

WORDS ABOUT WAR MATTER

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.

- George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 1946¹

A LANGUAGE GUIDE FOR DISCUSSING WAR AND FOREIGN POLICY

From George Orwell's critique of the language of totalitarian regimes to today, discussions of war and foreign policy have been full of dehumanizing euphemisms, bloodless jargon, little-known government acronyms, and troubling metaphors that hide warfare's damage. This guide aims to help people write and talk about war and foreign policy more accurately, more honestly, and in ways people outside the elite Washington, DC foreign policy "blob" can understand.

We encourage you to use this guide, to share it with others, and to adapt it as necessary to local contexts. The guide should be especially helpful to journalists and other writers, podcasters and vloggers, policy analysts, teachers, scholars, and people involved in public education projects. When quoting or copying parts of the guide, please cite it, with a link to the guide's online home: "Words about War Matter: A Language Guide for Discussing War and Foreign Policy," September 2023, www.wordsaboutwar.org."

Note: Some of these suggestions are focused on a US context; most apply worldwide.

AVOID EUPHEMISMS FOR MURDER, KILLING, DEATH, AND WAR

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
casualty	killed and wounded	Like other military terms, “casualty” hides what’s happening: people killed or wounded. There’s also public confusion about whether the term refers to people killed, wounded, or both. The <i>AP Stylebook</i> recommends: “Avoid using the word, which is vague and can refer to either injuries or deaths.”
collateral damage	civilian killing civilian deaths civilian murders	Militaries have a long history of employing euphemistic language to disguise the violence of their actions. “Collateral damage” is a particularly offensive term to hide the human impact of war.
drone, to	assassinate, to assassinate by drone, to kill by drone, to murder by drone, to	“Drone” has become a verb used to disguise extrajudicial killing. Avoid this and other dehumanizing language related to drones. “Bug splat” is a clearly dehumanizing term used by some drone operators to describe humans they have killed.
fallen, the	dead, the killed, the war dead	While we must respect family members’ choices about how to refer to loved ones killed in war, “the fallen” is a euphemism that hides and glorifies the death of war. Avoid.
intervention	war invasion attack	Another euphemism that disguises the violence of war (and invasions that don’t qualify as wars).

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
kinetic	describe the actual military violence: bombs, bullets, missiles, or other instruments of death	“Kinetic” also attempts to sanitize the work of killing and death.
neutralize	kill murder assassinate	“Neutralize” is a dehumanizing and sanitized euphemism that clearly hides the taking of human life.
overseas contingency operation	war in some cases: invasion combat military invasion	These terms, widely used in the military and Congress, disguise wars and the violence of other military combat. Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine is a similar attempt to hide and disguise the war he and his subordinates have waged.
precision bombing precision airstrike precision-guided munitions	bombing airstrike bomb/missile attack use only if there is evidence munitions are actually guided: guided munitions/bombs/missiles	Don’t use “precision” to describe bombing and missile attacks. The word is branding and public relations to encourage people to think war can be “clean” and to avoid questions about the death, injury, and destruction caused by bombs, missiles, and other munitions. An article in the US Army’s <i>Military Review</i> journal describes the “vaunted precision” of drones, for example, as “sheer fantasy, if not literally science fiction.” ²
targeted killing	assassination extrajudicial assassination extrajudicial killing targeted assassination murder	Used in the context of killer drones to disguise extrajudicial assassinations widely considered illegal under international law. Note that all killing in warzones can be considered a form of extrajudicial murder.

AVOID “DEFENSE”

INSTEAD USE “WAR,” “PENTAGON,” OR “MILITARY”

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
defense	war military	In many contexts “defense” has become a misleading, Orwellian word used to describe warfare and other military actions that often have little if anything to do with defending anyone. Just because someone says something is “defense” does not make it true. In most cases “war” or “military” are better, more accurate terms.
defense budget defense spending	Pentagon budget Pentagon spending military budget military spending	These terms assume that taxpayer money is providing defense. They hide the military’s offensive functions through US history, which often have undermined the defense of the United States. ³ The <i>AP Stylebook</i> similarly suggests “military spending usually is the more precise term.”
defense budget vs. non-defense budget defense budget vs. entitlements	Pentagon budget vs. non-Pentagon budget Pentagon budget vs. human needs budget war budget vs. human needs budget	This binary is common in discussions of the US budget. In addition to the problems with “defense budget” identified above, “non-defense budget” suggests that health care, education, housing, etc. do not defend people.
defense contractor defense contracts defense industry	Pentagon contractor Pentagon contracts weapons contractor weapons company weapons contracts weapons/war industry military contractor military contracts military industry	“Defense” is part of many other terms that are equally misleading and ideological. Find the best, most accurate replacement. (Remember no term or word is perfect.)

