

The Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are the main controlled vocabulary in use in UCD Digital Library. Standardised headings are crucial to support consistent searching within UCD Digital Library and between UCD Digital Library and other resources. However, some of the headings in LCSH are outdated and considered offensive. We apply critical analysis and judgement when choosing LCSH headings, particularly when choosing headings related to age, sexual orientation, gender identity, race or ethnicity, religion, country of origin or residence, ability or disability. The following approach is applied to controlled vocabulary headings:

- If a heading is problematic, we look for an alternative term within the vocabulary.
- We use a broader term if it less problematic than the narrow term, even if it is less specific.
- We add an additional term from another vocabulary if it uses more acceptable language or is more precise.
- We can explain subject heading issues in a note.
- If a collection relates to a specific community or subject for which LCSH headings are problematic, we assess if a more appropriate thesaurus or controlled vocabulary is available.

**Guidelines for medical, disability, and related collections**

Historical medical terms can be offensive and may not accurately portray a medical condition or a disability. Records may focus on a medical condition and/or on the perspective of medical staff rather than the subject who has a medical condition or a disability. Where such language is retained, additional context is added explaining why it was retained. We may retain the historical term and add the contemporary equivalent. Historical language is retained when it is the official title of an item; the name of an organisation or an event; or when an individual identifies themselves using a term that is no longer favoured by people within that group.

In general, we use person-first language, describing a trait as something the person has rather than who they are; for example, use “a person with diabetes” rather than “a diabetic”. There are important exceptions to this and again it is crucial to us that we respect how people refer to themselves and to use the terminology they prefer. Some communities prefer the identity-first approach, as it is seen as an integral part of their identity and not a disability:

- **Deaf**: we will use the preferred terminology Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deafened. We use Deaf for those who identify culturally as Deaf (their preferred language is Irish Sign Language), and deaf for those who have other preferences for communication, and also to refer to the physical condition. (Preferred terminology source: [Irish Deaf Society](#))
Autism: we will use autistic, autistic person/people. Person first may be acceptable to some
(Preferred terminology source: AsIAm)

We strive to avoid language that portrays a disability in a negative way – avoiding phrases such as
“suffers from” or “is a victim of”; for example, we avoid the phrase “wheelchair-bound” preferring the
phrase “uses a wheelchair” instead.

For more on this area, see the Harvard Center for the History of Medicine Guidelines for Inclusive and
Conscientious Description.

Future developments

As our range of collections expands, we are committed to reviewing these guidelines regularly and
implementing new developments related to ethical cataloguing.

If you have any suggestions or feedback on these guidelines, please contact us:
Email: digital.library@ucd.ie
Phone: +353 (0)1 716 7506

Resources

2. Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee Cataloguing Code of Ethics (2021)
3. Chew, Carrisa Inclusive Terminology Project : Guidance on discriminatory and harmful language
for cultural heritage professionals: Information and Resource Pack (2022)
4. Chew, Carrisa Annotated bibliography - discriminatory language and harmful material in the
cultural heritage sector (2021)
5. Chew, Carrisa Possible strategies for addressing harmful and discriminatory materials in cultural
heritage institutions (2021)
6. Emory University Rose Library Harmful Language in Finding Aids (2021)
7. Lellman, Charlotte, et al. "Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description." Center for the
Medicine, Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Boston, Mass. https://wiki.harvard.edu/confluence/display/hmschommanual/Guidelines+for+Inclusive+
and+Conscientious+Description (2020)
8. List of statements on bias in library and archives description http://cataloginglab.org/list-of-
statements-on-bias-in-library-and-archives-description/ (updated 2021)
Description and Cataloging (2018)
10. Tufts University, Digital Collections & Libraries DCA Statement on Potentially Harmful Language
in Archival Description (2020)
Glossaries / Terminology

1. American Jewish Committee Translate Hate (2022)
2. Chew, Carrisa Inclusive terminology guide and glossary for the Cultural Heritage Sector (May 2021)
3. Chew, Carrisa Inclusive Terminology Project (2022)
5. Digital Transgender Archive Homosaurus (accessed 2022)