

Consciously Editing SCUA's Finding Aids

Liz Caringola, Hannah Frisch, Marcella Stranieri

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Liz

Good afternoon, everyone! I'm Liz Caringola, the Archival Metadata Librarian in Special Collections and University Archives. Today my co-presenters and I are going to talk about SCUA's recent efforts to evaluate and correct harmful, offensive, and outdated language in our finding aids.

Hannah Frisch is a recent graduate of UMD's iSchool with her Master of Library and Information Science and since last January she has worked in SCUA as a student assistant.

Marcella Stranieri is the Graduate Assistant for Special Collections Access Services, a position she's held since January 2020, and a current graduate student of library and information science at UMD's iSchool.

What is conscious language?

Conscious language refers to language rooted in critical thinking and compassion, used skillfully in a specific context. Using conscious language involves asking yourself questions such as:

- Who is my audience?
- What tone and level of formality do I want?
- What am I trying to achieve?
- How might history change the impact of my language choices regardless of my intentions?
- Who's being excluded?

<https://consciousstyleguide.com/about/>

What is conscious editing?

Archivists at UNC-Chapel Hill are engaged in "conscious editing" of archival description. We aspire to re-envision our descriptive practice so that whiteness is no longer the presumed default, language in our description products is inclusive and accessible, and our description does not obscure collection material that documents the lives of enslaved people.

Dean, "Conscious Editing of Archival Description at UNC-Chapel Hill."

Liz

Before we talk about conscious editing, we'll first talk about conscious language. This term was coined by writer and editor Karen Yin, the founder of the Conscious Style Guide website. It "refers to language rooted in critical thinking and compassion, used skillfully in a specific context." "The goal is not to be inoffensive or politically correct," but to be intentional about how you use language to articulate your intentions and achieve your desired goals. She encourages authors to ask themselves the following questions:

- Who is my audience?
- What tone and level of formality do I want?
- What am I trying to achieve?
- How might history change the impact of my language choices regardless of my intentions?
- Who's being excluded?

The term "conscious editing" as applied to archival description was first used by archivists at UNC-Chapel Hill. They recognized that descriptions of their collections, particularly their Southern Historical Collection, were written with a white supremacist point of view. Patterns indicative of this point of view included softening the role that white southerners played in slavery (for example referring to them as "planters" instead of "enslavers"); omitting the well-known history of white supremacy of certain

collections' creators in their biographical information; and presuming whiteness by only describing the racial identity of non-white records creators. In 2017 they began the work of identifying and disrupting these patterns in archival description, in a process they called "conscious editing," inspired by the Conscious Style Guide website.

Why this project? Why now?

Liz

As I just mentioned UNC began their conscious editing efforts in 2017, and it seems that around 2016 through 2018 there was more and more archival literature around topics of care in describing archival collections. So why did it take until 2020 for SCUA to undertake a project like this? In my presentation notes, I had original typed “COVID presented an opportunity to work on it.” I think this sort of thinking is very common in libraries and archives: because we are chronically under resourced, we try to put a positive spin on any challenge we face and focus on how to creatively use the resources available to us. But I think if we’re going to be brutally honest, the truth is that this work was simply not a priority in the past. It was only when we physically could not access our existing collections or accept new materials that we made space for such a project. I don’t say this to diminish the wonderful work of everyone who has contributed to or supported the project, but I think it is important to acknowledge and grapple with this, especially as we return to in-person work in the coming months, and there will undoubtedly be pressure to abandon this work in favor of accessioning new collections.

At any rate, it wasn’t until the UMD campus closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic that we began to design a project to evaluate archivist-created language in our finding aids. At the time of the closure, the Access Team employed 5 student assistants and 2 graduate assistants, all of whom needed new projects to work on that could be completed remotely. An idea suggested by our Electronic Records

Archivist, Amy Wickner, was to complete a finding aids audit using resources for anti-racist and decolonial description, including the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's *Anti-Racist Description Resources*.

I'll now turn it over to Marcella and Hannah to describe our audit process and results.

