

# Bad Language and Scholarly Publishing: Use It or Lose It?

## **Bad Language and Scholarly Publishing: Use It or Lose It?**

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Recently I was editing an article accepted for publication and discovered that the authors described an example using a phrase that replaced part of a word with \*\*, as many do when posting on social media. The word in question was a derisive slang term that refers to a woman. It was not as shocking as the F-word, but certainly not acceptable language. I realized that I had not yet come across this dilemma in my experience, even though I have served in an editorial role for 12 years. I have published articles that included profane words such as hell or damn from qualitative interviews; while these were distasteful, I found the \*\* word to be worse. Yet, this was the term that was used by the authors and inclusion would reflect accuracy in this discussion.

This issue piqued my interest and I decided to investigate bad language in scholarly writing in the literature. For my search I used terms such as “profanity,” “swearing,” “obscenity,” and “slang.” I also queried the editors and others who participate in the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) email discussion. For my report herein, I consider bad language to be profanity of all types and slang or colloquialisms that are hurtful and possibly incendiary. I offer my findings and include some thoughts for consideration that I believe will assist both editors and authors of scholarly manuscripts who face this dilemma.

## THOUGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

Few academic publications have directly addressed bad language in scholarly writing. Those that have considered profanity or offensive slang, such as slurs, were dated. Style manuals offered advice about writing tone and using accurate terms, but were published at a time when it was likely less acceptable to see this type of language in print and thus this concern was not specifically addressed. However, even while dated, they did offer suggestions that may apply to this current and growing dilemma. For example, both print and online resources such as the *APA Manual* (APA, 2010) and the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#), ([OWL], 1995-2019; ) discussed similar topics about possibly offensive language in scholarly writing, due to bias related to gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, disabilities, or age, and the use of mild slang and colloquial terms in general.

In their classic, *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White (2000) offered two helpful suggestions. First, if use of a slang word is deemed necessary, refrain from drawing further attention to it by adding quotation marks for emphasis; rather just use it. They also noted the dynamic nature of language, with word meanings always in a state of change. Thus, it is better to consider established usage over current trends. Corbett and Finkel (2008) noted that no single word can be labeled as inappropriate in and of itself, and this may be especially so in technical writing where words or practices common to that audience are not out of place. This assertion supports the use of exact quotes that may include words offensive to some readers.

The Purdue OWL (1995-2019) website does not specifically address profanity, but includes information about levels of formality that suggests a style of writing appropriate to both your purpose and the expectations of your audience. This website notes that it is acceptable to include slang or jargon when you write for an audience that includes members of a group who would frequently use and understand these terms.

It is clear that the use of offensive slang and every manner of profanity is on the rise (Bergen, 2016), and this has been addressed frequently related to its use in non-scholarly, online venues such as websites, blogs, or social media. Two examples are noteworthy. A piece published in *The New York Times* (Sheidlower, 2014) stated that as a society we have become more comfortable with profanity and suggested that the media has not kept the same pace, instead using euphemisms or dashes or asterisks as part of the offensive word. Sheidlower (2014) described an example published in an academic journal in 1934 that discussed the history of a highly offensive profane term, the F-word, without even using it once, much as I am doing right now. The *Associated Press Stylebook* (AP, 2019) also recommends a partial spelling, suggesting hyphens in place of some letters in the word to convey the meaning without including exact term and inclusion of an editor's note.

Bergen (2016), a professor of cognitive science who studies swearing and what it reveals about us, our use of language, and our brains, noted the temporal aspect of profanity and the increasing use of slurs. He described in his book multiple examples of words that used to be or have become profane, due to current social constructs. Reading about the evolution of these words, it is not unreasonable to wonder whether any word we may innocently use in its current context might be considered profane sooner or later! Bergen (2016) suggested that bans are typically ineffectual. We use many similar sounding words or phrases, known as minced oaths, to avoid profanity, such as *oh sugar*, or *shut the front door*. He noted one particularly troublesome current trend among profanity usage, that of slurs, suggesting this as an exception to otherwise harmless swearing and far more offensive to most. Considering use of slurs on the continuum of free speech to censorship, Bergen (2016) offers the old adage that just because you can it does not mean you should. Both the temporal aspect of word meanings and the harmful potential of slurs are solid reasons to thoughtfully consider decisions about including bad language in scholarly print.

## THOUGHTS FROM NURSING EDITORS

As early as 1993, an article in *Editor & Publisher* questioned whether publishing profanities constituted censorship to avoid controversy, noting that, “arguments for and against using certain terms are subjective” (Venit, as cited by Case, 1993/2011, p.11). One viewpoint offered in the article suggested the danger of editing profanity and leaving the reader to imagine something much worse. The author asserted that in newsrooms, decisions are made on a daily basis about questionable words and advised that discussions with multiple people are helpful in this process to assure different perspectives are represented.

To that end, this discussion synthesizes the thoughts of the 15 editors who participated in the INANE listserv conversation about my query regarding use of bad language in scholarly nursing journals. The discussion expanded into recognizing phoniness and flowery language, often referred to in print as bullshit, in academic writing in general and specific to nursing. This article considers use of profane or offensive slur words only, versus their connotation as applied to critique academic writing which is beyond the scope of this article. Discussion related using profanity or offensive slang considered the temporal element of language; interest versus scholarly tone; and contextual purity versus scholarly tone. Several editors also offered helpful questions to consider when making such a decision.

