

# Consciously Editing Finding Aids at UMD Libraries

Presented as part of the session “Metadata and Cultural Memory: Investigating Models of Equitable and Inclusive Metadata Creation for Maryland History”

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Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Liz Caringola, and since 2016 I've held the position of Archival Metadata Librarian in Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Today I'm going to discuss a project that I started during the pandemic to consciously edit and update the language that we use in our finding aids.

## 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.”

If you’ve never heard of the phrase “conscious editing” before today, I’ll start by defining the term and its origin. The term “conscious editing” is based on the concept of “conscious language.” The term “conscious language” 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:

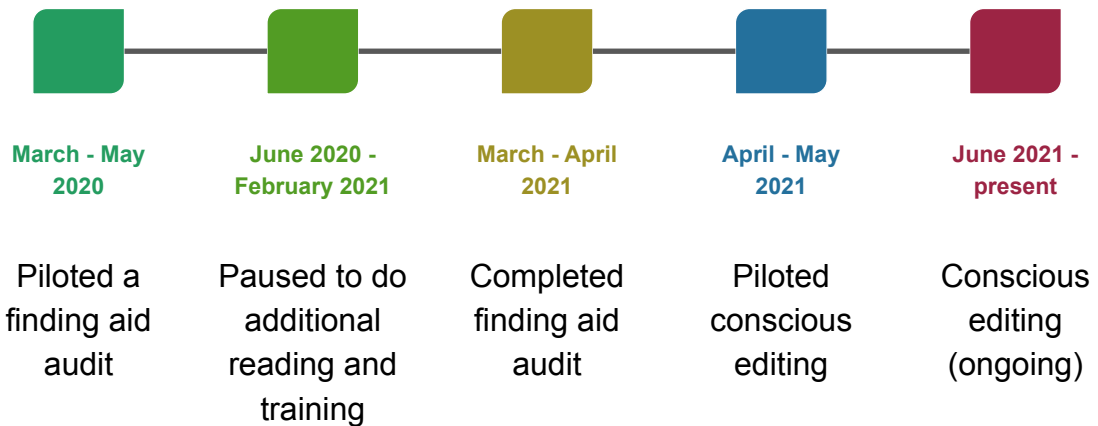
- Who is my audience?
- What tone and level of formality do I want?
- What am I trying to achieve?
- How might history change the impact of my language choices *regardless* of my intentions?
- Who’s being excluded?

The term “conscious editing” as applied to archival description was first used by archivists at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2017. 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”) and omitting the well-known history of white supremacy of certain collections’ creators in their biographical information. Archivists at UNC 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.

You may have also heard this process referred to as “reparative description.”

## Timeline



Now I'll give a little bit of background on how we started conscious editing at UMD and a brief overview of our project's timeline to date.

When the UMD campus closed in March 2020, I supervised 2 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."

The pilot project to audit finding aids from our Maryland and Historical Collections came about rather quickly once it became apparent that no one was returning to work on-campus anytime soon. For the pilot, one student, Hannah Frisch, reviewed each finding aid and evaluated our description based upon some preliminary reading and research. Together, Hannah and I developed a 0-4 rating scale that was applied to each finding aid depending on the level of editing we believed it needed, and she made note of what she thought specifically needed to be edited.

When Hannah completed the audit of Maryland finding aids, I felt that I needed to pause the project and do some additional research and training on my own before continuing. While I think anyone who undertakes this kind of work will never feel 100% prepared or qualified to do it, at the same time, I knew we had dove into this project head first without much preparation. I wanted to be sure that I was taking care with this work because the point in undertaking it is to show care to the collections

and communities that we have neglected in the past. During this time and with Hannah's assistance, I conducted a literature review of conscious editing case studies, looked for examples of inclusive style guides that we could reference, and completed online trainings and webinars.

About one year into the pandemic, I was ready to have the students complete the finding aid audit. In addition to Hannah, two other student workers, Marcella Stranieri and Sam O'Donnell, joined the project. Together, these three students reviewed our remaining 700 finding aids in just two months.