Designing a Finding Aid Audit

- March 2020: launched a pilot project to audit Maryland & Historical Collections (MDHC) finding aids.
 - Read each finding aid to the item level description and evaluated description and naming content based upon prior research.
 - Each finding aid was rated on a prioritizing scale of 0-4 that accounted for lack of information and contextualization, harmful, dismissive, or grading language, or more technical file naming or categorization.
 - The audit specifically focused on editing archivist-created description
- After the pilot program: conducted a literature review of conscious editing & new standards in archival description in order to expand the audit to SCUA's remaining collection areas.

Marcella

SCUA's archival collections are divided into 6 collecting areas, and we decided to pilot a finding aid audit with the Maryland & Historical Collections (MDHC). MDHC collection materials relating to all aspects of Maryland history and culture, including African American history, agriculture, business and labor history, family history and personal papers, military history, Maryland women's history, and more.

We approached this project in an organic way, reading each of the finding aids and marking what we believed to be offensive, harmful, or outdated language, eventually creating a 0-4 grading scale which I will talk about in the next section. We were specifically auditing the descriptions that were created by other archivists, which includes descriptions, file names, inventory sheets, and any other accompanying data, rather than the content of a given collection.

After we read each finding aid in the MDHC collection, we compiled a literature review to learn more about the emerging standards in archival description so that we could approach the rest of the auditing project in an informed and organized way.

Summary of MDHC audit results

| Rating | Rating summary | # of finding aids |
|--------|---|-------------------|
| 0 | Need more information before auditing | 10 |
| 1 | Uses offensive or harmful language used to describe people or communities | 44 |
| 2 | Needs better contextualization about events, issues, and social standards of the time described | 11 |
| 3 | No edits/suggestions | 240 |
| 4 | Needs better contextualization for folder titles authored by record creators | 40 |

Common issues found:

- enslavement / enslavers
- race
- ethnicity
- gender
- sexuality
- ability
- economic status
- lack of context
- aggrandizing biography

Hannah

Summary of Maryland and Historical Collection Audit Summary

- As Marcella said, we devised a rating system to audit the finding aids. After reading through each one, a rating from 0-4 was given to the collection.
- 0 was given for collections that needed more information before it could be audited. This was because we had a question when reading the finding aid and wanted to look at the collection materials themselves but couldn't due so to the remote environment
- 1 was given to finding aids that used offensive or harmful language to describe people or communities
- 2 was given for finding aids that needed better contextualization for the events, issues, or social standards being described
- 3 was given for finding aids that were good as is and we did not have any edits to suggest in its current state
- 4 was given for finding aids that had folder titles created by the record creator that needed to be contextualized
- After rating each of the finding aids in the Maryland and Historical

Collection, common issues of enslavement/enslavers, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, economic status, lack of context, and aggrandizing biographies were common issues in the description

Summary of audit results (all collection areas)

| Rating | Rating summary | # of finding aids |
|--------|---|-------------------|
| 0 | Need more information before auditing | 23 |
| 1 | Uses offensive or harmful language used to describe people or communities | 101 |
| 2 | Needs better contextualization about events, issues, and social standards of the time described | 31 |
| 3 | No edits/suggestions | 825 |
| 4 | Needs better contextualization for folder titles authored by record creators | 73 |

Three student workers audited all SCUA finding aids, totalling 1,051 collections, rating each on a 0-4 scale

