What's in a Word? Being Thoughtful about Terminology in Historical Writing

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Everything has a history, and that includes language. When students do historical research in primary sources, they may encounter terms describing race, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability that are no longer in use today or that are considered offensive. Words have power. Historically, people have used derogatory or stigmatizing terms to express their superiority to other people, to justify unequal treatment, and even to excuse violence. Students of history have a particular responsibility to understand the power of language, to be aware of the historical context of the terms that have been used in different eras, and to make respectful choices about their own use of language.

Language choices can be especially challenging in historical work. On the one hand, the language used in a primary source from a different historical era might be important evidence to help you understand conditions in the past or the perspective of the writer. A primary source reflects the ideas and values of the time in which it was written, and as historians, we are trying to understand those past beliefs. On the other hand, repeating outdated or offensive language in your own writing can detract attention from the argument and might offend readers in ways that you did not intend. This short guide explores some of the issues you might encounter in historical research and offers current best practices when deciding what languages to use in your own historical communications.

As teachers, it is important to model this behavior for our students in class and explain why we speak the way that we do about people in the past. This will help students to do the same in their National History Day® (NHD) projects.
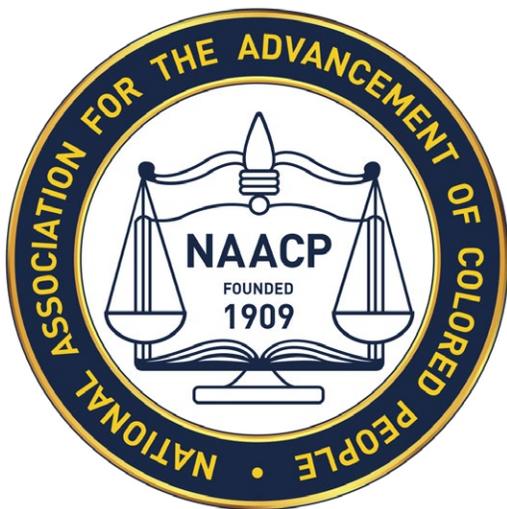
OUTDATED TERMS

Some terms that were once commonly used to talk about race, sexuality, or disability are today considered outdated. These include terms that might even have been considered respectful in a particular historical time period. See examples of language on the next page, now considered outdated, that you or your students might find in primary sources (with their favored contemporary alternatives):

OUTDATED TERM	PREFERRED CONTEMPORARY TERM
Negro or Colored	African American people or Black people
Caucasian	White people
Miscegenation or Amalgamation	Interracial relationships
Oriental	Asian American
Crippled	A person with a physical disability
Feeble-minded, imbecile, retarded	A person with an intellectual or cognitive disability
Homosexual	Gay, lesbian, queer
Minorities	People of color, non-Whites, marginalized populations

Many of these terms are considered outdated because they have been rejected by the group they are supposed to describe. As a rule, it is most respectful to use the terminology preferred by the group in question to describe themselves. Some of the terms referenced in the table originated not simply as descriptions but as part of definitions that stigmatized or mischaracterized people. The word "homosexual" was first used by psychiatrists who defined same-sex attraction as a disease. "Caucasian," a term historically used to describe people of European descent, was coined by German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in 1795. Blumenbach believed that humanity had its origins in the region of the Caucasus Mountains in Eastern Europe and that people from the region were the most beautiful in the world, so he used the term "Caucasian" to refer to people who were considered White. The term reflects a discredited theory of biological racism.

Teachers and students should avoid using outdated terms when writing in their own voices. If an author needs to use dated terminology when discussing a subject in its historical context, these terms should be placed in quotation marks to indicate that you understand the word is dated. Use modern-day terms in the analysis rather than repeating the outdated term.

Some organizational or institutional titles may incorporate terms that were once respectful but are today considered outdated. For example, the organizers of the NAACP, or the National Association of Colored People, chose to use the term "Colored" in its title when it was founded in 1909, and the organization continues to use the same name today. The many political conventions organized by African Americans from the 1830s to 1870s are known as the Colored Conventions Movement. The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, like the NAACP, has maintained the same title since its founding in 1896. The Black baseball teams of the early twentieth century were known as the Negro Leagues.

Formal titles of organizations should not be changed. It is not disrespectful to use terms like "colored" or "Negro" when they are part of an organization's title. But do not use the outdated term except to refer to the organization. For example, you might write: "African Americans in Philadelphia in 1830 held the very first Colored Convention."

It is also now outdated to use descriptors of racial or ethnic identities, like Black or Latino, as nouns. Do not refer to "Blacks" or "the Blacks" when describing a group of people of African descent. Instead, use these descriptors as adjectives (Black people, Latino soldiers, African American women). Using a racial identity as a noun is considered dehumanizing because it reduces a person to a racial category. African American or Asian American are acceptable terms because the terms "African" or "Asian" in these instances are adjectives that describe American.

Latino/Latina is commonly used to describe people living in the United States who are originally from Latin America; it describes people who came from a particular geographic area. Hispanic refers to people who are from Spanish-speaking countries. A person from Spain, in other words, could properly be described as Hispanic but not Latino.