Now there was nothing left to do but to start making edits! Again, Hannah worked with the finding aids from our Maryland collections as a pilot. Before Hannah began editing the finding aids, we met with the curator, gave an overview of the results of the finding aid audit, and gave her an opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns about what we wanted to do. Hannah then completed edits for 44 finding aids in April and May 2021 while still working from home. The edits were primarily related to the language used to describe the enslavement of Black people and their white enslavers. Additionally, she recommended that 46 finding aids be enhanced during a second phase of edits, which would require either consulting the collections onsite or significant research to complete. We met with the curator again at the conclusion of Phase 1 and provided a report to summarize the work completed and our recommendations for future edits.

Our progress has slowed significantly since last spring. Factors that have contributed to this include: the return to onsite work in August 2021, and therefore, a demand to balance this work with the backlog of tasks that could not be completed when we could not physically access our collections; a reduction in our budget to hire student workers; and recent staff departures, including the graduation of two of the students who originally worked on the project. Sam is the last remaining student, and she will graduate later this month. I plan to train my current graduate assistant, whose primary responsibility is to accession new archival collections, to continue working on this project.

## Just a few example of conscious editing recommendations

- Refrain from writing flowery, valorizing biographical notes for collection creators. Evaluate existing biographical notes, especially those describing white males, for aggrandizing language and remove it.
- Focus on the humanity of an individual before their identity/ies:
  - For example, consider the difference between “documents the business dealings of a Black woman named Maria in 18th century Mexico” and “documents the business dealings of Maria, a Black woman in 18th century Mexico.”
- Consult alternative cataloging schemes created by the subjects of the records being described when and if they are available, and cite them in a processing note or other part of the finding aid.
- Taking the time to locate and describe hidden voices and to correct past failures to respectfully describe the histories of Black communities.

[Alexis A. Antracoli, et al., “Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources.”](#)

I've pulled a few examples from “Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources” to illustrate the kinds of edits that you might make to finding aids as a part of conscious editing. The “Anti-Racist Description Resources” is, in my opinion, required reading for anyone getting started on this work and is a style guide that I refer back to often. Although it is focused on combating anti-Black racism in archival description, many of their recommendations can be applied to archival descriptions of any community traditionally underrepresented in the archives.

The first recommendation is to refrain from flowery, aggrandizing language in biographical notes. I would say that this was one of the most common issues we encountered in our finding aids and is relatively easy to fix because it doesn't require doing any research, just some copy editing.

Next, focusing on the humanity of an individual before their identifies can take many forms. To give an example, we found that there was often an overemphasis on gender in our finding aids when referring to women record creators, always calling them Mrs./Ms., when this wasn't common practice with male records creators.

In order to try to refer to communities as they refer to themselves, we have compiled many style guides that can help us to find current, respectful language and terminology to use on topics such as ability and disability, socioeconomic status, gender, incarceration, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and religion.

Finally, I want to emphasize that conscious editing isn't just about removing offensive

or outdated description, or about replacing one word with another. It is also about identifying gaps in our description where we have failed to describe underrepresented voices in the archives. So far, I think this has been one of the most challenging aspects of conscious editing because it can require extensive research and staff time to correct.

## Either / Or ?

Over the two years that I've been working on this project, I've had time to reflect on this type of work and how it compares to what I guess I'll call our "normal" workflows. I've been doing my best to keep up with new articles and discussions on this topic in the field and engaging my colleagues and bosses in conversations about this work. I've observed that there are several seeming contradictions in doing conscious editing or creating inclusive description versus widely adopted archival practices, so I wanted to take the opportunity to name them and discuss how it doesn't have to be "either/or" and that is very possible to incorporate conscious editing practices into our "normal" workflows using our existing resources.



Minimal processing

Inclusive description

Make conscious editing a factor in determining processing priorities and levels of processing.