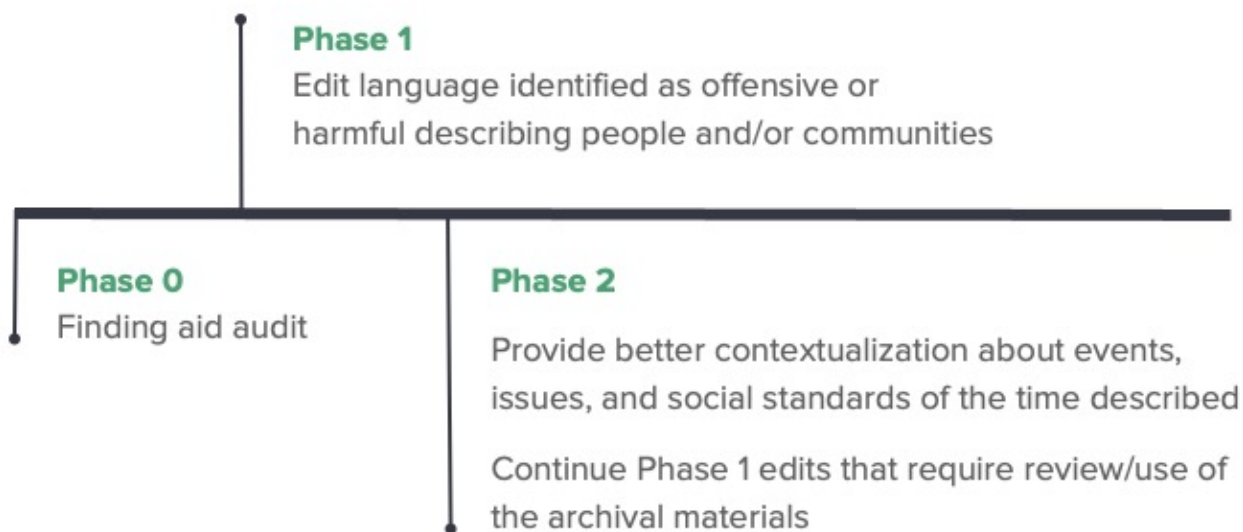
Marcella

After the pilot program, we tackled the remaining collections which totaled over one thousand finding aids. We used our previous literature review and the rating scale that was developed in the pilot program to scale up and properly assess the finding aids in an appropriate and inclusive way.

You may notice that the majority of our finding aids fell into the rating three category: no edits/suggestions needed. I would just like to clarify that these ratings are just a moment in time. This does not necessarily mean that these finding aids are perfect. Consciously editing is an ongoing process and ultimately the judgement call of a given archivist. As we continue to incorporate conscious editing into our workflow, we will likely revisit these 825 collections and screen them again for conscious language.

Okay so this is our final breakdown after three student workers tackled over 1000 collections:

Planning for consciously editing



Liz

Our philosophy for conscious editing mirrors our philosophy for processing archival collection, which is that it is an iterative activity, meaning that the product is never finished, but can always be further revised as new information and resources are available. Completing the audit gave us an overview of the kinds of language issues that needed to be addressed in our finding, so the next step was to determine how to break down edits into manageable pieces.

I decided that the priority should be editing language for any finding aids rated 1 because they contained offensive or harmful language. We're calling this Phase 1 of the project. Based on what we learned from the audit, I created broad categories of the types of language that need to be edited, which Hannah mentioned on her last slide. These categories are useful because they gives us a snapshot of what the most prominent types of edits are, and it also helps the students by allowing them to work on finding aids with similar issues at the same time.

We are working collection area by collection area on Phase 1 edits. Again, we decided to start with MDHC finding aids. Before we began editing finding aids, we met with collection area staff, reviewed the results of the audit, and gave them an opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns about what we wanted to do. In a second, Hannah is going to go into more detail about the edits we made to MDHC finding aids in Phase 1. In the next week or so, I'll be giving the collection area a

report to summarize our Phase 1 edits and our proposed edits for Phase 2, as well as lists of collections with potentially problematic folder titles and Library of Congress Subject Headings.

In Phase 2 we will address finding aids with ratings of 2 (Needs better contextualization about events, issues, and social standards of the time described), as well as 0s and 1s that require reviewing materials in order to edit the archival description. In this phase, we will likely need to work more closely with collection area staff or even subject experts outside of SCUA in order to edit finding aids.

