

Welcoming Nomenclature

Avoiding words/phrases with racist/oppressive overtones in your software and documentation

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<http://tm3.org/et>

Disclaimer:



Skip to the end ...

Read/Listen to minority voices. (Books, Twitter, podcasts, etc)

Believe what they tell you, even when (especially when) it doesn't match your experience of the world

(Recommendation: Start with Emmanuel Acho's "Uncomfortable conversations with a black man" if you have not already watched it.)



Leah Culver

@leahculver



I refuse to use “whitelist”/“blacklist” or
“master”/“slave” terminology for computers.
Join me. Words matter.

11:32 PM · Jun 5, 2020 from [San Francisco, CA](#) · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

What (The easy part)

- Stop using “blacklist/whitelist”. Use “allow/deny”, or “accept/reject” instead.
- Stop using “master/slave”. Use “primary/secondary” or “source/copy” instead

Why (The harder part)

- Use terms that describe what the thingy does, rather than a metaphor
- Being reminded, subtly, every day, that a part of who you are (“Black”) is the metaphor for bad/reject/deny, feels awful

r1878547 | rbowen | 2020-06-06 14:15:02 -0400 (Sat, 06 Jun 2020) | 4 lines

Remove 'blacklist' from our docs, as per
<https://lethargy.org/~jesus/writes/a-guide-to-nomenclature-selection/>
and other excellent resources.



Sebastian Bergmann

@s_bergmann



PHPUnit 9.3 (August 2020) will deprecate configuration options etc. that use "blacklist" or "whitelist" terminology:

[github.com/sebastianbergm...](https://github.com/sebastianbergmann/phpunit/blob/master/UPGRADE-9.3.md)

4:59 AM · Jun 8, 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

The responses ...

Try to assume good intent. This can sometimes be difficult.

(Almost) All of these arguments have truth behind them, but miss the point. And most of the people making them will not really hear your response. That's probably ok.

That's not what those words mean

“Blacklist” is from early 17 Century English and has nothing to do with skin color

While this is true, very few of us were alive in the 17th century.

Useful to note that “Awful” is a 13 Century English word meaning “Inspiring reverence and awe. Wonderful. Excessively great.”

Language evolves. It's a feature.

That's not what those words mean

The point is that it's a reminder, daily, associating “black” with “bad” or “reject” or “deny”. It's a death by a thousand paper cuts.

Muhammed Ali video, 1968, talks about this using a little humor, and is worth 2 minutes of your time. <https://youtu.be/ueDbCmG3iu4> (or google “Muhammed Ali black and white”)

Seems unnecessary. The old words were fine.

I don't find those terms offensive, and so this is a waste of time

- It's not about you
- It's my time to waste
- More seriously: We must believe people when they tell us that words hurt, even if we don't experience it for ourselves. (See disclaimer, above)

You are not an expert on anyone else's experience

🔄 You Retweeted



Heir to the Throne of the Kingdom of Idiots

@NomeDaBarbarian



Don't tell people what level of oppression they should be comfortable with.

Don't tell them that they're not an expert in their own experiences and preferences, that you know better than them.

People will have to learn new words

Hours and hours of lost productivity when we have to learn new words and change from “slave” to “secondary” or whatever.

- This is almost never actually true. In most cases it is

```
sed -i 's/OldTerm/NewTerm/g' *
```

- PHPUnit, Spamassassin, and many other projects did these changes via a deprecation cycle
- Use terms that actually mean what you're trying to do tends to make things easier for second-language consumers anyway. (eg DenyList vs BlackList)
- A little inconvenience may actually get you to stop and think about why this matters

If you change that, you'll need to also change ...

Ah, the “slippery slope” argument.

If you're nice about *this*, you'll have to be nice about that other thing, too!

This is a pointless exercise, because there's no end to it!

You'll also have to change ...

I suggest also replacing "server" and "client" with more neutral terms, the current ones are demeaning.

These comments are often sarcastic, intending to ridicule careful word choice.

Typically, I take these at face value and respond with “If you feel that those terms are problematic, I encourage you to think about why, and figure out what word/phrase works better.”

See also: “Should we change the color of chess pieces?” and “Should we change the name of the Black Sea?”, “black market”, “blackmail”, ...

Orwellian NewSpeak! Canceling words!

We are not the government. We are not forbidding the use of words. We are encouraging more careful word choices in order to be more welcoming.

Other words, such as profanity, overt racial slurs, and so on, are also unwelcome in the documentation of most software. This is neither strange nor malicious.

Newspeak intentionally used less-precise words in order to make it difficult to think subversive thoughts. We are searching for more precise words in order to sharpen understanding.

This is a completely false equivalence.



A Totally Cool Guy @CoolGuyVibes · Jun 7



It's a nice sentiment, but it comes to a point where it's a ceaseless cycle of making changes to everything that cause slight discomfort to one when, in some cases such as this one, understanding is preferable. Like, the use of black and white is not inherently linked to race.



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Rich Bowen

@rbowen



Replying to @CoolGuyVibes @sagemph and @leahculver

Yes. Kindness is a ceaseless cycle of listening to one another and trying to lessen each others discomforts. That's a good definition.

8:23 AM · Jun 7, 2020 · [Twitter for Android](#)

People are too easily offended

As a docs guy, my job is to communicate clearly. Using ambiguous terms with possibly problematic alternate meanings is lazy and counterproductive.

