

# Guidelines for Anti-Oppressive Description/Redescription

United Church of Canada Archives (Toronto)

Anti-Oppressive Description and Redescription Working Group, 2022

Second draft

## 1. Background

The United Church of Canada Archives (UCCA) began the process of evaluating its legacy archival descriptions for offensive and harmful language and practices in 2019 with the development of a fluent, in-house subject taxonomy that focused on relevance, clarity, and inclusivity. The following year, the United Church of Canada Archives staff were encouraged to educate ourselves on the historical biases of the archival profession and to challenge ourselves to work within a more equitable framework. In January 2021, Laura Hallman, the acting General Council Archivist, developed the United Church of Canada Archive's Equity Statement with consultation from the United Church Anti-Racism and Equity Lead, Adele Halliday, and members of Indigenous Ministries and Justice. Later that fall, a working group, was formed to begin remedial work on the descriptions of images relating to residential schools – most of which have been digitized and made available online through various collection websites.

The working group includes: Amanda Zalken, General Council Archivist; Laura Hallman, Archivist and Records Coordinator, General Council Archives; Robin Brunelle, Community of Faith Archivist, Ontario Regional Councils, Erin Greeno, the Ontario Regional Council Archivist and Nichole Vonk, General Council Archives Manager.

The Anti-Oppressive Description and Redescription Working Group would like to acknowledge that the group is mostly white, cisgendered women, with one white and Indigenous, cisgendered woman, and that we work for an institution that is predominantly white and has a long history with colonialism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, cis-sexism, and other prejudices. Our work is gratefully guided by the extraordinary work others in the archival profession have done or are continuing to do

(see resources section). We give thanks to the communities that consulted with us and with those communities we hope to build relations.

## 2. Introduction to Guidelines

### Policy objective

The United Church of Canada Archives aims to describe new and legacy holdings as accurately and respectfully as possible for the communities that create, use, and are represented within the records. The purpose of which, is to facilitate access to the archives while mitigating any harm to those who engage with the records.

### Archival legacy

Our records are created and collected by the United Church of Canada; antecedent denominations including the Methodist Church of Canada, the Evangelical United Brethren, the Congregational Union of Canada, a majority of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (pre-1925) and the individuals associated with and working on behalf of the church. Despite the current church policies towards equity and justice, the church has played a key role in the complex cultural hierarchical systems of colonialism, racism, sexism, and ableism. Church workers are members of these systems and have employed their biases within the records. Thus, harmful material may be found in both the original archival material as well as in descriptions and arrangement of those materials. As part of its equity, justice and reconciliation commitments, church staff and archivists are now dedicated to the transparency of this historical legacy.

### Purpose of the guidelines

The guidelines serve as a framework to support archivists in the creation of new, respectful, and inclusive archival descriptions at all levels (i.e. fonds, series, item) in all formats. Additionally, it provides suggestions on how to approach the redescription of legacy archival descriptions.

The guidelines are a work in progress; the document was created to direct the pilot project to audit the descriptions of residential institutions, historically referred to as

residential schools, in the United Church of Canada Archives holdings, but it is expected to develop concurrently with the Archives' work to make descriptions more equitable.

### 3. Guiding principles for description

The United Church of Canada Archives' descriptive practices have historically relied on a false assumption of neutrality; creators, titles, access points, and other descriptive information were often gleaned or transcribed from the office of origin or donor, and when not available, supplied from contemporary language used within the United Church of Canada.

To allow for more equitable and just descriptions, archivists need to denounce the concept of archival neutrality which has "erase[d] people, communities and their humanity" and embrace a framework of cultural humility, one that focuses on self-reflection, institutional accountability and the recognition of power imbalances (Tai).

When working with new acquisitions or assessing legacy descriptions, the following questions should be considered when preparing descriptions (Heslin):

- For what purpose were these records created?
- How is it that this particular record (fonds or item level) came to be, rather than another? What instance, or person(s) made this record possible?
- Are we restricting the "creator" to the corporate body, person, or family responsible for the entire body of materials? In doing so, whose voices have we suppressed? What other communities or individuals can be identified as creators of these records?
- How does the existence of the record, in its current state of description dehumanize, objectify, subvert, or degrade cultures and individuals described?
- Who are the records currently most accessible to? Are they in the language of the community from which they originate? Are the terms used to describe the records those currently used by communities and individuals to define themselves?

