



Words have the power to do good: to uplift, to inspire, to provoke thought, and to represent those who do not see themselves in media.

Words also have the power to do harm: to marginalize, to hurt, to reinforce stereotypes, to erase identities. Writers hold these powers in their hands, and our roles as sensitivity readers are to help writers use their words with intention. In the spirit of launching our sensitivity reading service, we're challenging writers to think more about the effects of their words.

The goal of sensitivity reading is to look at how specific identities and experiences are represented in a story's plot, setting, characters, and themes. As we read through a manuscript, we think about conscious language. According to [Conscious Style Guide](#),

Conscious language is the art of using words effectively in a specific context. . . . Some words are more apt than others. The most important part of conscious language is the conscious part—our intention. Good writers consciously use disagreeable language to strike a dissonant tone. The goal is not to be inoffensive or politically correct (whatever that means), because even language intended to be inclusive and considerate can be received the wrong way. If you're interested in conscious language, then clarify your intention and evoke and provoke skillfully.

We're constantly asking ourselves what the writer's intent might be. If an element of the

writing has a potential unintended consequence, we'll flag it in case the writer may be unaware of how it may be interpreted. We're also preliminary readers, so if we come across something that doesn't sit well, chances are that another reader will have a similar feeling. What is perfectly fine to one reader may be uncomfortable or offensive to another. Context matters, and there's no "one size fits all" approach to language or word choice. Sure, there are some words that are pretty universally understood as being problematic, but language is more nuanced than that. Even with problematic words, if the writer's intent is to bring awareness or evoke a reader's discomfort, that's a different situation from one where a writer may not know the word is problematic in the first place. Our

goal is to make sure the writer is aware of the potential effects of their words and that the message they may send is the intended one. We don't, however, tell them they must make a change. It's up to the writer to decide what they want to say and how they want to say it.

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In this guide are some thoughts on using conscious language. Keep in mind that this covers only a fraction of the many considerations involved in the ongoing process of using conscious language.





Physical Descriptions of Characters

Physical descriptions of characters are useful in helping readers visualize them. Here are some things to keep in mind when writing descriptions:

- When skin color is only mentioned when a character is non-white, this implies that white characters are the default and everything else is “other.” Providing a comparable amount of physical description for all main characters and a comparable amount for all supporting characters can even the playing field. When no skin color is mentioned at all, this can suggest that there is no diversity among the characters. It can be a tricky balance to strike.
- Comparing skin color to foods for people of color (chocolate,

caramel, coffee) is generally frowned upon because it can fetishize people of color, and many of the foods used to describe skin color have a history with slavery. For an in-depth look at writing about skin color, check out [Writing with Color's guide](#). Also, this [Buzzfeed article](#) provides a humorous spin on this topic.

- Physical descriptions that reinforce stereotypes can be harmful. For example, one of our sensitivity readers flagged a manuscript that described an East Asian character as having small eyes, a stereotype that many East Asians have been bullied for.
- Body shapes and sizes vary in the real world. Not everyone is athletic or muscular, depending on the context of the story.
- Please don't describe a character as looking “exotic.”

Behaviors and Roles

Characters' behaviors and roles can also play into stereotypes. Even if the character “just happens to have” a certain characteristic that fits a stereotype, it may be worth considering what the unintended consequence may be to readers, especially ones who only see themselves portrayed in media in limited ways. The sassy best friend just happens to be a Black woman. All of the breadwinners just happen to be



men, and all of the stay-at-home parents just happen to be women. The promiscuous character just happens to be bisexual. The inspirational character just happens to be disabled. It may not be as simple as “replace this characteristic with another one to avoid the stereotype” either. Depending on how fleshed out the character is, the intersectionality of the character’s identities may influence certain aspects of how they are portrayed.

Person-First or Identity-First Language

The idea of person-first language and identity-first language is to reduce stigma when referring to an individual with a physical or cognitive disability, or a health or mental health diagnosis. Person-first language places the individual first, such as “a person with a disability” or “a person with autism.” This type of language may be

preferred by those who see their disability as front and center of who they are as a person. As JR Thorpe writes for [Bustle](#), “The difference between the perspectives essentially boils down to personhood and disability: Is it something that you have, or something that’s at the core of your identity?”

Person-first language places the individual first, such as “a person with a disability” or “a person with autism.”

Regardless of which one is used, grouping all individuals who share a common characteristic with a preceding “the” should generally be avoided, such as saying “the disabled,” “the mentally ill,” or

the elderly.” This type of language is seen as lumping all of these individuals into one group and ignoring the unique experiences of each person. This also applies to groups across other marginalized characteristics, such as race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion.

Sex and Gender

A few notes on terms related to sex and gender:

- The terms “female” and “male” are typically used as adjectives, such as a “female colleague” or “male colleague.” Sometimes, “female(s)” or “male(s)” will be used as nouns, such as “the females were sitting around the table chatting.” Using “female” as a noun is perceived by many as derogatory toward women.



Usually the terms “woman” and “women” and “man” and “men” are the preferred nouns.

- Some commonly used terms are gendered and can often be replaced by non-gendered terms.
 - o mankind → humankind
 - o mailman → mail carrier
 - o policeman → police officer
 - o housewife → homemaker
- English famously does not have a gender-neutral pronoun. Writers often choose to use “he/she” or “one,” or to alternate between “he” and “she” in examples. The use of the singular “they” has been long used but not necessarily widely accepted, especially in formal writing. Language and its uses are constantly evolving. Merriam-Webster declared the word “they” as Word of the Year 2019 due to a surge in popularity, especially with some celebrities stating that they identify as non-binary. I’m using the singular “they” throughout this guide.