TERMS TO AVOID

BETTER ALTERNATIVES

EXPLANATION

<p>Defense Department Department of Defense</p> <p><i>See also Secretary of Defense</i></p>	<p>Pentagon the military</p>	<p>The department's prior name, the Department of War or War Department, more accurately and honestly described the agency's activities. Using the current name perpetuates the highly debatable idea that the department actually provides defensive services. Using the name also hides the offensive wars that have been the primary focus of the Pentagon and the military since US independence.⁴</p> <p>The name of the agency's headquarters is a helpful, frequently used shorthand to describe the US department responsible for war.</p>
<p>defense expert defense analyst defense strategy</p>	<p>military analyst military expert military strategy Pentagon analyst Pentagon expert military strategy war strategy</p>	<p>Media outlets frequently and inaccurately employ these terms. Again, avoid "defense" in most contexts.</p>
<p>Secretary of Defense</p>	<p>Pentagon chief Pentagon Secretary Secretary [insert name]</p>	<p>Again, avoid using the misleading word "defense" by using these alternatives or simply the person's name.</p>

AVOID EUPHEMISTIC MILITARY TERMINOLOGY

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
all-volunteer force	all-recruited force post-draft military	While people join the military for many reasons, many join because they have few other options for employment, education, and a stable life. Many refer to the “poverty draft” replacing the US draft that ended in 1973. The Pentagon also spends billions annually to recruit and entice people to “volunteer.” After joining, working for the military is not voluntary—recruits are contractually bound to complete their term of employment (“service”).
boots on the ground	troops combat forces military personnel soldiers, Marines, and sailors and Air Force personnel when on land	“Boots on the ground” often masks the violent nature of what the people in the boots are doing. It also directs attention away from the lives of the people wearing the boots.
deterrence	<i>depending on context</i> troop deployment military deployment military bases and troops overseas bases and troops bases and troops abroad	Like “power projection,” “deterrence” hides the deployment of US military forces, bases, and weaponry abroad whose purpose is to threaten other countries. Being specific about the forces involved is generally best. Note that while many use “deterrence” as an unquestioned justification for deploying US forces overseas, there is little if any evidence suggesting that deterrence is an effective military strategy. ⁵
enemy noncombatant	civilians	Both words in “enemy noncombatant” dehumanize what are usually innocent civilians, making it easier to ignore their

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
		deaths, injuries, and suffering. Avoid “enemy civilians” too: labeling someone an enemy is usually an ideological claim—a kind of branding to stigmatize—rather than a label based in evidence.
enhanced interrogation	torture	The George W. Bush administration used this Orwellian term to try to justify interrogation techniques widely considered to be torture under international law (and prior US authorities).
expeditionary force	troops Marines soldiers invasion force	“Expeditionary forces” sounds more like a scientific voyage or exploration than what it is: military forces deployed into other peoples’ lands without their consent. It’s usually best to name the specific forces involved. Historically speaking, US “expeditionary forces” have been imperial forces helping expand US territorial and political-economic control.
lethal aid	weapons shipments	“Lethal aid” should be an oxymoron given that “aid” usually appears in humanitarian and medical contexts. Whether one supports any given weapons shipment or not, we shouldn’t hide the deadly nature of war. (See below for guidance about avoiding medical metaphors.)
military exercises	war maneuvers war training war exercises	The word “exercise” makes this sound like benign exercising at the gym. The activities involved are preparations for war, often designed as threats to a nearby country given that war exercises can disguise an actual invasion force.

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
military footprint	military occupation military bases and forces military	“Military footprint” similarly masks the nature of the military’s presence, including its deadly weaponry. In other countries, the term conceals the occupation of foreign lands.
military sites/ locations/facilities forward operating sites forward operating locations cooperative security locations	bases military bases	The Pentagon has a range of terms that help hide the presence of US military bases. Frequently these terms also help disguise the size and scope of bases and the sovereign power that US personnel frequently enjoy on bases abroad.
national interest	corporate interests elite interests	“National interest” is widely used to justify military and other government actions. Usually the term actually means corporate or elite interests. Don’t let others make this substitution. Identify whose interests are being served and whose are not.
national security threats	military threats nuclear threats climate threats extremist threats...	Many use “national security threats” to scare people and turn off critical thinking. Avoid this term and instead be specific, and thus more honest, about the threat involved.
power projection	<i>depending on context</i> troop deployment military deployment military bases and troops overseas bases and troops bases and troops abroad	“Power projection” again hides the nature of the power involved—the troops, weaponry, and other violent force. Best to name and describe the military power involved.
training grounds	war training grounds war rehearsal grounds war training base	“Training” is another word that hides the violent, deadly nature of military activities.