## Language in descriptions

- Unlearn the neutral voice of traditional archival description
- Avoid passive voice when describing oppressive relationships
- Refrain from writing flowery valorizing biographical notes for creators (see Kelly Bolding's list of problematic terms)
- Use terminology that communities use to describe themselves; this terminology will change over time
- Use accurate and strong language (i.e. murder, lynching) when appropriate
- Minimize archival jargon
- Keep language simple
- Capitalize Black and Indigenous, etc. when referring to someone's race; do not capitalize "white"; Use racial descriptors as adjectives, not nouns. (A4BLIP)
- Avoid using Mr., Mrs., Miss or Ms. unless there is no other way of identifying the person (Lellman)

When possible, consult communities on how to best approach language and identities. In addition, the following resources will provide help in reviewing and selecting terms in description:

- [Digital Transgender Archive Style Guide](#)
- [Disability Language Style Guide](#)
- Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples by Gregory Younging (2018)
- First Nations, Metis and Inuit Indigenous Ontologies
- Indigenous Subject Headings - Association of Manitoba Archivists, MAIN changes to LC Subject Headings
- Diversity Style Guide – media resource with glossaries for age, disability, immigration, LGBTQ, race/ethnicity, and religion
- [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#) – LGBTQ resource
- [Homosaurus: an International LGBTQ+ Linked Data Vocabulary](#)

- [Power of Words Handbook: A Guide to Language about Japanese Americans in World War II](#)

## Names and naming

Historically name authorities have been limited to primary record creators and any prominent individual or corporate body (i.e. United Church unit) affiliated with the creator or the records. However, as Heslin recommends:

“In addition to the corporate body, person, or family responsible for an entire body of materials, the individuals and communities that interacted, intersected, influenced, or allowed the creation of the records should also be identified as records creators. Otherwise we prioritize one voice over another.”

These additional creators can be added as creators (“event actors”) along with the primary creator. Naming an individual is “an act of affirming humanity” (A4BLiP) – name those who may not be historically named if not as creators than as name access points (subject). Name the spouses if they played a part in the creation of records, especially in cases of missionary families, i.e. do not solely name the male missionary.

In many of the records of the United Church of Canada Archives, female spouses are never named or described as “Mrs.” and husband’s name. Consult the biographical files of clergy and missionaries for the full name of spouses and use when available in titles or other descriptive fields.

## Names and naming of residential institutions in photographs

Following consultation with members of the Indigenous Ministries and Justice Unit, the United Church of Canada Archives decided to approach names and naming of residential institutions in archival descriptions, as follows:

- Residential Institutional Names

The United Church of Canada Archives acknowledges that the residential institutions, historically referred to as residential schools were not schools but institutions that forced Indigenous children from their families, homes,

cultures and languages. The Archives hopes that as we move closer towards reconciliation, the phrase residential schools will no longer be used but instead a term that more adequately reflects the true purpose and activities of these colonial institutions; however, at this point in time, the Archives will continue to use the phrase in authorized names. Attempts will be made to use other terms to describe these residential institutions in supplied titles and other descriptive fields.

The United Church of Canada Archives will use the name authorities of residential institutions, historically referred to as residential schools, maintained by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). These authorities can be found by searching the [authorities page](#) in their archives catalogue. The United Church of Canada Archives will not use the legal name of these institutions as recognized by the Federal Government of Canada, as these official names often includes offensive terms; however, to ensure searchability, all variable forms of the institutional name will be included in the authority record.

Any variant of the institution's name will be replaced by the authorized name in titles; however, the original title will be maintained in the Variations in Title field (see section on File and Item Level Titles)

- Children's Names

Children forced into these residential institutions were commonly referred to as students. For the same reasons that the United Church of Canada Archives is moving away from the use of school as a descriptor of these institutions, student will not be used in new or remediated descriptions. Alternate terms could include child, children or youth, for example.

