

THE
Conscious
↑
STYLE
GUIDE

A FLEXIBLE APPROACH *to* LANGUAGE
that INCLUDES, RESPECTS,
and EMPOWERS

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INTRODUCTION

Many of us want to “do our part” in the fight against social injustices. Using inclusive terminology—or comprehending it—has become a necessity in many arenas of life. But the world of inclusive terminology can be more maze than amazing. How do we know when a word needs replacing? Who has the final say when people disagree? And why is it so hard to let go of certain words?

Though many friends and colleagues have asked me to write a book, I struggled with the idea. I knew that a reference that was essentially a menu of words would be outdated before it hit the presses. After all, language evolves. But during the process of studying language, conversing about language, and editing language, I had an epiphany. What people need more is a system—their own style—for thinking about these constantly changing issues.

Style is simply expression. Like the “fashion” meaning of style, language style is flexible and adapts to the occasion. And like fashion, your style and approach should fit you. Without a clear way of thinking, there can be no clear way of doing. So I decided to write a reference book that helped people nurture their own conscious philosophy.

I love reference books. In my youth, I read dictionaries and

encyclopedias. As a writer, I pored over thesauruses and visual dictionaries. As an editor, I sought refuge in grammar books and style guides. I blogged about Associated Press style and Chicago style on APvsChicago.com for anyone “who gives a dollar sign, ampersand, exclamation point, and pound sign about style.” For three years, I wrote the style column for the beloved but now-defunct *Copyediting** newsletter. Meanwhile, to perform my editorial duties, I scoured the internet, searching for online resources. Journalism affinity groups, like the National Association of Black Journalists and the Asian American Journalists Association, had published community-centered style guides to counter the recycling of stereotypes and non-conscious narratives in the media. GLAAD, the National Center on Disability and Journalism, and other organizations that support specific subcultures offered their own media guides. Despite the proliferation of resources out there, I knew from conversations with my fellow editors and writers that awareness of them was almost nonexistent. In 2015, after more than two decades of editing professionally, I launched Conscious Style Guide at ConsciousStyleGuide.com.

ConsciousStyleGuide.com was the first website dedicated to conscious language. My mission was to help writers and editors become more aware—of words, yes, but also portrayals, framing, and representation. I also launched a monthly news roundup, later named *The Conscious Language Newsletter*. What differentiated ConsciousStyleGuide.com from mainstream guides at the

**Copyediting* was founded in 1990 by Mary Beth Protomastro under the name *Copy Editor*.

time was its ability to quickly evolve. If a piece of writing had an illuminating perspective, I added it. If a resource became outdated, I replaced it. To publish a newsletter every month, I reviewed hundreds of articles to find news, opinions, and observations related to conscious language that would help my subscribers—and myself—make informed decisions.

To many, conscious language consists of kind, inclusive, and bias-free words. To me, the one who coined the term, this is an oversimplification, like reducing rainbows to seven colors. Conscious language is a philosophy and a practice that goes beyond terminology. I chose the word *conscious* because it means “aware, mindful, and intentional.” So, to use conscious language is to be more aware, mindful, and intentional about how we treat ourselves and others through language. While the use of contextual and impact-conscious language is not new, capturing its many forms in a single term is. Now many industry leaders have adopted my term to describe their own inclusive language practices.

Conscious language liberates instead of limits. It emphasizes the importance of context and critical thinking, and it flexes and grows alongside society. In this book, I share my insights for building a personal practice. My favorite definition of *practice* is “translating an idea into action” (Vocabulary.com). To help you translate conscious ideas into consistent action, the chapters—Prepare, Plan, Practice, Pause, and Persuade—mimic the journey someone new to conscious language undertakes.

In chapter one, Prepare, I explain my philosophy of conscious language, who uses it, and when. After introducing the five core

components of conscious language, I distinguish it from language that is nice, overinclusive, or politically correct. Then I give an overview of known limitations.

