

# Words Matter

How language, context, and content can perpetuate or change public bias about sexual violence

Accurate portrayal of sexual violence should not place blame on victims or use language which implies consent or disbelief. It is important for journalists to use the most accurate terms for describing acts of sexual assault, instead of using euphemisms or suggestive language.

Instead of...	Use...	Because...
Monsters, predators & evil	Person-first language or non-charged words such as: <b>people who commit sexual offenses; man; the father of four; the woman who taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade</b>	Few people think they associate with “monsters, predators & evil” people. In reality, most who people who offend do so against those in their social or family circles. These labels create an “us v. them” dynamic and make is difficult to recognize problematic sexual behavior in loved ones and associates. People who offend often rely on these positive, public personas to help them appear trustworthy and obscure their criminal actions.
Engaged in / performing	<b>was forced to perform; forced his penis into; ...said he pushed her head; held her down while he forced his mouth on her...; Held her arms while he...</b>	These phrases (engaged in/performed in) imply that the victim was an active participant, rather than someone who was forced, manipulated or harmed. The language of consensual sex both minimizes the violence and misleads the reader, making it easier to sanitize, rationalize, justify, and excuse sexual violence.
Sex or intercourse	<b>rape; sexual assault; forced penetration; forcefully penetrated; was forced to perform</b>	“Sex” or “intercourse” imply a consensual activity and equate criminal behavior with a pleasurable activity. Using “intercourse” or “sex” instead of “rape” prevents the public from fully understanding that the act was one of violence and not a mutually consensual act. These terms blur the line between sexual pleasure and criminal violence.
The victim was unharmed	<b>victim is recovering; victim is at home; victim is with family</b>	Victims of sexual assault may experience a wide range of emotional trauma and psychological harm, as well as physical injuries that are not immediately visible.

Instead of...	Use...	Because...
<b>Sex scandal</b>	<b>child sexual abuse case; rape case; sexual assault; sexual abuse</b>	Using “scandal” is sensational. “Sex scandal” diminishes the crime; it removes the distinction between a normal, consensual act and violence/potential crime.
<b>Sexual relationship</b>	<b>sexual abuse; sexual assault; sexually abusive relationship; language of the actual charge</b>	“Sexual relationship” doesn’t describe a crime. It denotes a consensual relationship when there was none. Power differentials (such as teachers/students) negate the ability to consent.
<b>Accuser/ accused him of</b>	<b>victim; alleged victim; the woman/child; the woman reported; the woman said; the man said</b>	The word “accuser” flips the power dynamic – referring to the victim as the “accuser” turns the perpetrator into the victim of an accusation, and shifts the focus of the events on to the victim.
<b>Victim admitted/ Victim confessed</b>	<b>victim reports; victim says; victim disclosed</b>	Both “admits” and “confesses” imply responsibility and shame on the part of the victim and does not hold the perpetrator responsible.
<b>Fondle</b>	<b>grope; unwanted sexual contact</b>	Fondle suggests the perpetrated act is gentle, which may undermine a reader’s ability to see unwanted sexual contact as harmful.
<b>Date rape Acquaintance rape Legitimate rape Non-consensual sex Forcible rape</b>	<b>rape; sexual assault</b>	These qualifiers & descriptors infer there are different kinds of rape, and none are as serious as “rape.”

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