

The Modern Editor Podcast – Episode 4: Say What? Words to Think Twice About Before Using

Tara Whitaker: [0:03] Welcome to *The Modern Editor Podcast*, where we talk about all things editing and what it's like to run an editorial business in today's world. I'm your host, Tara Whitaker. Let's get to it.

Tara Whitaker: [0:17] Hi there, welcome to today's episode. We are going to be chatting about words today. I know, shocking! We're editors talking about words. But specifically, today we're talking about words that I want you to have a little think about before using in your marketing, your social media, your contracts, your correspondence with clients, and—honestly—your everyday life. And first of all, I do want to give a blanket content warning for this episode. I'm going to be discussing some words and phrases that are problematic and/or harmful. And that involves hate groups, mental health, and cultural sensitivities. So, I talk about them throughout the entire episode, so I just want to give a blanket warning for this entire episode. Now, why it's important to talk about these words and phrases because, like I just said, they're problematic at best. And some of them that we're going to talk about are just straight-up harmful. And using these words and phrases not only affects how we're perceived—both ourselves and our businesses—it can affect attracting clients, it can affect not attracting clients, it can affect our industry. And, like I said, they're harmful, they—words matter. They can cause harm. So, it's always good to reassess and take a second look at the words that we are using, both in our lives and in our business.

Tara Whitaker: [1:41] So, we're going to chat about some specific words and why I've included them. I'm going to give you alternatives to those words. And I also want to be clear that this is not meant to shame or berate. I know for a fact that I've used these words in the past, and for—I know—at least one of these words, I still slip up and use it to this day. And I—you know—I'm aware of it and correct myself. But this is not meant to berate you or shame you. It's about learning and growing. And if you have deeper questions about some of these harmful words, I highly encourage you to put on that Modern Editor hat and you're going to do some research. Google is your friend—there is plenty of information out there from sources that are more suitable to give you the background and the reasoning behind using or not using these words. And that does not include asking the people that are directly affected by using those words, okay? We're going to do our own research, and we're going to do our own learning because that is our responsibility as good human beings and good Modern Editors.

Tara Whitaker: [2:47] Now, this list is also for words and phrases that I see a lot in, like, marketing and social media, like I mentioned. This is not an exhaustive list by any means, nor is it a list to look out for when you're editing. Some of the words might be words you look out for when you're editing. But if I wanted to make a list of all of the words that you should include in your searches and editing—like conscious language and microaggressions and anything else—that list would be a mile long, and it would take a bajillion years to cover. So, we're not doing that here; we're just doing words that I see in sort of a business sense, so to speak.

Tara Whitaker: [3:25] So, the first three words—I'm going to group them together—and these are falling under the category of problematic—they are: *perfect*, *error-free*, and *guaranteed*. Now, again, not a call-out if you use these. I have no idea who uses this word right now, or—you know—I don't have anybody specific in mind. I just know in the industry, I see this—excuse me—a lot when people are first starting out. And I group them together because I see them used in social media bios and posts, and I've heard about them being used in contracts, which is an issue. First of all, the last time I checked, we are all human beings; not a single one of us is perfect. There is absolutely no way we can ever guarantee that a piece of content will be perfect unless that piece of content is a sentence long. And even then, I bet someone would argue with it. It's just not possible. And what industry or profession out there produces 100% perfection? No one, like, not even a brain surgeon. We all make mistakes. And I'm by no means a lawyer, but I can't imagine putting into a contract a guarantee of perfection, like that's [not] a good thing. That seems like a massive recipe for disaster because perfection is so subjective. And editing is so subjective. It's an art form, and what one author sees as an error, another author won't. Or an editor will leave something in that is technically "wrong," but they kept it in there because that's retaining the author's voice or style. You know, run-on sentences or comma splices are very common, and we know that they're, again, "wrong," but if that's how the author conveys their story, then that's fine. But is that "perfect"? I don't know. See the ambiguity there? And one author will think differently, and one editor will think differently than another. It's just a good idea to rethink using those words. And again, as an industry—as a whole—if we're, as editors, using these words, and—like—promising authors that we're perfect and that their content will be 100% perfect—that's not good. Because, again, we're setting these unrealistic expectations, and they're going to think that editors are perfect. And whenever they hire an editor, they expect perfection, right? Why wouldn't they? You're guaranteeing it. Not good.