In chapter two, Plan, I discuss implicit bias, the signs of bias activation, and how we can shift our perspectives. I include a series of tips designed to reveal possible motivations, interests, and boundaries for your practice. After explaining how thinking like an editor can shape your approach, I demonstrate the importance of deferring to credible sources when questioning language.

In chapter three, Practice, I present best practices for when you are in doubt. These overarching guidelines can help you identify and remedy bias at four levels of content—word, sentence, story, and series (meaning any number of related pieces). I round out this chapter with a section devoted to conscious design and images as well as tips for respectful interpersonal communication.

In chapter four, Pause, we take a detour. Here, I address common doubts. To encourage compassion for one another, I talk about the many ways that words and beliefs may be misaligned and how to work across differences. Because working with language and dealing with people can be stressful, I provide step-by-step instructions for one of the most effective techniques that you may not know about for alleviating stress. Then I cheer you on with words of inspiration from people I admire.

In chapter five, Persuade, I outline ways to spread conscious language, including building your own stack of reference works and creating a style sheet.

How you flesh out your theoretical framework is up to you.

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This book exists to affirm that conscious language is a choice and that your unique voice belongs in this movement. I hope my guidance helps boost your confidence in discerning song from noise. Please marinate in the ideas set forth in this book and allow the most resonant conscious language principles and practices to illuminate your path. Ideally, you will explore approaches that are doable and reasonable and, above all, make sense to you.

In truth, this book is as much about you as it is about conscious language. Being clear about your beliefs and boundaries will help you recognize when someone else's concerns may have supplanted your own. The best person to make sense of where your intentions and goals intersect is you. Your passion for conscious language may falter if you need to pretend to be someone you are not. Our choices must be grounded, down to the bedrock, in something we believe in. If we build a practice around fear—of criticism, of exclusion—then we tend to do the least to get by. Fear may also produce piecemeal style decisions severed from throughline and thought. Curiosity, not compliance, is the way forward.

As you can imagine, it is tricky to write a guide to conscious language. No doubt, by writing a book that describes and prescribes conscious language, I am invoking Muphry's Law. As hinted by the cheeky spelling, Muphry's Law states that any criticism of a writing or editing error will contain such an error. In the process of exhorting a language of compassion and context, I am bound to make missteps and be unskillful in my choice of words and incomplete in my efforts to include. I hope that you can be charitable in your reading despite these flaws.

Also, some of you may wish that I took the guidance further, prescribed more, laid down the law. But I am consciously outlining a philosophy that can spread. For it to spread, it must be flexible. Though I present considerations for best practices, my brushstrokes are necessarily broad. Content and context work together, so rather than one-word-fits-all solutions, I encourage you to observe and explore different approaches to equity-based language so you can come to your own conclusions about what is more effective for you and your audience. My main intents are to help you close the gap between spectatorship and ownership and to provide tools for processing the shifts in equity-oriented language.

Again, this book is an invitation to think and question, not to perform. If you seek straightforward guides to terminology, I invite you to treat ConsciousStyleGuide.com as a companion to this book.

If you work with conscious or inclusive language in a specialized field—journalism, publishing, counseling, higher ed, medicine, science, the nonprofit sector, to name a few—this book can help you solidify your style, embrace flexibility, and use the power of context to effect change.

Finally, if you are looking for a history lesson on sexism, racism, and other types of bias, please visit your local or online bookstore. I touch upon identity, culture, and privilege because power dynamics are inseparable from language, but these complex concepts are beyond the scope of this book. Nor do I debate, for example, which identities are “real,” whether a group exists, or why oppressed groups deserve compassion. I encourage you to

Introduction

read widely, especially points of view you disagree with. After all, a willingness and openness to learn (and unlearn) is essential to the idea of thinking critically about language.

