

University of Kent

Statement on Responsible Cataloguing Terminology and Descriptions

The University of Kent is committed to foster and promote equality, diversity and inclusivity in all its practices and activities and Library Services aim to reflect this commitment. Our library collections aspire to represent our diverse user community, and we strive to describe our collections with accurate and respectful language, adopting a critical approach to cataloguing through our actions, policies, standards and processes.

Harmful language in our catalogue records

We acknowledge that some of our descriptions may contain harmful, offensive or derogatory language, reflecting historical conscious and unconscious biases regarding gender, race, class, religion, age, sexuality, sexual orientation, disability, displacement or conflict. These records may be the result of the following circumstances:

- Original Context: in some cases, harmful language relates to the content of the resource and is reflected in its description to preserve the original context. This serves the purpose of accurately describing the resource and ensuring its discoverability.
- Historical Records: some of our historical records reflect conscious and unconscious biases embedded in worldviews of the past and outdated cataloguing practices and contain language and terminology that do not reflect current standards.
- External Providers: within our current process, we do not always have control over the creation or administration of some records on our online catalogue. Catalogue records may be partially or entirely produced by third parties and directly ingested in our systems or provided by creators or former owners of material. Furthermore, many of our records are administered by an external provider and we cannot amend them.
- Standardised Vocabulary: for specific sections of our descriptions, we use standardised vocabularies governed by external agencies. For instance, we adopt the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Classification (LCC) to enhance search and discovery, as do many academic institutions worldwide. On occasion, these may include language that is harmful, offensive or outdated or entail inappropriate classification of our resources.

Our commitment

We are committed to review any language identified as harmful in accordance with our ethical cataloguing guidelines and strive to adopt a transparent and responsible approach. We endeavour to balance the efficient and timely cataloguing of material and preservation of original context with the importance of using inclusive and ethical language in our catalogue records.

We aim to replace harmful language with ethical and inclusive terminology, especially where the issue was the result of our past practices. In some cases, we might need to retain the original terminology, but we commit to provide additional description to acknowledge and contextualise the harmful terminology and explain why it was maintained. Where the Library of Congress Classification is deemed to be outdated or offensive, we aim to reclassify the resource to an alternative location in the classification scheme or otherwise contextualize this in the record with an appropriate note. We also support the various efforts by the library and archives community to address the issues of standardised vocabulary and will actively engage with this work wherever possible.

Feedback and timescale

We may not always make the right decision and acknowledge that terms and descriptions we currently use may need updating in the future. We strive to keep up to date with ethical cataloguing practices, addressing and amending our records accordingly. We also welcome feedback from our community so that we can learn and adapt our practices. Given the large number of existing records in our catalogues, this work will take significant time and resources to implement and will be part of our ongoing activity – we very much welcome feedback from our communities to define priorities in this endeavour.

Please let us know if you encounter harmful language or if you have concerns about any description in our catalogue, by emailing us at curationanddiscovery@kent.ac.uk.

Acknowledgement

This statement and the principles that inform it have greatly benefited from the work and similar statements on harmful language and ethical cataloguing practices published by many other British and international libraries.

Review

This statement will be reviewed annually and updated according to user feedback and evolving best practices in the sector.

Document history

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This is the first version, completed January 2026

Next due for review January 2027