Tara Whitaker: [6:08] So, words to use instead. And again, for this whole episode, I encourage you to use your thesaurus. We're editors, right? We know how to use a thesaurus. But I'm just gonna give you some examples. So, instead of *perfect* or *error-free*, use *polished*, *enhance your story*, *elevate your content*, *bring your best story forward*. Something along those lines that shows that we are helpful, we can bring their best foot forward, but we're not ensuring perfection. Okay.

Tara Whitaker: [6:39] Now, the second phrase I want to talk about is *charge what you're worth*. Now, I admit, this is a pet peeve of mine. And it's a small change, and it's a small shift, but it's an important one, in my opinion. Charge what you're worth—your worth is not tied to a monetary amount. You are a human being—you are worthy, period. You are not worth forty dollars an hour or fifty dollars an hour—whatever—two cents a word. Charge what you bring to the table in terms of your skills, knowledge, and experience. So, if you're gonna say charge what you're worth, *charge what your skills are worth*. I know that's a small shift, but I can't stress it enough. I highly suggest not saying charge what you're worth. Because again, you're a human being—charge what your skills are worth, charge what you bring to the table. Okay, those are the problematic words.

Tara Whitaker: [7:41] Now we're going to get into—not only are these problematic, but they are harmful, okay, so this is probably where the content warning really comes into play here. Now, the first pair of phrases I'm going to mention are *slaving away* or *chained to my desk*. Again, I'm not going to go into in-depth reasonings here because I honestly think they're pretty self-explanatory. But to be clear, let's not equate having to work hard with actual slavery. Harmful at minimum. Instead: *working hard*, *putting in the hours*, *chugging along*, *hustling*—which, I know, that has—you know—its own issues, too. But those are all much, much better options.

Tara Whitaker: [8:27] The next one—this is a biggie—is *grammar Nazi*. I can't believe this is still used—2022, the time of this recording—but it is. And I see it on social media more than I would like to. Again, I don't think this needs an in-depth explanation. However, being vigilant about grammar is not the same as murdering millions of people. We don't need to be using it. Instead, I've seen *grammar police*, which again—I know—that has its own issues as well. But here's my favorite. *Grammar Nazi* obviously has a negative connotation to it. And it does not help feed into the stereotype that editors are these—you know—red-pen-wielding meanies who are just slashing through every error known to man. How about *grammar enthusiast*? Let's put a positive spin on it. Just because you enjoy grammar, you like it—what—why do you have to have a negative Nazi connotation to it? You're an enthusiast! Let's, let's own that! *Grammar enthusiast*. I think that's such a way better option—way better option. So, have a think about that. Okay.

Tara Whitaker: [9:44] The next one is *spirit animal*. And I've seen this used on social media to describe attracting someone's ideal client, like their ideal author. Appropriating Native American culture is not ideal. Not a good thing. Now, of course, if you're Native American, this is different. But if you are not, *spirit animal* is not appropriate. How about just saying *ideal client* or *someone with the same vibe as you*, or *same values*, or you're looking for your new *author-best friend*. Something along those lines is a much better option. And this is going on a bit of a Tara-tangent, but while we're on the topic, we also don't have powwows. We're not “the low man on the totem pole,” and we don't sit “Indian style.” We have meetings, we're beginners, or we're new. And if you're my daughter, you sit crisscross applesauce. That's all I'll say about that.

