

The Washington Post

'Ex-Marine' and other dangers of labels

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The headline read: "Ex-Marine convicted in abduction, rape." The first paragraph said: "A former U.S. Marine was convicted Friday of abducting and raping a University of Maryland graduate student whom he then left for dead in a secluded, wooded area on a cold February morning."

The Oct. 16 Metro section story was small, but it caused a big problem for Post reader Ronald C. Semone.

"Nowhere in the eight paragraphs of the story could I find any explanation as to why it was necessary or helpful to identify him as an 'ex-Marine.' I am sure he had many other past affiliations that could have been used to identify him," wrote Semone, a District resident. "Any one of those would have been just as relevant to the crime of which he was convicted."

Previous Post stories had noted that the convicted man was living at a Marine Corps facility near the Pentagon when the crime was committed. He was discharged from the Marines after his arrest. But those facts were missing in the short Oct. 16 story, leaving Semone to ask, "Why focus on his military service?"

Descriptors like "ex-Marine" can give readers a helpful depiction of people in the news. But these shorthand labels and phrases, routinely

used to describe everything from ideology to physical appearance, prompt a steady stream of complaints to the ombudsman when readers think they are inaccurate, misleading or unnecessary.

In recent months, The Post has several times referred to people with disabilities as "wheelchair-bound." Each sparked loud criticism. "Wheelchairs are tools that people use to get around," wrote one reader. "Would you describe someone who drives as 'confined to her car' or 'SUV-bound'?"

There were objections last year when a news brief reported the guilty plea of a Calvert County woman accused of killing two of her "adopted daughters." Seeing no relevance, angry readers accused The Post of stigmatizing adoption.

The Post's stylebook says "illegal immigrant"

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and "undocumented immigrant" may be used interchangeably to describe those living in the United States without legal approval. Both terms have been used in recent Post stories about Ingmar Guandique, on trial for the 2001 murder of federal intern Chandra Levy. But some readers have contacted me, wondering whether The Post knows that even immigrants with documents can be here illegally if they arrived using a valid visa but remained after it expired. (In the case of Guandique, The Post has been accurate in describing him as both "illegal" and "undocumented" because he entered the United States without a visa.)

Ideological labels - conservative, liberal, moderate, progressive - are ubiquitous and sometimes inaccurate. For example, The Post has variously referred to the Cato Institute as "libertarian" or "conservative." There's a difference.

"Libertarian is the term we prefer," said Chris Kennedy, Cato's director of media relations. "This is especially a problem because media types like their think tanks to be nice and pigeonholed ideologically. But we are certainly not across-the-board conservative. We are liberal on a lot of issues." As examples, he said, Cato favors sharp cuts to the military and drug decriminalization.

A check of hundreds of Post news stories in recent years shows that they rarely include labels like "left-wing" or "arch conservative," often considered pejorative.

"But a lot of times what you'll see is not 'far left' or 'far right.' Instead, you'll see one person described this way and the other not. So, it's the absence of labels," said Dan Gainor of the Media Research Center, a self-described conservative group that seeks to expose what it believes is liberal bias in the national news media.

The Post's stylebook offers valuable guidance on avoiding prejudicial or inaccurate descriptors. Labels like "hard-drinking" Irishman or "tempestuous" Latin are forbidden because they unfairly stereotype. Likewise, "fiery redhead" or "diminutive grandmother" should not be used in describing physical appearance.

But the stylebook is not always followed, such as when The Post occasionally has used "adopted" where it wasn't pertinent. "Adoptive parents and adopted children are offended when an unnecessary distinction is drawn between them and other families," the

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stylebook notes. And, it says, stories should say someone "uses" a wheelchair; they are not "confined" to it.

Reporters are urged to include the age of key figures in a story. "After one's sex," the stylebook says, "few facts say more about a person more efficiently than providing his or her age." But less precise adjectives like "elderly" or "middle-aged" are discouraged.

Labels, economical and helpful, can prove harmful if inexact. Accuracy is essential. And relevance is key.

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