AVOID THE “T” WORDS

TERMS TO AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES	EXPLANATION
terrorists terrorism	militants acts of mass violence attacks on civilians terror attacks	The George W. Bush administration helped make these already questionable terms useless. US and other leaders worldwide have applied the terms widely to any group or organization they don't like. As many have said, one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. Avoid the words and instead name the actions of groups employing violence and military force. ⁶
war on terror (WOT) war on terrorism global war on terror (GWOT)	post-9/11 wars endless wars	Many organizations recommend against using the Bush administration's name for the US wars launched since 2001 in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, and far beyond. Reuters, for example, says the term “is poor English and part of the propaganda battle around militant violence.” ⁷

MORE GUIDANCE

Avoid jargon.

Jargon, like many of the terms above, makes it hard for people to understand what you mean, excluding outsiders. Jargon also obscures what's going on. Ditch jargon of all kinds: military, foreign policy, Congressional, bureaucratic. Use clear, simple, descriptive language. For example, “*Targeted killings*” are *illegal (or extrajudicial) assassinations*.

Avoid Congressional language almost always.

Develop a reflex to avoid this language too. Like military and Pentagon language, Congressional language often obscures what's going on while excluding outsiders who don't speak the language. When communicating with Congress members and staffers, use their language mindfully.

Avoid military/Pentagon language almost always.

Developing a reflex to avoid military and Pentagon language is helpful. Language is entrapping. Language can constrain our thinking. Terms like “theater of war,” “military campaign,” and “military operation” (e.g., Operation Iraqi Freedom) sanitize battles, combat, invasions, and killing. Taking the time to find the clearest, most accurate language helps ensure clearer thinking. When speaking to military audiences, like other specialized audiences, use military language mindfully—consider alternating between military language and plain language, gradually replacing the former with the latter.

Use some military terminology accurately.

If you don't, it will piss off some of your audience. For example, don't refer to people in the US Navy or US Marines as “soldiers.” They are sailors and Marines, respectively. (Note: some style guides accept “soldiers” as a generic term for all military personnel.)

Generic term = military personnel (also, troops)

Army = soldiers

Air Force = airmen (airwomen, unofficial, is used by some); gender neutral = Air Force personnel

Coast Guard = Coast Guardsmen, Coast Guardswomen; gender neutral = Coast Guard member or coastie (their informal name)

Marine Corps = Marines

Navy = sailors

Space Force = guardians

Don't use “warriors” or “warfighters.”

Use the correct terms above and not these hypermilitarized terms.

Don't Use “Hawks and Doves.”

This framing is terrible. Everyone should stop using it. “Hawk” is an especially awful euphemism naturalizing support for war and hiding war's effects. Instead, describe the specifics of what a person supports: On the one hand: war, bigger military budgets, aggression toward China/Russia/Iran/North Korea, military domination, etc. On the other hand: peace, cutting military budgets, diplomacy, negotiations, multilateralism, etc.

Avoid acronyms/initialisms.

Like jargon, they exclude outsiders and obscure what's going on. “OCO” is war. “NDAA” is the annual Pentagon spending authorization bill (a term requiring greater explanation for many audiences).

Avoid sports metaphors.

War is not sport. Sports metaphors hide war's human damage. Sports have winners and losers. In war, no one “wins.” There are only different degrees of suffering.

Avoid medical metaphors.

War is not medical practice. “In this metaphor,” prominent linguist George Lakoff explains, “military

'operations' are seen as hygienic, to 'clean out' enemy fortifications. Bombing raids are portrayed as 'surgical strikes' to 'take out' anything that can serve a military purpose."⁸ War is never surgical or hygienic. Using such language hides the destruction caused by bombs, missiles, and other deadly weaponry. Human beings and groups, no matter how odious, are also not "tumors," "cancers," or "disease." This language dehumanizes other human beings, making it easier to kill.

Avoid talking about countries as singular, homogenous wholes.

Turning a country into a single *thing* is a common practice that obscures the people in that country. This can make it easier to wage war by hiding war's human damage. When we talk about "the United States invading Afghanistan," war becomes more like bloodless, dehumanized sport. This makes it easier to overlook the millions of lives affected and ended by war. Talking about countries as singular wholes also hides the many internal divisions within countries. Criticize specific actions of the "Chinese government" or the "Xi regime." Don't criticize "China" or "the Chinese." Both are inaccurate. Both fuel Sinophobia, anti-Asian, and anti-Asian American sentiment.