Tara Whitaker: [10:39] Now, the next group of words—I had two of them, and then we had a listener-submitted option. So, I grouped these together, which [are] *OCD*, *crazy*, and *insane*. And the lovely [Meg McIntyre](#) is the one who submitted *OCD*. And I will say *The Editing Podcast* has a fantastic episode that is dedicated specifically on why we shouldn't be using *OCD* in the editing industry. I'm going to [link it in the show notes](#), but I definitely suggest having a listen to that. There are far less offensive words to use than these. And I know, this is one of the words that I use still is *crazy*. And I'm trying very, very, very hard to eradicate it because it's just harmful. It's rude. We're human beings, like, let's just be kind. Words to use instead: we can be *meticulous*, *precise*, *wild*, *ridiculous*, *silly*, *absurd*, *odd*. Bust out that thesaurus, bust out the thesaurus.

Tara Whitaker: [11:43] All right, the next group—I had one of these words on the list, and then, again, the lovely Lena Velasquez submitted the other one. And that is, *should*

or *have to* or *must*. Now, this comes into play in two different ways. First of all, when it comes to what you “should” or “have to do” in your business—guess what—you’re the owner of your business. You don’t have to do anything; you are the boss. And if anyone like a coach, a mentor, a teacher, tells you that you *have to* do something, and says it in, kind of, like, that “my way or the highway” way—that’s a red flag. Because a coach or mentor is supposed to help you discover and unearth what’s best for you. We don’t tell you what to do. That’s a consultant, not a coach. And if—you know—mine kind of is a hybrid approach because I do both, but someone telling you that you have to do something is always a bit of a red flag for me. And with my personality, I automatically am on the defensive and like, “Well, why? Why do I have to do that?” I’m going to do the opposite, you know. So, there is no one way to do business; there’s no one way that you can run your editing business, no matter who says that. So, keep an eye out for *should* or *have to* or *must*. And then the other way that that can come into play is when an author, or excuse me, an editor, tells an author or a client that they *should have to* do something. We don’t have that authority.

Tara Whitaker: [13:23] Now, that’s what’s going to lead perfectly into my next example, which was submitted by another lovely human being, [Dayna Reidenouer](#) (they/she), with True Love Editorial Services. And she submitted *corrections*. Now, if you were to receive something, anything, and it said, “Here are my corrections.” How does that make you feel? It’s kind of a negative vibe, right? Like, you did all these things wrong. At the end of the day, the author—your client—is the owner of their piece of content. It is 100% up to them to decide what they choose to do with it. So, when we give our edits, they are not requirements, they are not corrections, they’re not set in stone. We are merely giving *suggestions* based on our knowledge and skills and expertise. So, some *suggestions*—haha! Instead of *corrections*, use *suggestions*, perhaps *comments*, or *queries* or *remarks*. Now think about that. If you were to receive something back from an editor, and you said, “Here are my suggestions. Here are my remarks. I’ve left some queries for you.” Doesn’t that feel better than “I’ve given you my corrections”? Bleh! Agreed. Let’s think about the words that we’re using. They’re small tweaks, but they make a big impact.

Tara Whitaker: [14:45] And that’s it for the list. Now, that is not exhaustive by any stretch, but it’s the ones that I see the most often—the ones that I think are the most problematic and harmful. I’m sure I’m missing some, and if you have any, I can always do a part two—I would love to hear them. But I think it’s important we keep this conversation going because ultimately—you know—like I said—it’s up to you on how you run your business. And I can’t tell you what you should or should not do, but I can share with you things that I have seen in the industry that affect other people. And I’m all for being better human beings, first and foremost, and then being better editors. The world needs our help. We need to make the world a better place and choosing our words carefully and thoughtfully is a great place to start. And that’s what a Modern Editor is, after all, right? We’re always learning and growing. So, if you’re interested in, you know, chatting more, I’m always available. Find me on Instagram, find me at [tarawhitaker.com](#). And until next time, keep learning, keep growing and know that you’ve got this!

Tara Whitaker: [15:50] Thank you so much for tuning into today's episode. If you enjoy *The Modern Editor Podcast*, I would be so grateful if you left us a review over on iTunes. And as always, you can head to tarawhitaker.com to connect with me and stay in touch. We'll chat again soon.