### ***Temporal Element of Words***

One editor referred to the temporal element discussed in the literature, especially of offensive slang, and noted that this is often not considered. Similar to thoughts from Bergen (2016), Strunk and White (2000), and information from the *APA Manual* (2010), he noted that, “words have the power we assign

them – Scandalous as it would be to use the words bloody and bugger in 1750, today these get barely a chuckle. Ten years from now, it may again be scandalous” (Personal communication, D. Olson, January 30, 2019).

### ***Interest versus Scholarly Tone***

The discussion considered the dilemma of creating interest among readers versus adherence to scholarly tone. One editor commented that being provocative may have a purpose, but passages were still possibly borderline offensive and thus not appropriate. Another felt that the benefits of using bad language rarely outweighed the risk and suggested consideration as to whether the point could be made without that specific word. Several suggestions from editors mirrored practices common in publishing, such as using an asterisk as part of the spelling of the word; inserting the word [expletive] or leaving a space; and adding a disclaimer to explain the omission of certain words (AP, 2019; APA 2010; Sheidlower, 2014). These editors advised taking the high road (i.e., omit the offensive word) and use of discretion.

### ***Contextual Purity versus Scholarly Tone***

A few editors had mixed feelings, first noting that bad language is not appropriate in scholarly journals in general, but making the exception of quotes from qualitative data. Direct quotes are an important component to demonstrate trustworthiness in a qualitative study. One editor gave an example of publishing words as they were spoken, but also noted that she had not been presented anything more offensive than the word bitch, rather mild in nature compared to some other profanity. Even while supporting the purity of qualitative data to provide absolute context from the quotation, one person felt that using bad language in these quotes is still a slippery slope that can lead to a lower standard. The increasing use of slurs that Bergen (2016) noted adds another layer of complexity to the decision to honor contextual purity with direct quotes including that type of language.

### ***Questions to Consider***

Several participants (personal communications, J. Castner, December 22, 2018, and A. Valdez, January 30, 2019) offered questions to consider when making the decision to include bad language in a scholarly publication, as follows:

- Is the emphasis in using the word necessary? Is it disrespectful or insightful for the reader?
- Does using the word perpetuate discrimination or illuminate discrimination’s existence, causes, and consequences?
- Who decides what provocative terms are acceptable?

- What if the word is a racial slur or other discriminatory term?

Discussing these questions prior to the final decision, or even before the occasion arises, may inform an appropriate rationale to support whatever action is taken.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUTHORS AND EDITORS

There are multiple recommendations related to appropriate writing for scholarly work. Because this article is considering profanity and offensive slang, these included below are specific to use of bad language.

### *Think About Similar Decisions*

Resources do address similar topics about possibly offensive language due to bias related to gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, disabilities, or age; and the use of mild slang and colloquial terms in general. These may be helpful to inform a decision about the use of bad language. This is important to consider as some profanity or offensive slang, specifically slurs, can also reflect such biases, including the use of labels (APA, 2010; Bergen, 2016). Use a style manual to consider similar recommendations that may also be appropriate to inform your final decision. Check for precedents. If you are an editor, investigate how this may have been handled in the past. If you are an author, investigate your selected journal to see if you can find an example of bad language. Start by mirroring the editorial strategies of what has been previously published.

### *Work to Achieve Consensus*

Resist making the decision in a vacuum; seek input from others. If appropriate, be sure that your supervisors are aware of the dilemma and the support for any decision. The APA manual (2010) offers a suggestion for writers of historical information. The challenge in this context is to preserve historical accuracy and the manual recommends using the original language, but including an asterisk the first time it is used, with an explanatory comment. This strategy could be useful to indicate rationale for including language from raw data to preserve context, especially in cases where the word meaning has evolved since the original usage, and also offers an explanation for this decision.

### *Search for Current Usage*

The APA manual (2010) recommends respect for people's preferences, and the change in preferences over time. A quick Google search revealed several university-based or reputable organizational sources to access an LGBTQ glossary of terms. Make an effort to find the most current acceptable language to avoid unintentional slang that may be hurtful or inappropriate.

## *Consider the Audience*

Consider the purpose of the manuscript, the journal, and the audience for this venue (Purdue OWL, 1995-2019). It may be entirely appropriate to quote bad language when including qualitative data in a report for a research journal where the readers will understand and appreciate inclusion of exact quotes.

## CONCLUSION

You might wonder how my dilemma ended. Because one of my areas of expertise is qualitative methods, I am a purist when it comes to quoting language to preserve the context to every extent possible. That does not mean I do not struggle with the use of this type of language in scholarly writing.

After considering the risks versus benefits, as suggested by one of the editors, I had a discussion with the authors about my concerns. The word in question was a slur. It was not a quote, but an example of sexual harassment in an article about that topic. They felt strongly about using the word as is, but were willing to allow me to first state it in a scholarly way and then use it parenthetically as an example, qualifying it as a colloquial term. I was comfortable with that decision because I felt we put intentional thought into this dilemma, at minimum. Also, this was middle of the road bad language – not the worst you can imagine.

The compromise to use the word, but note it as colloquial, acknowledged explicitly that we were stepping away from scholarly tone to preserve integrity of data. I still ask myself, could I do this if the word were even more incendiary? Best practice is for each editor and writer to give intentional consideration to potential risks and benefits of using a particular incendiary word or phrase. The goal is to reach consensus and thoughtfully represent the individual manuscript and journal content.

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