Consciously editing MDHC finding aids

- Phase 1: Address the 44 finding aids with rating of 1 (Uses offensive or harmful language used to describe people or communities)
 - Revise harmful language used describe communities
 - Use person-first language
 - Research to contextualize and best describe materials
 - Move information regarding enslavers to collection level description
 - Define and explain events or ideas that negatively impacted another person or community

| Type of edit | # |
|-------------------------|----|
| enslavement / enslavers | 26 |
| race / ethnicity | 15 |
| gender / sexuality | 8 |
| economic status | 7 |
| ability | 4 |
| need context | 3 |
| Mexican-American War | 2 |
| aggrandizing biography | 1 |

Hannah

Consciously editing the Maryland and Historical Collection finding Aids

- After we had had audited all of the collections, we began making the actual edits to the finding aids, which we have called Phase 1
- In Phase 1, we addressed the finding aids in the Maryland and Historical Collection that were rated 1 - offensive or harmful language to describe people of communities.
 - Edits made during this Phase included
 - Revising the harmful language used to describe communities by changing it to language that the communities use to describe themselves
 - Using person first language in the description rather than describing a person by a single attribute or part of their identity
 - Researching to contextualize and best describe a community, event, or history
 - Move information regarding a history as enslavers from a series level description to the collection level

- Define and explain events or ideas that negatively impacted a person or community.
- On the right, you can see the breakdown of the types of edits made, with issues of enslavement/enslavers and race or ethnicity being the most frequent

Davis Family Papers

Collection Abstract

[no mention of family's history as enslavers]



"It is known from these records that William Morsell Sr. enslaved a man named Abraham on their farm, William Morsell Jr. enslaved one person, and Eli Davis enslaved six people."

Family History

"It is likely that he was an enslaver, as the 1850 and 1860 censuses record an enslaved family on his farm."



"Eli Davis enslaved one boy and girl under the age of 10 and there were three people of color living on Davis' farm in 1830 according to the census. In the 1840 census, there were 3 free people of color living on David's property. The 1840 and 1850 census reports that 3 free people of color were living on the farm. The 1850 Slave Schedule describes that a 20 year old woman, an 18 year old man, and their 1 year old daughter were enslaved on Davis' farm. In 1860, the census reports that a free man, woman, and girl under age of 10 were living on the Davis farm. The 1860 Slave Schedule indicates that a 35 year old woman, a 30 year old man, an 11 year old girl, and three boys ages 7, 5, and 3 were enslaved by Eli Davis"

Hannah

Davis Family Papers

- An example of one of the finding aids revised in Phase 1
- Issues addressed:
 - Revised language around enslavers and people who were enslaved
 - Removing repetition of a single intended benevolent action of an enslaver intending to free a man named Abraham who he enslaved throughout the finding and instead just including it one time because it seemed to pillow the actual fact that this man was an enslaver rather than focusing on an intention
 - Adding as much detail as known about the people enslaved into the finding aid
 - Researched census records to find information
- Here are two examples of edits made
 - In the Collection Abstract, there was no mention of the family's history as enslaver

- After researching I added the sentence, describing the names of the people who were enslavers and how many people were enslaved. There was only one person whose name was known of those people enslaved
- Family history read:
 - It is likely that he was an enslaver as the 1850 and 1860 censuses record an enslaved family on his farm
 - Revised this statement that softened the facts rather than calling the situation as it was.. Eli Davis was an enslaver he was not just likely one
 - Also included as much information about the people who were enslaved, including their sex and age. Unfortunately from the Census Slave Schedules that I found for 1850 and 1860, names were not listed so that will be part of Phase 2 to look into the collection materials themselves to see if their names are listed anywhere in the records

Inclusive description guidelines

- Describe communities as they describe themselves.
- Take into account different perspectives of stakeholders.
- Disclose your own positionality and be self-reflective.
- Be transparent.
- Continue to read, research, and stay informed on changes of description.

Hannah

- **Describe communities as they describe themselves.** Research and consult communities and community created guides and resources to ensure the language you are using is used by those in the community you are describing.
- **Take into account different perspectives of stakeholders.** When describing, ask yourself questions about how different people, such as the record creator, the subject(s) of the record, the community, and the user, would read and respond to the language. Ensure that you are being respectful and cognizant of these different stakeholders.
- **Disclose your own positionality and be self-reflective.** Acknowledging your own position and biases in the world allows for readers and researchers to be aware of who is doing the work and what biases might impact the description.
- **Be transparent.** Stating why you are doing the work of redescribing, acknowledging past issues, taking institutional and personal accountability for the work. Mistakes have been made and will continue to be made, but you are actively working to improve and are open to criticism and changes in practice.
- **Continue to read, research, and stay informed on changes of description.** This work is a continuous process. Be vigilant in ensuring you are describing communities and populations in the way they want to be described and

continue to educate yourself on best practices for cultural humility work.

