



Statement of Harmful Content Templates and Suggestions for Their Use

The catalogs and web pages of state and territorial archives provide access to millions of descriptions and digital copies of permanent records. Some of this content may be difficult or harmful to view. As part of the support provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) through a National Leadership Grant to the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) for [*BACKER: Building Archival Capacity for Keeping Electronic Records*](#), a project of the State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI), we have been exploring how agency leadership and staff can make electronic records inclusively available to diverse communities in ways that acknowledge language and communication traditions, and lived experience.

Thinking about using a statement of harmful content?

Your agency's recognition of potential harmful content within its collections is the first step in addressing the errors and omissions in collection description. Assessing and updating description is an ongoing and evolving process, which is often best done working collaboratively across staff, within diverse communities, and with allied organizations.

Informing users about the presence and origin of harmful content is a critical next step. A public statement to this effect for use on websites, in research rooms, in specific records groups, and in additional locations and formats underscores your agency's commitment to addressing current – and preventing future – harmful language in staff-generated descriptions.

Statements, however, are just one part of a comprehensive, agency-wide effort to address oversights in collections description. Statements without supporting policies, procedures, and plans will ultimately ring hollow.

See also: [Conscious Editing/Reparative Description Resources](#)

Templates

CoSA-SERI has developed two templates for your agency's use. We encourage you to adapt this language to best reflect your agency's mission, vision, and values.

Example A

<<Archives Name>> hold collections with records that reflect the time and social conventions of their creation. Collections may include outdated, biased, offensive, and violent content preserved for their historical significance. Access to these materials is access to the historical record. We do not alter the original content in our holdings thereby protecting their historical authenticity and provenance.

While the historical record is maintained, we are committed to updating language that is in our control to edit. We are committed to upholding the description of archival materials and special collections in a respectful and accurate manner while maintaining the historical context of the collections we manage. Just as language, classification, and cultural context changes, so too do our methods of description. As you use historical records, you may encounter language that may be considered culturally insensitive or derogatory. Please inform archival staff if that content needs to be acknowledged as insensitive or harmful. Our efforts to amend our cataloging and records description are ongoing. Your feedback in this process is greatly appreciated.

Example B

[[Archives Name]] has custody of records in its collections that may contain language, images, or other content with historically or culturally outdated, biased, offensive, or violent content. The archives will never edit, censor, or otherwise alter original records. Records are preserved as close to their original form, format, and order as possible in order to properly reflect the context of the historical era in which they were created. The authenticity and provenance of essential records is paramount.

Unfettered, equitable, continual access to the historical record is as important to the archives as the preservation of records within. However, some users may find some of this content harmful or offensive, and the archives seeks to reduce the harm caused by unwelcome or unwanted exposure to such content. The description of records in finding aids, catalogs, indexes, and other referential materials reflects the work of the archivists and records professionals that have managed these records in their custody, and these descriptions can and should be constantly re-evaluated, not simply for harmful or offensive language, but to enhance or add context, make them more discoverable, and generally improve the understanding of the records they describe. Archival descriptions themselves are living documents, even if the records they describe are not.

The archives encourages and welcomes users who find language that is harmful or offensive to report it to staff so that appropriate action can be taken. This will never result in the censoring or loss of records or context, but instead will help archivists better serve their user communities with language that reflects modern sensibilities. We can have both: an authentic, accurate, and complete historical record that is accessible to everyone, and descriptions of records that allow all who wish to find records to do so without fear of harm. As a member of the archives' user community, your feedback is greatly appreciated as our services continue to evolve.