



Archives & Special Collections

Elizabeth M. Cudahy Memorial Library

Harmful Language in Archival Description Policy

Updated April 2023

Overview

Archival description at the Loyola University Chicago Archives & Special Collections includes finding aids, catalog records, and digital collections. LUCASC is committed to using inclusive and respectful language in all its descriptive practices. We acknowledge that some of our legacy description may contain language that, while considered non-controversial when created, is euphemistic, racist, homophobic, sexist or otherwise demeaning to the people who created or described in the collections. LUCASC is dedicated to correcting these records as part of a larger effort to make our collections more accessible.

If you encounter harmful language in our finding aids, catalog records, or digital collections, we encourage you to contact the Loyola University Chicago Archives & Special Collections at archive@luc.edu. We acknowledge that we are often describing communities that we are not a part of and welcome suggestions, recommendations, and examples of appropriate language.

Standards

When creating description for archival collections, archivists rely upon professional standards, codes of ethics, research into the people, places, and events documented by the collection, and the LUCASC arrangement and description policy. The Library of Congress Subject Headings had been traditionally for controlled vocabulary access points, especially for catalog records. We recognize that some of the terminology used by LCSH is outdated, offensive, and harmful. LUCASC has initiated a project to develop a local controlled vocabulary based on inclusive and respectful language to be used for archival description, thus lessening the reliance on LCSH for description. The LUCASC controlled vocabulary will continually change and expand, reflecting the changes in and use of language used for our description.

Legacy Finding Aids

Loyola University Chicago Archives & Special Collections staff strive to use inclusive, respectful, and accurate language when describing our collections. Language and archival best practices are always changing, however, and what was acceptable in the past may not be acceptable or appropriate today. Legacy finding aids, defined as finding aids created prior to the year 2000, are a prime example of archival description that may contain harmful and objectional language. It is the policy of LUCASC to continually review and update legacy finding aids with respect to language and accuracy of information. This ongoing process occurs when reformatting legacy finding aids, prior to putting them online.

Retention of Harmful Language in Description

Occasionally, harmful language may be retained in archival description. This may occur because such language provides information about the historical context of the collection. LUCASC believes that it is important to acknowledge the racism and bigotry present in collections, although encountering racist or derogatory language can be difficult for both researchers and archivists.

Examples of when harmful or offensive language may be retained in description include:

- Organization names that may include outdated terms, especially if the name reflects a previous incarnation of the organization
- Historical terms that provide context for the time period in which they were used and which may improve access to the collection
- Description created by the donor
- Description originating from documents, such as titles
- Terms from national standards such as Library of Congress Subject Headings that are outdated and offensive

Resources

LUCASC consult best practices related to diversity, equity and inclusion in archival description when crafting descriptions. These include but are not limited to:

[Anti-Racist Description Resources](#) from the Archives for Black Lives Philadelphia

[Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#)

[Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description](#) from the Center for History and Medicine, Harvard University

Portions of this policy have been adapted from Emory University Rose Library's Harmful Language in Finding Aids policy, Drexel University Libraries Statement on Harmful Content in Archival Collections, and Northern Arizona University Cline Library's Special Collections and Archives Outdated, Offensive and Harmful Language in Archival Description Policy.