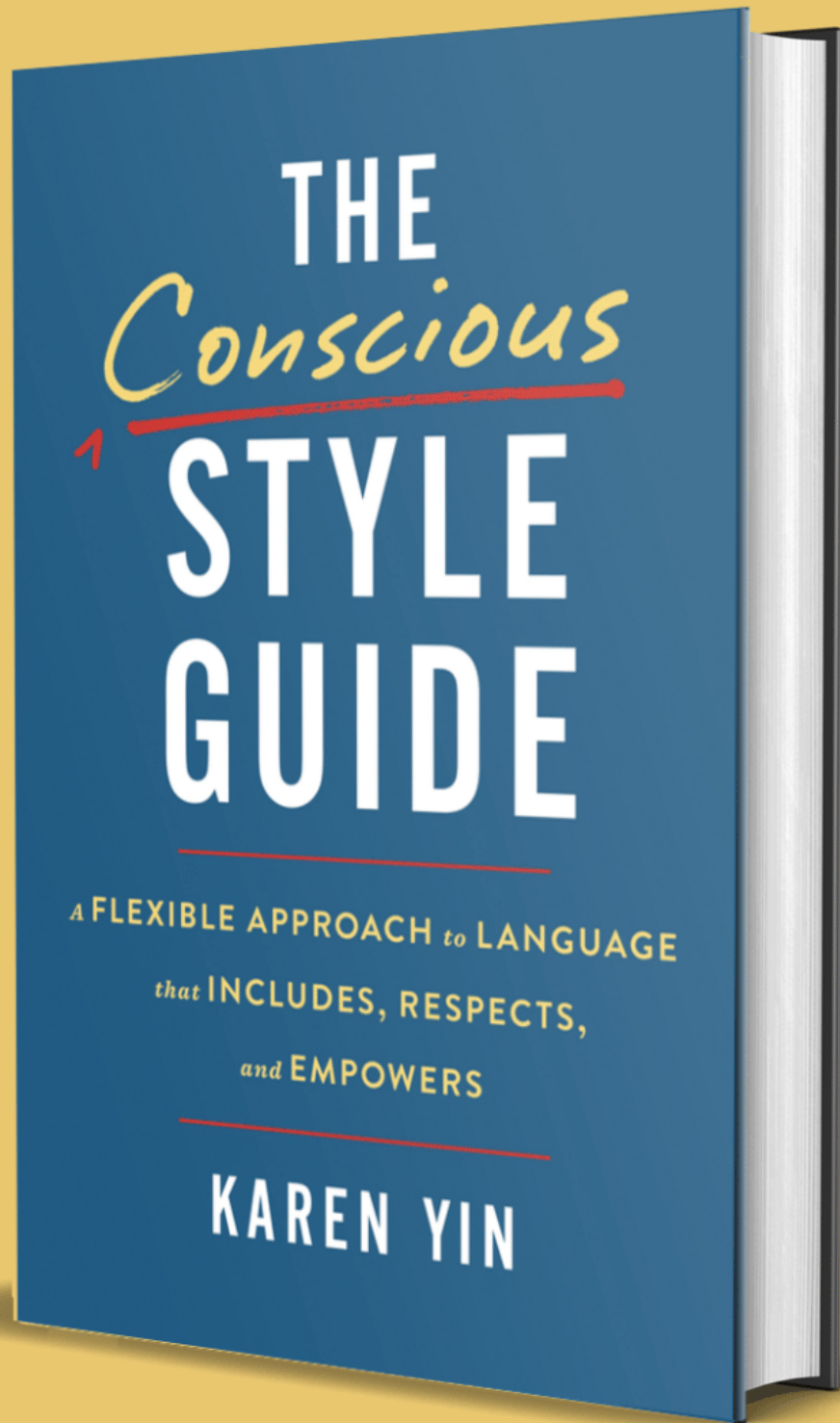
When I proposed this book title, *The Conscious Style Guide: A Flexible Approach to Language That Includes, Respects, and Empowers*, my editor, Tracy Behar, thought it was imprecise. Did I mean that the approach includes, respects, and empowers, or that the language does?

I said both.

Thank you for letting me be your guide into the rewarding, joyful, and powerful world of conscious language. Please take from this book what you need.



LITTLE,
BROWN
SPARK



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