Don't use a leader's name to refer to an entire nation.

This can hide the violence of war and other foreign policy decisions. While many leaders have enormous power, allowing "Xi Jinping" to stand for all of China hides the lives of 1.4 billion people. Linguist George Lakoff explains using the case of Saddam Hussein and the Iraq war: "One of the most central metaphors in our foreign policy is that *A Nation Is A Person*. It is used hundreds of times a day, every time the nation of Iraq is conceptualized in terms of a single person, Saddam Hussein. The war, we are told, is not being waged against the Iraqi people, but only against this one person.... What the metaphor hides, of course, is that the 3,000 bombs to be dropped in the first two days will not be dropped on that one person. They will kill many thousands of the people hidden by the metaphor, people that according to the metaphor we are not going to war against."⁹

Avoid saying "United States" or "America" when you mean the US government—so too with other countries and governments.

This practice is near universal in the media, politics, academia, and beyond despite the fact that: 1) Referring to the collective action of any country is factually inaccurate: the *United States* did not invade Iraq. Russia did not invade Ukraine. 2) The practice obscures actors. It hides *who* is doing what in the world: The *Bush/Cheney administration* used the US military to invade Iraq. *Putin* invaded Ukraine with the Russian military. 3) Referring collectively to the United States when actually describing the actions of the US government (and often US or transnational special interest groups) also encourages listeners to unconsciously identify with the actions involved, making it harder to analyze them critically. Don't say "US support for Saudi Arabia" when you mean "US government support for Saudi Arabia" or "support for Saudi Arabia from leading elements of the Military Industrial Complex."

Use “national security” and “national defense” very carefully and very critically, if at all.

“National security” and “national defense” are used frequently to justify anything and everything, including offensive wars that do little if anything to secure or defend the United States or its people. Avoid repeating the terms uncritically. Use the terms *only* when there is evidence that the activities described are actually securing or defending people. Note that some are trying to expand understandings of “national security” to include other forms of security such as health, climate, income, etc. Others use “human security” to expand ideas of security beyond the military alone.¹⁰

Avoid war, gun, and other violent metaphors.

Words and phrases like “rally the troops,” “on the frontlines,” and “battle” are everywhere. So too “pull the trigger,” “smoking gun,” “ammunition,” “silver bullet,” and “you killed it.” This language and the war metaphor itself (e.g., war on poverty, war on COVID) reflect the pervasiveness of war, guns, and violence in US society. We can make ourselves and others aware of these metaphors and avoid them, helping make language and, to some degree, society less violent. Some lists of words and alternatives are in this note.¹¹

BE PREPARED FOR SOME RESISTANCE

Using words and terms that are unfamiliar or less commonly used in public can feel hard, even if they are the most accurate. We can feel awkward using language that strays from conventional language use and perhaps even conventional wisdom.

We encourage people to follow the suggestions here in all settings. Changing language use takes practice and repetition. The more we use accurate, honest, descriptive language, however, the easier it becomes.

Some suggestions above may be harder than others to adopt. Writers in particular may face resistance from editors when using terminology that strays from mainstream usage. Don't let resistance discourage you. If you try to change your language and are forced to adopt conventional terminology, try again the next time. Keep pushing editors, fellow journalists, and others to rethink their language choices.

When we encourage others to rethink their language choices, do so gently. Shaming people's language use is unhelpful and tends to cause resistance and division. Instead, share alternatives politely, taking care to explain why particular words, terms, or phrases are unhelpful. Point to the guide as a resource. Use language to invite people into conversations about how words shape how we perceive the world and thus matters of war and foreign policy.

SOME FINAL REMINDERS

- Clear, accurate, descriptive language is always best. When discussing a phenomenon—war—that has such profound, often deadly effects on human flesh and bones, we should use “bullet-hits-the-bone words,” describing war’s effects as directly and honestly as possible.¹²
- Avoid falling into other language traps and reinforcing longstanding narratives such as US exceptionalism.
- Use language that foregrounds human lives and the humanity of those harmed by war and foreign policy.

GENERAL WRITING ADVICE

Aim for a 5th-grade reading level (unless addressing audiences above that level). More than half the United States reads at a 6th grade level or below. Aiming for a 5th grade reading level is especially important for reading on the web—and almost everything ends up on the web—because most people skim and miss material online. Short words and short sentences work best. See: <https://centerforplainlanguage.org/what-is-readability/>.

Use simple, clear language.

Write short sentences.

Use short words.

Delete ~~any and all~~ **unnecessary** words that don't need to be in every sentence.

If you can use two words, not three, do so.

