

## **Obscenities Cited in AP, *New York Times* and *Washington Post***

### Associated Press

In the "Standards" section of its website under "obscenities, profanities, and vulgarities" the AP states that it "does not use obscenities, racial epithets, or other offensive slurs in stories unless they are a part of direct quotations, and there is a compelling reason for them."

### Usage of the "f-word" in articles

A search of the AP website shows that the earliest instance of the "f-word" in an article was July 2018. Since then, the word has been used in a total of eight articles with the most recent usage occurring in January 2026.

### Usage of the "n-word" in articles

The AP's policy on obscenities does allow it to use racial slurs, such as the "n-word." A search for the word the "n-word" shows that the word has been used in 17 articles with the earliest usage in August 2013. However, the word has been used less frequently in recent years—14 articles used the word between 2013 and 2019 while only three articles used it in the 2020s. The most recent usage of the word was in January 2021.

### *New York Times*

The *New York Times* made a change to their stylebook concerning obscenities in 2014. Part of the new policy stated that "if the precise nature of an obscenity, vulgarity or other offensive expression is essential to the reader's understanding of a newsworthy event — not merely to convey color or emotion — editors should consider using the term or a close paraphrase; readers should not be left uninformed or baffled about the nature of a significant controversy. In such cases, a single reference is generally enough to provide the information."

A 2015 *Times* article on the policy said, "The Times, like many news organizations, generally avoids repeating racial slurs, obscenities and other potentially offensive language." However, it also says that it will

"make exceptions when the word or phrase is central to reporting a newsworthy event. In those cases, paraphrases or euphemism could leave readers confused or uninformed or actually draw attention away from the substance of our reporting."

A 2022 *Times* article further explains its policy saying that "The Times doesn't shy away from reporting vulgarities uttered by powerful public figures and wielded in a public setting. If a reporter feels strongly that offensive language should be used in an article, editors from the Standards desk — and sometimes the masthead — will discuss the merits of using the language before agreeing to publish it."

#### Usage of the "f-word" in articles

The usage of the "f-word" has increased frequency in recent years in *New York Times* articles. A Lexis-Nexis search shows that the earliest instance of the word was in an article was in 1998; the next instance came in 2013. Since then, the full use of the "f-word" has increased. Between 2014 and 2019 a total of 13 *New York Times* articles used the "f-word." Between 2020 and 2025 a total of 91 articles used the word.

#### Usage of the "n-word" in articles

In contrast, the usage of the "n-word" in articles has decreased in recent years. A Lexis-Nexis search found that between 2014 and 2019 a total of 183 *New York Times* articles used the "n-word." Between 2020 and 2025, 63 *Times* articles used the word.

#### *Washington Post*

In its "Policies and Standards" section, the *Washington Post* says that writers "shall avoid profanities and obscenities unless their use is so essential to a story of significance that its meaning is lost without them." It also states that "if editors decide that content containing potentially offensive material has a legitimate news value, editors should use visual and/or text warnings about such material."

#### Usage of the "f-word" in articles

A search of the *Washington Post* website showed that a total of 52 articles contain the "f-word" in them. The earliest article is from May 2009; the most recent article is from January 2026. Of the articles, 16 were published between 2009 and 2014, 27 were between 2015 and 2020, and 9 were published between 2021 and 2026.

#### Usage of the "n-word" in articles

A search of the *Washington Post* website shows that a total of 265 articles contain the "n-word" in them. The majority of these articles are from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Relatively few of them are from the 21st Century. Only 37 articles written after the year 2000 contained this word, 24 of which were written after 2010. The most recent article that used the word was published in June 2022.