Organization names or titles might contain terms that were once respectful but now considered outdated when used in other contexts. As long as the organization continues to use the term in its name, it is perfectly acceptable to refer to the organization in your own writing. An example would be the NAACP, which stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

Historians today prefer what is known as people-first language, which means using terms that prioritize the individual above any specific identity or condition. People-first language recognizes that a person's status or diagnosis does not define them. It focuses attention on people's humanity rather than their identity characteristics or conditions imposed upon them. Some examples of language choices that many historians today prefer:

► *enslaved person* instead of a slave

► *incarcerated person* instead of an inmate

► *a person with a disability* instead of disabled or crippled

► *a person with a learning disability* instead of learning disabled

SLURS AND OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

Beyond outdated language, students may also encounter terms that are racial, ethnic, or sexual slurs in a primary source. Slurs are terms that are insulting and demeaning; they were used historically (and may still be used today) to attack and denigrate a person based on their racial, ethnic, or sexual identity.

Understanding the power and significance of these terms can be an important part of historical analysis. In historical context, using an insulting and denigrating term might be evidence of the writer's or speaker's personal attitudes.
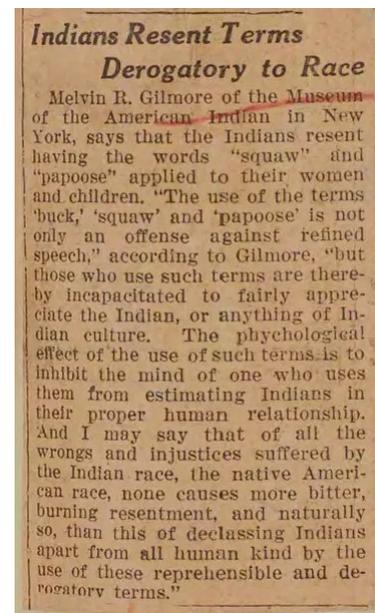
Offensive language might also be a sign of broader cultural attitudes. Finding racial slurs used in political speeches helps illuminate the nature of political debates at the time of the speeches and could well be evidence of how certain groups of people were marginalized in the political sphere. Offensive language, in short, deserves attention and analysis.

ANALYZING SOURCES THAT CONTAIN OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

But how to analyze offensive language without repeating the offense in your own writing or when teaching your students? It is challenging, even in writing this guide, to discuss how to deal with offensive language without using or quoting that language. But here are some guidelines to follow and share with your students when dealing with language from the past that is degrading and designed to stigmatize others.

▶ If you are unsure how offensive a term might be to others today, do additional research or ask. Some terms that once might have been considered slurs (like the term "bloody") no longer carry such negative meanings. But many slurs that refer to people of different religious, racial, or ethnic backgrounds or to women or queer people are highly inflammatory today. If you are not familiar with a word you find in your research but can tell from context that it is meant to be an insult, try to learn more so you can make informed decisions in your own writing.

▶ If you determine a word is a slur, do **not** use it when writing in your own voice. If you feel you must quote a primary source verbatim that uses a racial, ethnic, or sexual slur to convey an argument or to be truthful to the meaning of the original source, be careful not to repeat the slur as part of your analysis.

▶ Consider carefully whether you need to use a quotation that contains insulting or degrading language. If you are analyzing rhetoric or if you are making a case about a particular individual's attitudes or the cultural attitudes at the time, you might feel like it is necessary to offer evidence in the form of a direct quotation that contains a slur. But often, it is possible to make the argument without the direct quote. Consider whether you might be able to paraphrase without compromising your analysis. You might explain that the author of a source used harmful or derogatory language without quoting the source directly.

▶ If you do feel that you need to use a quote that contains a slur, you should acknowledge that the language is offensive and explain why you chose to use it, either in your analysis or in a footnote. Some writers choose to write just the first letter of the word and substitute asterisks (*) or dashes (–) for the other letters. If you make that kind of change to a source, you should again acknowledge that in the text or a footnote.

Historical work should be true to the past and should not shy away from telling hard stories or acknowledging racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination. At the same time, historians need to consider how to best communicate with and respect their present-day audience. Be thoughtful about the terminology you use in your historical work and communicate openly with your audience about your choices. By doing so, you will demonstrate both an understanding of the past and a sensitivity to the present.

Indians Resent Terms Derogatory to Race

Melvin R. Gilmore of the Museum of the American Indian in New York, says that the Indians resent having the words "squaw" and "papoose" applied to their women and children. "The use of the terms 'buck,' 'squaw' and 'papoose' is not only an offense against refined speech," according to Gilmore, "but those who use such terms are thereby incapacitated to fairly appreciate the Indian, or anything of Indian culture. The psychological effect of the use of such terms is to inhibit the mind of one who uses them from estimating Indians in their proper human relationship. And I may say that of all the wrongs and injustices suffered by the Indian race, the native American race, none causes more bitter, burning resentment, and naturally so, than this of declassing Indians apart from all human kind by the use of these reprehensible and derogatory terms."

Complaints about the use of derogatory terms are not new. This 1927 newspaper article describes how terms like "squaw" and "buck," once used to describe and stereotype Native American men and women are dehumanizing and cause anger and resentment among Indigenous peoples. Excerpt from MAI Scrapbook of Newspaper Articles, May 1926–Sep 1927, MAI-Heye Foundation Records, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI.AC.001).

"Because of The Color of Our Skin"

– ROSA PARKS

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