First, there is the reality of processing backlogs that almost of us must contend with. At the same time that we try to work on describing materials in our backlog, we must also do our best to ensure that no new collections are added to the backlog. In order to prevent additions to the processing backlog and to make collections discoverable to researchers as soon as possible, we use an extensible processing model at UMD. “An extensible processing program ensures that baseline descriptions of all collections... are available online as quickly as possible, with more detailed descriptive work conducted later based on user demand and assessment of the research value and state of collection.” (Santamaria) So how can we continue with minimal processing practices and chipping away at our processing backlogs while also striving to show the care and respect that is due to the people and communities represented in our records through more thorough description?

Alexandra deGraffenreid at Penn State published an article about this point of tension in 2021 based on her experience processing the Luis Alberto Sánchez papers. She argues that it is possible to do conscious editing within the framework of extensible processing because it is a flexible framework. At your institution, you can decide your own parameters for ranking collections for further processing and description, and among those factors, you can weigh a need for conscious editing and enhancing description when underrepresented communities are not being accurately or respectfully described, or have been omitted from the archival description altogether, in addition to user demand, research value, or other factors.



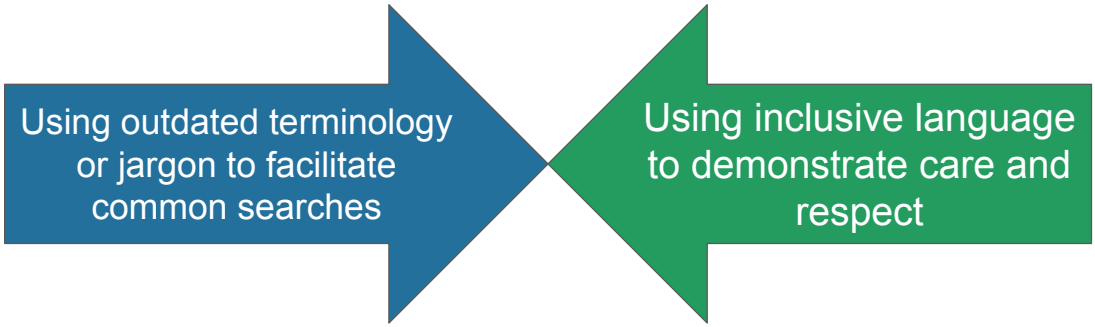
Acquire collections  
from underrepresented  
communities

Enhance description to  
reveal underrepresented  
voices in collections

Consciously edit finding aids to build trust with communities  
whom we hope to document in the future.

When given a limited amount of storage space for collections and limited staff time to do the donor outreach, processing and description, and reference for collections, you may find yourself trying to decide between acquiring more diverse collections or enhancing description for your current collections in order to reveal the traditionally underrepresented voices that are already documented in your collections.

I propose that enhancing current description before reaching out to underrepresented communities that you seek to document is a show of good faith and allows you to demonstrate how you would treat any new materials acquired from that community. To quote from the conclusion of deGraffenreid's article, she says: "It is in the institution's best interest to make their archives more accessible and welcoming for researchers from historically marginalized communities. Initiatives to diversify collections at traditional repositories cannot succeed if communities cannot identify themselves within the repository's current holdings or trust repositories to be responsible stewards of their communities' memories."



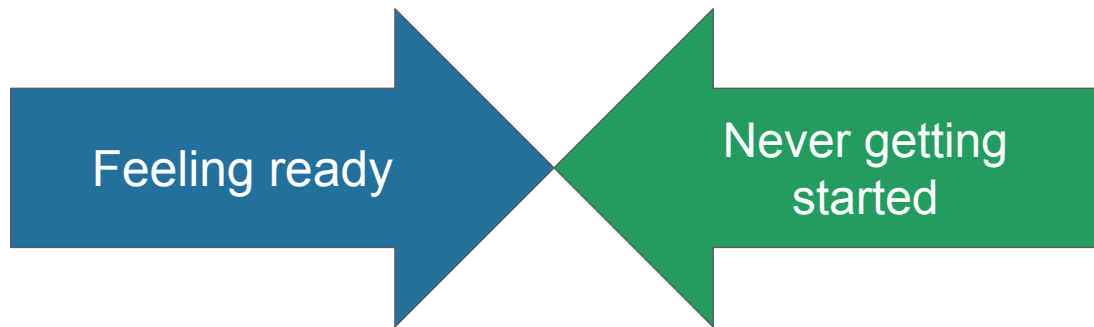
Using outdated terminology  
or jargon to facilitate  
common searches