Children's names, if available, in descriptions will be maintained in titles and/or notes; however, if a family or community asks for the name to be removed, the United Church of Canada will remove the name from the description. The removal of the name will be recorded in an internal tracking

document, which will only be searched and consulted at the request of family or community members.

Children's name will not be recorded as name access points.

- Staff Names

Staff names will not be given name authorities unless the staff were ministry personnel; the United Church of Canada Archives currently creates authorities for all clergy and missionaries. However, staff will be named in the title and/or note fields, if available. The United Church of Canada Archives will not remove names of the staff of these institutions if requested.

While these decisions specifically deal with records of residential institutions, the guiding principles can also be applied to other mission records of the United Church of Canada.

## Biographical sketches/Administrative histories

The biographical sketch/administrative histories, which are tied to name authorities in the AtoM descriptive software, should provide "information about the external structure or context of the records being described" including the authority and functional relations of an organization or an account of the activities of an individual or family (RAD 1.7A1). Historically, these descriptions were created "objectively" without any contextualization of power structures and would mirror the systemic racism or prejudice of the individuals or bodies described. Information commonly would come from the creators or other institutional works, memorials, etc. Even when using "neutral" language, there is a tendency to validate individuals and church bodies through language at the expense of others.

When creating biographical sketches or administrative histories, consider what power relationships existed to contextualize records:

- Are you highlighting one person over the work of others who are hidden?

- Are you using language or lack of language to make assumptions that a person is of the dominant culture? By not naming race or other identities are you assuming white, etc. is the “norm”?
- Is there a counter-narrative? Is there information which would add context from the perspective of marginalized communities?

When describing situations regarding marginalized individuals, use events, places and occupations and other known signifiers that humanize rather than dehumanize (A4BLiP).

Challenge white bias by naming those who are white not just BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) individuals and avoid using language that devalues non-Western traditions and practices (Drake).

### File and item level titles

There will be situations in which the titles of files and or items will use problematic language. In such cases, the archivist will need to weigh the value of using a word-for-word transcription of the file or item (i.e. inscription on photographs):

- What is the potential for harm?
- What does the title say about the record, the creator(s), the context?
- How does the community affected by the term(s) feel about its use?

If it is decided to include the problematic language, a content warning should be added to the Other Title Information field (see Content warnings in section 4). A note that explains the reason for using problematic should be added to Parallel Titles and Other Title Information field.

If it is decided to not use the original title, include a statement under Parallel Titles and Other Title Information field such as:

Offensive and problematic language found in the original title was removed and replaced with more appropriate language on [date changes were made] by the archivist.



The original title and its context should not be fully omitted from the description to avoid whitewashing or creating bias in the records. The original title can be added to Variations in Title.

Original title transcribed: [insert original title]

When the title includes any organizational name that used offensive language, the organizational name (except names of residential and day institutions) should be retained; however, a note may be added to any linked name authority to explain the context of the name. If no name authority exists, a statement can be made in the general notes.

Even when problematic language is not used in creator-supplied titles, consider what the title is excluding. For example, with item-level photograph descriptions, inscriptions may not identify marginalized individuals in the image, or may depict racist or oppressive situations, which was normalized and would never have been named. This information should be either added to the title or in a general note at the archivist's discretion.

## Subject access points

The United Church of Canada Archives moved away from the use of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and developed an internal subject taxonomy in 2019. The subject taxonomy is built into the UCCA's AtoM catalogue. One of the focuses of this project was to identify problematic subject terms and provide more representative options, especially subjects relating to Indigenous Peoples. The subject taxonomy remains a work in progress as subject headings need to be fluid and adaptive to language evolution.

The repository had a long history of not using subjects as access points and so many of the legacy descriptions do not have subjects assigned to them. When used, subjects often reflected the dominant themes of creators and their records and did not necessarily provide access to other voices/content in the record(s). Best practices

recommend using broad subject terms; however, archivists can use subject access points as a user-friendly approach to records relating to specific identities and/or communities. For instance, historically Indigenous communities would often be classified as 'Indians of North America'. While this term has been replaced with 'Indigenous peoples,' it is encouraged to identify the specific Indigenous communities when known.