Yes, some people are probably too easily offended. No, it is not possible to avoid offending everyone.

But surely it's worthwhile trying to avoid obviously problematic words and improve things for some people?

People will always find something else to be offended about, and it never ends

This is true. Because language evolves. We should evolve with it. Pretending that we are the arbiters of language and the world should adjust to us is pretty arrogant.

It's just an America-centric cultural issue

- This has some truth to it. So, *maybe* we're just solving a problem for that audience.
- But even if this is so, the end result is that we have words that are more descriptive than what we started with.
- The process has also made us aware of terms/phrases that are problematic in other cultures, that we, as Americans, were ignorant of

Related: This is just a publicity stunt

“You’re just making this change to ride the publicity wave around the issue.”

Yes, there are definitely organizations which are doing this. That’s human nature.

Assume good intent until you see evidence to the contrary. (This goes for everyone, not just those opposing this effort.)

This doesn't "Fix Racism"

"Surely there are more important things to work on!"

I am a software engineer. This is what I can do in this space. I am under no illusion that it is the most important issue. But I am obliged to use the skills and privileges that I have, while I advocate for changes that I cannot make myself.

- Big changes are comprised of many small changes
- We are very aware that the problem is SO MUCH bigger than this
- Please work on those other important things too

This change reinforces (calls attention to) the negative connotations!

Making people think about the ways that they use words, and how it affects other people, is indeed part of the goal. So calling attention to it isn't all bad.

Removing a hurdle creates a situation where most people will never be aware that the hurdle was there. That's the goal - a world where people don't know that it was there in the first place.

But, also, getting people to be *aware* of how they use words is definitely a goal.

Why should we remove hurdles? Nobody removed them for me!

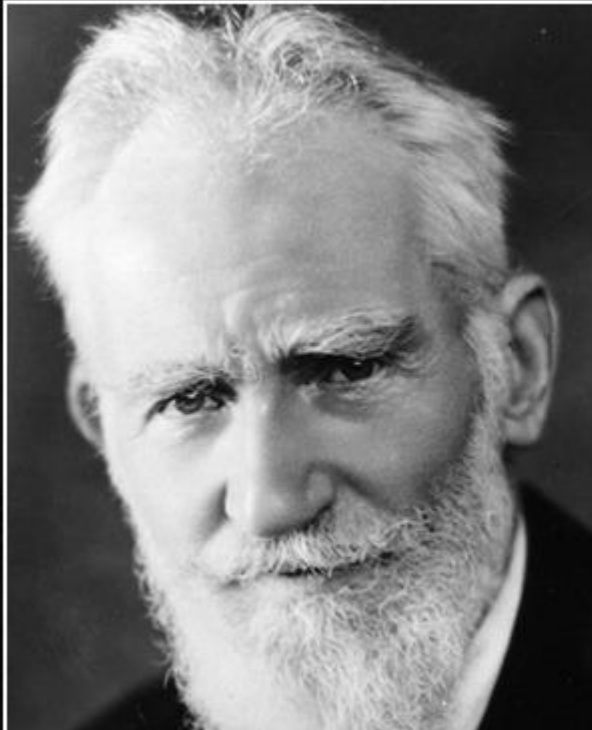
The “I walked up hill in the snow” argument slows progress for the sake of making other suffer like we did. It’s selfish and short-sighted.

Particularly in open source, we grow our communities by being welcoming.

If you have to explain to people why it’s important to be compassionate, that may be outside of the scope of this talk.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS RUN AMOK!

This is usually your sign that engaging in further conversation will not be productive.



I learned long ago, never to wrestle
with a pig. You get dirty, and
besides, the pig likes it.

— *George Bernard Shaw* —

Negative responses tend to be louder

Overwhelmingly positive responses, but we humans tend to focus on the negative ones.



Khary Sharpe 🍌

@kharysharpe

Replying to [@s_bergmann](#)

Thank you for this. Exclude and include is precise, clear & better naming. I wish projects would stop using blacklist (negative connotation) & whitelist (positive connotation). Racism is so entrenched in society that people have formed a blindspot and refuse to even look.

8:55 AM · Jun 8, 2020 · [Twitter for iPad](#)

Note: This is just one axis

- Ableist terms (sanity check, crazy, cripple)
- Gendered terms (man-hours, mankind, selection of pronouns)
- Violent/martial language (hill to die on)
- Drug metaphors (on steroids)
- Religious terms (my cross to bear, not kosher)
- Colloquialisms (May mean something different to someone else. See, for example, “pig” metaphor two slides back, which may be offensive to some viewers.)

Yes, it is possible to go overboard on this, but consider each word choice and whether there's a better one.

Resources/Reading List

- <https://lethargy.org/~jesus/writes/a-guide-to-nomenclature-selection/>
- <https://developers.google.com/style/word-list>
- <https://developers.google.com/style/inclusive-documentation>
- <https://tools.ietf.org/id/draft-knodel-terminology-00.html>
- <https://youtu.be/h8jUA7JBkF4>
- <https://vimeo.com/139167005>
- <https://mojo.redhat.com/docs/DOC-1225118>
- <http://mcwriting11.blogspot.com/2014/06/that-word-black-by-langston-hughes.html>
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40061475?seq=1>