Using inclusive language  
to demonstrate care and  
respect

Inclusive language can provide better results for some researchers; place outdated language in context instead of deleting it if important for discoverability.

Another concern that I've heard is that by updating language to be more inclusive, we might be stripping finding aids of common search terms used by scholarly researchers.

However, consider that the opposite can also be true and that by using terms that community members and other groups of researchers are searching for leads to better search results for those audiences. The Anti-Racist Description Resources recommends writing archival description "to include a plurality of audiences." In cases where outdated terminology might be important for discoverability, those terms or phrases should be contextualized, for example, by explaining that although X term was common during a specific time period or in a specific place, it is now considered offensive or that the current preferred term is (blank).



Accept that you will never know everything, be prepared to continue learning and to make mistakes, and focus on progress over perfection.

Earlier when I spoke of our project's timeline, I mentioned taking a long break between the pilot phase of the finding aid audit and completing the audit because I felt like I needed to do more reading and reflection before proceeding. I do think it is important when undertaking a project such as this to allocate time for self-reflection and to do research in areas where you feel lacking in knowledge.

However, it is equally important to acknowledge that you can never know everything and that research and self-reflection are ongoing processes (Jessica Tai). So, at a certain point, you must get started. Even with the best of intentions and extensive research, it is *impossible* to undertake this work and never make a mistake.

Therefore, I urge you to not strive for perfection, but to strive for progress, a sentiment that Dorothy Berry expressed as one of the instructors of the Introduction to Conscious Editing webinars, which is one of the free online trainings that I participated in back in 2020.

## Making this sustainable

- When ranking collections for processing or reprocessing, include and/or maximize diversity as a component of how that ranking is reached
- Include guidelines for creating inclusive archival description in your processing manual and include it in new employee training
- Create a plan for how often finding aids are audited for harmful and outdated language
- Encourage feedback from researchers, donors, and community members
- Support professional development and keep up with changes in archival description

I'll wrap up my presentation by discussing a few strategies for making conscious editing a sustainable part of your routine workflows, instead of a special project.

As mentioned a few slides ago, the need for conscious editing or enhancing the description of a collection containing traditionally underrepresented communities in the archives should be a factor when determining processing priorities.

We can also ensure that any new description we create takes into account conscious editing principles by including guidance on creating inclusive archival description in our processing manuals and/or new employee training.

We can also create a plan or schedule for regularly reviewing finding aids for harmful and outdated language. For example, if online finding aids are reviewed on an annual basis for broken links, perhaps you can also take the opportunity to review language. Or if you are working on inputting legacy finding aids into a new system like ArchivesSpace, you could perform conscious editing as part of that process.

To solicit feedback from researchers and community members, they first have to know that you're doing this type of work. You can put a harmful language statement on your website (as many archives have done in recent years), write blog posts, or use social media to talk about conscious editing. Putting a contact button on your finding aid website also encourages feedback.

Finally, and this one is mostly for the supervisors and managers, but provide your

employees with ongoing professional development opportunities so that they are equipped to do this type of work. Conscious editing isn't a one-time fix; it's an ongoing process, and so our learning must also be ongoing.

# Thank you!

Liz Caringola (she/her)  
[ecaringo@umd.edu](mailto:ecaringo@umd.edu)

Archival Metadata Librarian  
Special Collections & University Archives  
University of Maryland, College Park

Thank you all for your time today. I look forward to your questions or comments, or feel free to reach out to me after the conference. Thank you!

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