Subject access points can also be used to identify troubling record content, i.e., identify use of blackface in images as Racism to help direct users to such content.

### Uploading digital content

The Archives will evaluate any digital content, i.e., images, digitized textual records, etc., before uploading to the Archives catalogue, websites, and/or social media accounts for oppressive, inequitable language and/or imagery and for any sensitive content matter (i.e., the health and health care of individuals, cemeteries, and other sacred spaces). The Archives will consider what harm may be caused by the publishing of such content on digital platforms.

Following community feedback with Indigenous Ministries and Justice Unit, the Archives will not upload any images of cemeteries associated with residential institutions, indigenous missions, or hospitals unless requested by the Indigenous communities. Descriptions of these images will be available in our catalogue and access given when requested by researchers as per the archives policies and procedures.

The United Church of Canada Archives welcomes feedback and/or concerns from communities about the appropriateness of publishing specific digital content, i.e., images. The Archives will review any images flagged by communities and will address raised issues according to these guidelines.

### Community participation and collaboration

Anti-oppressive description depends on understanding who is being excluded and expanding the audience. Community input is crucial to the success of any remedial descriptive work.

The United Church of Canada Archives encourages users to provide feedback on problematic descriptions they discover when using our online catalogue and finding aids, our legacy databases and/or paper finding aids. Additionally, staff would like to learn of any disturbing or oppressive language or content in the records themselves so that we can properly create warnings for future researchers. While it is not solely on the users to identify such problems, feedback is greatly appreciated as the Archives do not have the staff, resources, and time to review all content. The United Church of Canada Archives website contains a feedback form [insert link] to offer users an opportunity to share any concerns or comments privately.

The Archives hopes to build better relations with communities to learn how we can best describe records created or about their communities.

However, when collaborating with communities, archivists need to “be empathetic towards those who may have emotional ties to people documented in the records/be careful of language choices and center the humanity of people documented.” (A4BLIP). For instance, when seeking input from Indigenous communities, be mindful that the United Church’s residential school legacy has caused various forms of trauma. Yet there is always a risk of further othering or harming those communities and individuals to whom archivists are trying to include:

- In a relationship of caring, we must balance our desire to capture histories that would otherwise be silenced in the archival record with the privacy, desires, and needs of the subjects of our records.” (Michelle Caswell & Marika Cifor, on radical empathy, 2016)

Individuals may not want to be named and whenever possible, consent should be sought.

Community input should be sought from multiple voices; one person may not necessarily represent a whole community. This may also prevent exhausting relationships with those in communities who have helped the Archives’ work towards diversity, inclusivity, and justice. The Archives recognizes that seeking community input

does not mean asking others to do the Archives' work; we understand and respect that asking communities too much can cause fatigue.

## 4. Approaches to remediation

Remediation should not be simple; there is no one quick fix to remove harmful language or biases from legacy descriptions. Various approaches will be needed to best identify, assess, and select more inclusive approaches to redescription, and solutions may not be the most ideal. Archivists “will never have all the answers” (Tai); however, any form of immediate action can “reduce the emotional and psychological harm that can result from such language and description” (Heslin).

### Auditing Legacy Descriptions

The Archives has made a commitment to systematically review, identify and acknowledge language of colonization, prejudice, racism, and sexism within legacy archival descriptions. The Archives have created a list of problematic language to help guide the identification of such language, as well as to educate archivists on offensive word origins and uses.

As with creating new descriptions, any audit should also identify any hidden voices that have been silenced by the archive's historical biases, determine new access points to draw on a more comprehensive understanding of the record(s) and highlight any need for community input and relation building.

These tasks will require time, staffing and resources so work will be directed mostly by demand – usage, community feedback, etc. The United Church of Canada Archives has drafted a strategy that prioritizes and ranks what fonds/collections and/or level of descriptions should be audited, but priorities should remain flexible to any emerging issues.

