

Digital Repositories Annual Meeting 2022
“Using Anti-Oppressive Description Protocols in Special Collections”

Rubric for Anti-Oppressive Description

Eva Martinez and Leah Sylva
San Francisco State University

For questions or comments,
contact evamartinez@sfsu.edu or leahsylva@sfsu.edu

Framing

“Culturally competent archival (re)description is the documenting of materials with an awareness of one’s own cultural identity as well as the cultural identities of donors, sellers, custodians, creators, subjects, and users. It includes the ability and willingness to continually learn and develop in applying those skills and knowledge in writing descriptive metadata.”

From “Toward Culturally Competent Archival (Re) Description of Marginalized Histories,”
https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/library_presentations/23/

Questions to consider before (re)writing finding aid

- Who are the creators and subjects and have they been marginalized or maligned in the historical record?
- Does my description accurately, appropriately, and respectfully represent marginalized and underrepresented persons? Does my description consider their perspective when making archival decisions?
- How have colonialism, racism, sexism, or other forms of hegemony impacted the origins of the records I am describing?
- What role can my words have in either perpetuating or combating marginalization and archival erasure?
- Who is harmed and who benefits from my description?
- In the interest of clarity and equity, what should be brought to the forefront to appropriately contextualize the records?
- What might I be leaving out?
- What system of arrangement or description am I using? Does it reinforce white, male supremacy?
- Does my description support the information-seeking needs of stakeholder communities, not just academic scholars?
- Is my description in a language accessible to the stakeholder community?

Workflow

- Save a copy of checklist in Collection file (physical or digital)
- Save original version of finding aid in collection file (physical or digital)
- Log assessment in ArchivesSpace

Checklist for Evaluating for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description

Name of Finding Aid:

Evaluated by:

This finding aid:

- uses descriptive language respectful to the larger communities invested in this record
- uses active voice (instead of passive voice) whenever possible
 - i.e. “Members of the Ohio National Guard killed four Kent State University students during a mass protest against the Vietnam War” instead of “Four Kent State University students were killed on May 4, 1970, during a clash between the Ohio National Guard and a crowd gathered to protest the Vietnam War.”
- uses person-first language (introducing the person before their identities)
 - i.e. “documents the business dealings of Maria, a Black woman in 18th century Mexico” instead of “documents the business dealings of a Black woman named Maria in 18th century Mexico”
- refrains from using flowery language valorizing the collection creator
 - Remove evaluative terms such as “renowned”, “genius”, “seminal”.
 - Ask: does including this piece of information help users better understand the collection, or is it there only to justify the collection creator’s stature?
 - We can add an additional historical note to describe the related movements, programs, etc. (i.e. describing the Bracero Program alongside Henry P. Anderson in biographical note or describing the membership and issues of farmworker movement alongside Cesar Chavez biography)
- uses accurate and strong language to describe racism, lynching, murder, etc.
- describes relationships of power and oppression when important for context, such as naming racism, slurs, white supremacy, and colonialism
 - Describe issues of systemic oppression in the collection.
- names the subjects of records to the extent that it names collection creators (include the subjects’ given names in the description whenever possible)
 - Be aware that women are often described by their husband’s names (i.e. “Marjorie Leonard” instead of “Mrs. Norman Leonard”)
- capitalizes terms such as Black, Indigenous, and Native, when referring to someone’s race (do not capitalize “white”). Use racial descriptors as adjectives, not as nouns
 - In general, do not apply racial identity terms if the subject does not self-identify. However, when the collection creator belongs to a historically excluded group, reference their identity markers when known.
- describes collections using language that is accessible to a wide variety of potential users, avoiding archival and technical jargon
- revises problematic language that was supplied by a past archivist AND retains/contextualizes racist/oppressive terms supplied by the content creator
 - can encapsulate these terms in quotation marks and add notes to give context

Content Warning Template

Goal: Provide a clear and straightforward description of the challenging material to give the researcher the opportunity to decide whether they really want or need to view these materials, or at least, to mentally or emotionally prepare themselves to view the materials.

Reasons to keep problematic language:

- Preserve for original context and provide additional context for the retention of this language
- Provide information about the record creator(s)
- When replacing racist terms from archivist-supplied description, refraining from removing entirely language that would help researchers discover Black subjects in archival collections

Location of statements in finding aids

Content warning statements must be inserted at various levels in the finding aid as many users might not read the front matter, choosing instead to go directly to the level where they will find the information they are interested in.

Front Matter

Processing note: This finding aid was revised in [year] in accordance with anti-oppressive archival description protocols. The original finding aid has been retained.”)

Scope and Content note: This collection contains harmful language that was present in the materials when they were donated to Special Collections and Archives. These problematic terms are retained in this finding aid to provide information about the record creators and make these collections more accessible for research. If you have questions or comments about this language or description, please email us at _____

- include specifics on the language used (i.e. “this collection refers to Mexican agricultural workers with a derogatory terminology to disempower these workers”). Some users may not be familiar with some racist language/terminology and why it is such. Use it as a teaching tool.

Series and Subseries Level

Scope and Content note: This series contains harmful language that was present in the materials when they were donated to SCA. We have included these problematic terms in this finding aid to provide information about the record creators and make these

collections more accessible for research. [Add specifics of language used.] If you have questions or comments about this language or description, please email us at [email]

Folder and Item Level

Scope and Content note: This folder/item contains harmful language that was present in the materials when they were donated to SCA. We have included these problematic terms in this finding aid to provide information about the record creators and make these collections more accessible for research. [Add specifics of language used.] If you have questions or comments about this language or description, please email us at [email]