If you can use two syllables, not three, do so.

Do you really need that adjective? If not, delete.

Do you really need two adjectives? Use one.

RESOURCES ON LANGUAGE USE

In addition to the works cited in the endnotes below, here are some helpful resources.

Asian American Journalists Association, “Guidance on Coverage of Sept. 11, 20 Years Later,” <https://www.aja.org/2021/09/08/guidance-on-coverage-of-sept-11-20-years-later/>

Asian Americans Advancing Justice, “National Security Messaging Guidance,” <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/publication/national-security-messaging-guidance>

William J. Astore, “All the Euphemisms We Use for ‘War,’”
<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/all-the-euphemisms-we-use-for-war/>

Daniel King, “How Language Is Deployed as a Weapon of War,”
<https://www.motherjones.com/media/2020/02/how-language-is-deployed-as-a-weapon-of-war/>

National Association of Black Journalists, “Guidance on Coverage of Sept 11th, 20 Years Later,”
<https://nabjonline.org/blog/guidance-on-coverage-of-sept-11th-20-years-later/>

George Orwell, “[Politics and the English Language](#),” 1946.

ReThink Media, “9/11 20th Commemoration: Everything You Need To Know,”
<https://rethinkmedia.org/resource/911-20th-commemoration-everything-you-need-know?authkey=Ode6737e-36108aefbdd8e28fc612dae91c4df1249027af1a8b6a8375e1ed1b0e>

South Asian Journalists Association, “Guidance on Coverage of Sept. 11, 20 Years Later,”
<https://saja.org/september-11-style-guidance>

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Endnotes

1. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, 1946, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>.
2. Jeffery Sluka, “Death from Above: UAVs and Losing Hearts and Minds,” *Military Review*, March–April 2013, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20130430_art013.pdf.
3. “The misleading first name of the Defense Department doesn’t justify using ‘defense’ as an adjective for its budget,” writes Norman Solomon. “On the contrary, the ubiquitous use of phrases like ‘defense budget’ and ‘defense spending’...reinforces the false notion that equates the USA’s humongous military operations with defense.” Solomon, “Stop Calling the Military Budget a ‘Defense’ Budget,” *Common Dreams*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2021/10/05/stop-calling-military-budget-defense-budget>. Some might object that “Pentagon budget/spending” will not capture the budget for nuclear weapons in the Department of Energy budget. Note that the Pentagon controls the use of nuclear weapons. Putting nuclear weapons spending in another agency’s budget hides the immensity of war spending. Bureaucratic and

military categories should not define our language and reality. One alternative: “Pentagon and nuclear weapons (nukes) budget/spending.

4. See prior note. “The department’s official name doesn’t make it true,” writes Norman Solomon.

5. David Vine, *Base Nation: How US Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015): 325–27.

6. See, e.g., Jennifer Walkup Jayes, “Beyond the War Paradigm: What History Tells Us About How Terror Campaigns End,” Costs of War Project, February 8, 2022, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2022/BeyondWarParadigm>; ReThink Media, “9/11 20th Commemoration: Everything You Need To Know,” August 3, 2021, <https://rethinkmedia.org/resource/911-20th-commemoration-everything-you-need-know>.

7. Quoted in National Association of Black Journalists, “Guidance on Coverage of Sept 11th, 20 Years Later,” September 7, 2021, <https://nabjonline.org/blog/guidance-on-coverage-of-sept-11th-20-years-later/>.

8. George Lakoff, “Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf,” January 30, 1991, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Lakoff_Gulf_Metaphor_1.html.

9. George Lakoff, “Metaphor and War, Again,” Altnet, March 18, 2003, https://www.altnet.org/2003/03/metaphor_and_war_again.

10. “National security state” and “national security establishment” are used less frequently today. Using the terms can perpetuate the idea that the agencies and people involved are indeed providing security. Often, the “Military Industrial Complex” is largely synonymous with “national security state.” It is thus a good replacement. Other alternatives include “so-called national security state,” “warfare state,” “military state,” “Pentagon and spy state,” “military establishment,” and the “Pentagon and spy establishment.”

11. Grandparents for Gun Safety, “Words Matter,” n.d., <https://grandparentsforgunsafety.org/about-ggs/words-matter/>; Center for Hope & Safety, “Violent Phrases That Are Used in Everyday Speech,” n.d., <https://hopeandsafety.org/learn-more/violent-language/>; Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center, “Suggested Language List: Violent Language,” n.d., <https://sites.google.com/brandeis.edu/parcsuggestedlanguagelist/categories/violent-language>.

12. Email communication with retired Air Force officer William Astore, June 1, 2023.

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