This work will be enduring, and the approaches and workflows will need to be flexible to accommodate changing language, greater community involvement, etc.

## Content Warnings

The Archives will use content warnings for any offensive language in original title, inscriptions, accompanying materials or if the contents of the records may be offensive and will not be known until item is viewed. The content warning should be as specific as possible.

General content warning:

CONTENT WARNING: This material contains [state issue with material, where in the image/record and/or what Rules for Archival Description field the issue can be seen and explain what is wrong with contents; if title/inscription/descriptions include inappropriate language state "use of the word [include inappropriate word, where the word appears, and the word meaning from inappropriate word list]"]. Please make any necessary preparations prior to viewing. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses.

Specific example of offensive language used in titles:

CONTENT WARNING: This material contains use of the word "squaw" in the original title. This word is a derogatory, misogynist, and racist term used for an Indigenous woman. It contains a colonial implication of exotic inferiority based on race. Please make any necessary preparations prior to viewing. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses.

Specific example of offensive content in records:

CONTENT WARNING: This material contains an image of a person in Blackface. There are two individuals at the left-hand side of the group of performers in Blackface. Blackface is used to refer to the practice of wearing makeup to imitate the appearance of a black person. The use of such makeup was associated with minstrel shows in the United States from the 1830s until the mid-20th century; it is now regarded as highly offensive. Please make any necessary

preparation prior to viewing. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses.

If the description involves residential institutions that formed part of the Residential School legacy it should include a statement about the use of the word institutions instead of schools, the legacy of these institutions, and the crisis line number at the end of the content warning.

CONTENT WARNING: This material contains [state issue with material, where in the image and / or what Rules for Archival Description (RAD) field the issue can be seen and explain what is wrong with contents]. Residential institutions, historically referred to as residential schools, were institutions that forced Indigenous children from their families, homes, cultures, and languages and contributed to a legacy of harm still pervasive today. Residential institutions divided children by Judeo-Christian gender binaries and structured the institution in this manner. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses. Please make any necessary preparations prior to viewing. The Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419 is available as needed.

If the description involved day institutions, historically referred to as day schools, a similar content warning should be included without reference to the crisis line:

CONTENT WARNING: This material contains [state issue with material, where in the image and / or what Rules for Archival Description field the issue can be seen and explain what is wrong with contents]. Day institutions, historically referred to as day schools, were institutions that forced Indigenous children from their families, homes, cultures, and languages and contributed to a legacy of harm still pervasive today. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses. Please make any necessary preparations prior to viewing.

If the image is of hospital building (former, for active building see below), staff, patients, and procedures, add the following warning:

CONTENT WARNING: this material contains an image of a [hospital building/ staff/ patients/ procedures], [authorized name of former institution]. These photos may have been taken without the permission of patients. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses. Please make any necessary preparations prior to viewing.

If the image is of a mission or residential institutional building, or hospital that is still used as a church building or by the community. Use the statement as follows:

CONTENT WARNING: This image of [building name] was taken at a time when the building was used as part of a [type of institution: mission/mission hospital/residential institution/day institution], [authorized name of former institution]. Materials of this nature can be upsetting and may be unsuitable for some uses.

If the material is flagged by archive staff or a member of the public, they will be added to the tracking document to be reviewed. Material will be marked with a content warning notifying researchers that there is an issue with the material.

CONTENT WARNING: This material has been flagged as being potentially harmful. It may contain racism, sexism, colonial attitudes and/or ableism. Archive staff have been notified and we are undergoing a review process of this material in order to accurately describe and include any warnings necessary.

### Statement of Responsibility Content Warnings

The archives received feedback that the names of ministers, missionaries and church workers listed in the catalogue record of materials may be upsetting to those harmed in the institutions where these individuals worked. If the statement of responsibility is linked to a minister or missionary associated with residential institutions or other mission work, the statement of responsibility should be placed in the Statements of Responsibility Note along with any information about the person's location that may be helpful and in the Statement of Responsibility field enter a content warning. Examples include:

## Residential institution staff

CONTENT WARNING: The statement of responsibility involves a person/s who was directly linked to a residential institution run by the United Church of Canada and has been added to the Statement of Responsibility note below.