From project to process

- Incorporate inclusive description guidelines into the SCUA Processing Manual
- Solicit and respond to feedback from our users and colleagues when they find harmful, outdated, or offensive language
 - [Harmful Language in Finding Aids statement](#)
- Empower SCUA staff to identify and make changes to language
- Support professional development and to keep up with changes in archival description

Liz

Throughout our presentation, we've referred to this work as a conscious editing *project*. Projects have a discrete endpoint, so you may be asking how will we take what we've learned and turn it into a sustainable workflow. So far we've identified four ways to do so:

First, we will incorporate inclusive description guidelines into the SCUA Processing Manual. The Processing Manual has not undergone major revisions since we launched ArchivesSpace as our platform for managing and describing our collections in 2017. We had already planned to make updates to the manual in the near future, so it's perfect timing to make additions on inclusive description as well.

We will also solicit and respond to feedback when it comes to the language used in finding aids. The first step we have taken in this area is to publish a [Harmful Language in Finding Aids statement](#) on the SCUA website. In this statement we take accountability for why harmful language may exist in finding aids and invite users to contact us with any questions or concerns about the language we use in archival description. In the future we hope to further increase transparency by blogging about our conscious editing work on the SCUA blog.

We want SCUA staff to feel empowered to identify and make changes to language in real time if they notice harmful language or it is brought to their attention. Adding

inclusive description guidelines and best practices in the SCUA Processing Manual will facilitate that, and Marcella is also working on creating self-guided training that anyone in SCUA can complete to help them feel more confident in making these kinds of changes.

Finally, members of the Access Team and workers across SCUA should receive support to pursue professional development opportunities relevant to archival description. For example, as Hannah was working on the MDHC finding aids, we could both see how training in African American genealogy would help us to track down the names of individuals enslaved by people and families whose collections we steward.

Obviously we have a long way to go, and as I mentioned earlier, I'm definitely concerned that interest in projects like these will wane when we return to more regular work in the office. There have definitely been points in the past year and a half where I've felt overwhelmed or unqualified to take on this project. In fall of 2020, I attended a series of webinars from the [Sunshine State Digital Network](#) on the topic of conscious editing. The first speaker in the series was archivist Dorothy Berry. She ended her presentation with words that I often return to when I'm questioning myself, and so I'll also end my presentation with them:

“The inability to reach collection perfection is no excuse not to try. Progress takes time and education, but we all have a responsibility to do our part. Perfection is not the goal. Progress is the goal.”
(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nOKbyU3K-nn2Y4GNh0OI96KD8d-ZOAtN/view>)

Thank you!

Works cited & additional resources

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https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ardr_202010.pdf

Bolding, Kelly. "Reparative Processing: A Case Study in Auditing Legacy Archival Description for Racism." *Presented at the Midwest Archives Conference, Chicago, IL, March 24, 2018.*

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1MhOXx5ZIVjb_8pfvFouMqLsUUIQHFFMT4is5EP4gnA/edit?usp=sharing

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Sunshine State Digital Network. "Introduction to Conscious Editing Series (3 parts)."

<https://sunshinestatedigitalnetwork.wordpress.com/2020/09/16/introduction-to-conscious-editing-series/>

Additional resources for creating inclusive and conscious archival description:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A5e46wuBIA4Vmlqhlna1Bv40AoMiled6XRAMStSGKqU/edit?usp=sharing>

Questions?

Contact

Liz Caringola, Archival Metadata Librarian, ecaringo@umd.edu

Hannah Frisch, Former Student Assistant at SCUA, hfrisch@umd.edu

Marcella Stranieri, GA for SCUA Access Services, mstranie@umd.edu