Sensitivity Readers

One method in which a writer can receive feedback on their manuscript is to have it read by sensitivity readers. The role of sensitivity readers is to evaluate a manuscript’s story, characters, plot, descriptions, and themes with a focus on authenticity. This is especially useful when a writer does not belong to a group they



are writing about. Questions they may ask about a story include:

- Does the writer represent X, Y, or Z in a way that is nuanced and believable, or is it one dimensional?
- Are these cultural representations stereotyped or harmful? Does the plot rely on tropes?
- Are there unconscious biases that may need to be examined?

Sensitivity readers are not there to police words and pounce on every opportunity to be offended. Their role is to improve the writing and story by highlighting areas that may require thought or revision in order to portray elements authentically. It's important to note that sensitivity readers also don't speak for entire groups, and their insights typically come from their own personal experiences and knowledge. This [Huffpost article](#) provides an overview of what sensitivity readers do.

Final Thoughts

It may be a new challenge to think about how words may affect those reading them—not just the emotional influence of the story itself, but how conscious language choices play a role in how the message is received. Again, it's not about what word can be said or what word can't be said. It's about how to use words intentionally to create an authentic, representative, and thought-provoking story.

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DOT AND DASH SENSITIVITY READING

Our sensitivity readers are available for the following topics:

- Agoraphobia
- Alcoholism & drug abuse
- Alzheimer's and dementia care
- Anxiety
- Asian American, specifically Chinese/Taiwanese
- Bipolar disorder
- Bisexuality
- Borderline Personality Disorder
- Caregiving
- Child abuse
- Christianity
- Chronic pain
- Connective tissue disorder
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome
- Evangelicalism
- Extremist religion
- Feminism & gender issues
- Fibromyalgia
- Gamer geek
- Homophobia
- Hospice/end-of-life care
- Hypermobility

- Lesbianism
- Mental health therapy and recovery
- Mental health hospitalization
- Midwestern
- Non-religious, atheist & agnostic
- OCD
- Pansexuality
- Phobias
- Physical disability, arms & legs
- Political activism
- PTSD
- Queer topics
- Religious abuse
- Science-fiction nerd
- Scoliosis
- Second generation/child of immigrants
- Self-harm
- Social anxiety
- Sudden death
- Suicide/suicidal ideation
- Tinnitus
- Verbal abuse
- Working class

Sensitivity Consulting

If you want someone to help you as you are writing your draft, then Sensitivity Consulting is right for you. This is perfect if you have a particular scene you want help with or need more immersive guidance in order to create the most authentic character you can.

The Dot and Dash Sensitivity Consulting package includes:

- Unlimited email consultation access
- One half-hour consultation via phone or Zoom per week
- Sensitivity read on up to 25 pages per week

MEET OUR SENSITIVITY READERS



Erin Servais

Erin has worked in book editing and publishing for more than a decade, specializing in romance, women's fiction, young adult, and business nonfiction. She has worked with a Big Five publisher and has helped to bring hundreds of titles to publication, including romance books that went on to be USA Today and Amazon best sellers. She has a certificate in editing and is a member of the ACES: The Society for Editing and the Professional Editors Network.



Brenna Davies

Brenna is a full-time book editor for independent authors. She has experience in both young adult and adult fiction across the board, including contemporary, fantasy, science fiction, and historical fiction. She received her editing certificate from Simon Fraser University and is a member of Editors Canada. She is a copy editor, beta reader, and sensitivity reader for Dot and Dash.



Crystal Shelley

Crystal is a copy editor, sensitivity reader, and conscious language expert who primarily works with indie fiction authors. Her specialties are science fiction and fantasy, though she is open and available to work on all types of books. She is a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association and its Diversity Initiative, ACES: The Society for Editing, and Utah Freelance Editors.



Jacquelynn Lyon

Jacquelynn is an author of fiction and poetry, as well as a story coach, beta reader, and sensitivity reader. She spent a year teaching English as a foreign language in South Korea and has now returned home to write about the strange, fantastical, and romantic. She focuses on speculative fiction across different genres, and her favorite things to read are urban fantasy, offbeat sci-fi, and anything a little eerie.

DOT AND DASH SERVICES

Book Editing

We offer a range of manuscript-editing packages so you can get the exact type and level of copy editing you want. Our specialties are romance, women's fiction, fantasy, science fiction, young adult, and business nonfiction, but we have edited just about every genre and subgenre you can imagine.

Author Coaching

With author coaching, we help writers through all phases of book writing and beyond, by offering publishing and marketing advice, as well. With a mix of worksheets and one-on-one education, we'll help you plan your novel and start chapter one. Then when there are any writer's blocks or need for accountability help, we'll be there, too.

Beta Reading

This service takes a big-picture view of your manuscript and focuses on analyzing the major factors, such as plot, characters, setting, and dialogue. At the end, your Beta Reader will give you your personalized Beta Reader Report with their feedback and findings.

Sensitivity Reading

Sensitivity reading is a type of manuscript evaluation that checks whether characters are portrayed with authenticity and respect and helps books avoid harmful stereotypes and problematic language.

Author Platform & Social Media Help

To attract an audience, it's vital authors make sure they are providing the best information in the best way. We'll review your author website, Amazon author page, and social media profiles. Then we'll create a report with action steps you can take right away to leverage your online presence and get you and your book in front of readers and in their feeds.