## Mission staff

CONTENT WARNING: The statement of responsibility involves a person/s who was directly linked to mission work run by the United Church of Canada and has been added to the Statement of Responsibility note below.

## Unspecified Church Worker

CONTENT WARNING: The statement of responsibility involves a person/s who may have been linked to a mission or institution run by the United Church of Canada and has been added to the Statement of Responsibility note below.

## Hospital staff

CONTENT WARNING: The statement of responsibility involves a person/s who was directly linked to a hospital run by the United Church of Canada and has been added to the Statement of Responsibility note below.

## Redaction

In most cases, redaction will not be used to handle the use of problematic language in archival descriptions as the United Church of Canada Archives recognizes the need to not censor the historical context of the records. There may be specific cases where information may need to be redacted from archival descriptions for privacy reasons, i.e. names of children who attended residential institutions may be redacted from descriptions when requested by those who may be harmed by the use of the names (See section on [Names and naming of institutions in photographs](#)). When redaction of names occurs, the names will be maintained in an internal index to facilitate future inquiries.



## Redescription

The Archives recognizes that language and approaches to archival best practices are constantly evolving. Legacy descriptions may often need to be changed to meet archival descriptive standards, like Rules for Archival Description; similarly, descriptions may need to be altered to remove harmful and/or problematic terms or biases.

Redescription is an attempt to build on existing descriptions not to remove information. Any re-descriptive work will retain original content in the most relevant note fields to ensure historical context is maintained. Changes will be documented in other note fields for transparency and accountability. Ultimately, redescriptions should provide clear evidence of the evolution of the description, and thus archival practices.

Changes to titles and descriptive notes should focus on mitigating any harm that may result from the language or content of the descriptions and on providing more context to help users access their informational needs.

Solutions to problematic language and content may not be accepted by all users. It is expected that some will disagree with changes and some will wish more was done. Archivists must be open to all feedback and to regularly reassess approaches.

## 5. Accountability and Transparency

The United Church of Canada Archives will make institutional policies and guidelines regarding anti-oppressive description available to the public on the [United Church of Canada Archives website](#).

Any remediation to archival descriptions needs to be well documented; older descriptions and finding aids will be retained to provide historical context.

Changes to a description will be noted in the Control Area in AccesstoMemory (field “Dates of creation, revision and deletion” or “revisionHistory” in csv import).

Example:

This record was changed on May 4, 2021 by Erin Greeno in accordance to the UCCA policy on inclusive description.

More detail on the process may be needed depending on the evaluation and remedial approach to the description.

Any problematic legacy description will be recorded in a tracking document along with any changes made. The tracking document will serve as a comprehensive and accountable record of the Archives' redescription work and the institution's progression towards making the Archives more inclusive and equitable. It will provide evidence of trends (problems) with descriptive practices of the past and guide areas requiring more work or community feedback. Reports from the tracking document will be regularly published on the [United Church of Canada Archives website](#). All public reporting will protect the privacy of communities and members who provided community feedback on problematic descriptions in person, through email or by online form.

Changes will also be regularly reviewed by the Working Group, or other designated body, to review approaches and to further develop policies and procedures. These meetings will also encourage opportunities for archivists to discuss and to challenge systemic racism and other prejudices within the profession and the United Church of Canada.

## 6. Resources

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Working Group. "Anti-Racist Description Resources." October 2019:  
[https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/arldr\\_final.pdf](https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/arldr_final.pdf)

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Heslin, Kayla. Archival Redescription Recommendations wiki blog, accessed October 2021 <https://github.com/kheslin0420/kheslin0420.github.io/wiki/Archival-Redescription-Recommendations>

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Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce of the Steering Committee on Canada's Archives. *A Reconciliation Framework for Canadian Archives* (draft for public review, July 2020) ([https://archives2026.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/reconciliationframeworkforarchives\\_july2020\\_en.pdf](https://archives2026.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/reconciliationframeworkforarchives_july2020_en.pdf))

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