

Editorial Policy



Guidance Note

Offensive Language

This guidance note should be read in conjunction with BBC Editorial Guidelines (www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines) Section 8: Harm and Offence.

In cases of doubt, further assistance can be sought from the duty Editorial Policy Adviser by telephoning 0870 333 4550 or BBC extension (02) 81819.

All Guidance Notes can be found at edpol.gateway.bbc.co.uk/guidance_notes.shtml (BBC internal link) or www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/.

Definition of “offensive language”

It is not possible to compile a definitive list of offensive words. Language is fluid, with new word and phrases regularly entering the public vocabulary. Also, the power of established terms to offend may change over time. For example, racist abuse or pejorative terms relating to physical or mental illness and sexual orientation have become increasingly unacceptable to audiences.

The following examples indicate the differing offensiveness of language. It is by no means definitive. If in doubt consult a senior editorial figure within your department or Editorial Policy:

- The most offensive language includes terms such as cunt, motherfucker and fuck (which are subject to mandatory referrals); others such as cocksucker and nigger are also extremely offensive to audiences.
- Moderately offensive language includes terms such as wanker, pussy, bastard, etc. Care should be taken with using moderately offensive terms and they are almost certain to generate complaints if used in pre-watershed programmes.
- Mildly offensive language includes crap, Jesus, Christ, knob etc. Terms such as bloody, God, prat, tart etc are all very mildly offensive terms - nonetheless they should not be used indiscriminately.

There are a range of other factors to take into consideration when assessing the acceptability of offensive language in editorial content:

Frequency and accumulation

Even mildly offensive language can become unacceptable to the audience if used too frequently in a programme, an article, an item etc. For example, a line of dialogue which contains a number of mildly offensive words often produces a much more negative impact on audiences than if the same number of offensive words is spread throughout the entire piece.

Used sparingly and judiciously, some strong language can have great comedic or dramatic impact; but careless or excessive use is likely to upset many of our audiences.

Context, Character and Tone

How, who, when and where offensive language is used plays an important part in the reaction of audiences to its use.

Even if strong language is used after the watershed, audiences may feel it is inappropriate if it appears to be out of context e.g. offensive language in charity appeals such as Comic Relief or Children in Need or in content which may appeal to younger audiences or in news items.

Characters, whether presenters, performers, contributors or fictional portrayals also contribute to the acceptability or otherwise of offensive terms. Audiences have expectations of individuals who are featured in BBC output and this can affect how they react to strong language. Audiences are more likely to be offended if even mildly offensive language is used by presenters of factual and news programmes and by presenters with appeal to a younger audience.

Likewise, audiences have expectations of some actors and fictional characters. Presentation information, listings and billings are all helpful in signalling a change of role or indicating that the content may be stronger than the audience would normally expect.

Audiences also have varying expectations of the different BBC channels and stations. In general terms, viewers are less tolerant of bad language on BBC1 as it appeals to a broader audience. Even on radio, where there is no watershed, editorial teams should be conscious that certain slots are associated with particular types of content and appropriate scheduling is important.

Strong language delivered or used aggressively will invariably make a more negative impact than the same language used in a humorous or non-aggressive way. Younger audiences, in particular, react badly to shouting and even mildly offensive words can be aggravated by insensitive delivery.

Slang

Slang, patois and regional words and phrases should be used carefully as the degree of offence may differ according to different audiences. Take care with the meaning of offensive terms. For example, “twat” is a mildly offensive word to some people, to others it is another word for “cunt” and hence one of the most strongly offensive terms.

Changing acceptability

Careful judgements have to be made about the acceptability of certain terms. For example, words such as “faggot”, “poof” or “queer” are sometimes used by members of the gay community to describe each other; but the same terms may be deemed offensive when used by a heterosexual, particularly if the terminology is used aggressively or in a clearly pejorative manner.

Likewise, the term “nigger” is occasionally used in the black community and terms such as “cripple” are sometimes used humorously or sarcastically by people with disabilities. But this usage may still cause distress within these communities and is also much more likely to cause offence when employed by someone who is not a member of the requisite community.

Classic Content

Archive content frequently raises issues about the acceptability of language for a contemporary audience. Difficult decisions have to be made about whether or not to reversion content which contains language that is now clearly out of step with popular tastes.

As with other instances of offensive language, context, character and scheduling are important considerations. BBC7, for example, devotes much of its schedule to classic comedy and the station’s audiences are less likely than others to be surprised by terminology which would not be acceptable in contemporary comedy. Presentation announcements also help to explain the original context of the broadcast. However, the station’s editorial teams still have to make case by case judgements on whether dialogue goes beyond the bounds of acceptability and edit accordingly.

All BBC outlets should take great care if broadcasting un-edited archive programmes as straight-forward repeats in the normal schedules. Audiences will usually judge such content by contemporary standards and may take offence if terms now considered pejorative are retained in the repeat.

Bleeping and Dipping

Production teams may sometimes choose to bleep out or dip the sound on offensive language rather than edit it out of a programme. In these cases, it's important to ensure the sound is completely removed and that television viewers cannot see the offensive language being clearly "mouthed" by the speaker. Entertainment programmes may want to suggest the existence of offensive language by including the first and/or last syllables but this is not acceptable pre-watershed if audiences can easily understand what the offensive language is intended to be.