

4-Week Challenge

Words Matter Challenge: 4 Weeks to a More Compassionate Shelter Vocabulary

Purpose:

This challenge helps your team replace outdated, inaccurate, or judgmental language with clear, inclusive, and supportive terminology—one week at a time.

WEEK 1: *Observe + Reflect*

Theme: What are we really saying?


- **Kickoff Activity:**
Ask each staff/volunteer to jot down 5 commonly used phrases around the shelter (e.g., “aggressive,” “stray,” “failed foster,” “cage card” “breed labels”). No judgment—just awareness!
 - **Discussion Prompt:**
Are these terms factual or habitual? How might these words affect how adopters, community members, or coworkers perceive our pets?
 - **Print & Post:**
Share key examples from the **Words Matter Guide** around staff areas and in team huddle notes. You can use our [premade template](#) if you want!
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WEEK 2: *Swap + Practice*

Theme: Rewrite with purpose.

- **Mini Training:**
Review a few examples from the guide, e.g., “stray dog” → “lost dog,” “behavior problems” → “behavior incompatibilities.”
- **Group Task:**
Choose 3-5 frequently used phrases at your shelter. Rewrite them using the guide, and post a before/after list in a staff area or Slack channel.
- **Extra Credit:**
Update one real kennel card, social media caption, or dog bio using reframed language.

Share it as a “Words Matter Win!”

 **WEEK 3: *Go Public***

Theme: Model the shift.

- **Action Item:**
Pick a “Myths and Legends” dog or any long-stay dog. Work together to rewrite their bio or marketing material using compassionate, accurate language.
 - **Social Post Prompt:**
“At [Shelter Name], we’re rethinking the words we use—because language shapes perception, and perception shapes outcomes.”
 - **Team Talk:**
Identify one public-facing document, signage, or template that could use a language refresh.
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 **WEEK 4: *Commit + Continue***

Theme: Make it a habit, not a moment.

- **Wrap-Up Meeting:**
Share what shifts felt easy, what felt hard, and which new phrases your team liked best.
 - **Sustainability Ideas:**
 - Assign a rotating “Language Buddy” who reviews bios before they go live
 - Add a “Words We Use” section to your staff onboarding
 - Bookmark or print a cheat sheet of your top 10 reframes
 - **Celebrate!**
Create a “Words Matter Wall” to track language wins, with room for future suggestions.
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BONUS: Turn it into a Team Challenge!

Offer weekly prizes or public recognition for:

- Best rephrased kennel card
- Most creative positive reframe
- Most improved dog bio
- Best "Words Matter" ambassador of the month

Welcome

Welcome to the Words Matter Resources File

On your desktop - Use the sidebar to the left to navigate to all the resource tabs

On your phone - Open in your Google Docs app for the best experience. Use the menu at the bottom of your screen to navigate to all the resource tabs

Questions or comments:

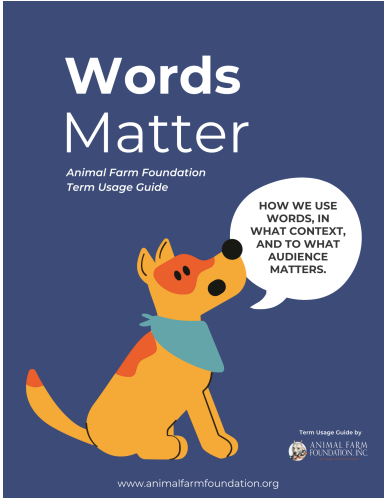
Email: info@animalfarmfoundation.org

Call or Text: 845-868-7559

Term Usage Guide

Term Usage Guide

Word Matter Term Usage Guide



Workshop Activity: Identifying Bias and Fallacy

Workshop Activity: Identifying Bias and Fallacy in Shelter Language

Purpose: To help staff and volunteers recognize how unconscious thought patterns—like cognitive biases and logical fallacies—can influence the language we use in shelters, and to practice reframing that language to promote better outcomes for animals and adopters.

Part 1: Understanding the Concepts

Cognitive Bias is an unconscious pattern in how we interpret information. In a shelter setting, this can affect how we describe animals or interpret their behavior.

Logical Fallacies are errors in reasoning that can sneak into our policies or communication, often without us realizing it.

Together, these can shape the words we use—and the outcomes that follow.

Part 2: Group Exercise – Spot the Bias

1. **Break into small groups or pairs.**
2. **Read each sample description or policy line** (provided by leadership, specific to your organization's pain points)*.
3. **Discuss the following questions:**
 - What bias or fallacy might be influencing this statement?
 - What assumptions are being made?
 - How could we reframe this using more accurate, neutral, or supportive language?
 - How might this language impact a potential adopter's perception?

The facilitator will provide prompts that may reflect:

- Biases like confirmation bias, negativity bias, or attribution errors
 - Fallacies like appeal to tradition, hasty generalization, false dichotomy, or slippery slope thinking
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Part 3: Language Practice – Rewriting the Narrative

Choose a few phrases commonly used in your shelter (or use ones provided) and:

- Reword them to describe observable behavior or situational context
- Remove assumptions about personality or outcome
- Aim for language that invites interest and support rather than fear or judgment

Some guiding questions:

- What's the actual behavior?
 - What might be influencing it?
 - How can we describe this without assumptions or labels?
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Part 4: Reflection & Application

As a group, discuss:

- Where do you see these biases or fallacies show up most often (kennel notes, bios, conversations, policies)?
 - How does this affect public perception, adoptions, and internal decision-making?
 - What's one immediate change your team could make in your language practices starting today?
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Reminder:

Language doesn't just describe animals—it shapes how others see them. Shifting our words helps shift perceptions and outcomes.

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www.animalfarmfoundation.org

Types of Biases and Fallacies:

1. **Confirmation Bias** - We seek information that confirms what we already believe.
 2. **Negativity Bias** - We remember negative experiences more strongly than positive ones.
 3. **Fundamental Attribution Error** - We blame behavior on character, not circumstances.
 4. **Appeal to Tradition** - Believing something is right because it's always been done.
 5. **Hasty Generalization** - Making assumptions based on limited examples.
 6. **Slippery Slope** - Assuming one action will inevitably lead to worst-case scenarios.
 7. **False Dichotomy** - Presenting only two extremes
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***Sample Descriptions for Discussion**

This workshop works best when you provide examples tailored to your organization. Below are some potential examples to inspire you.

1. "He's aggressive toward other dogs."
 2. "This dog was dumped by his owner."
 3. "He's a blockhead mix—needs someone who can handle a strong dog."
 4. "He's been returned twice, so he must have a behavior problem."
 5. "She's a husky, so she is too high-energy for apartment living."
 6. "Not recommended for first-time dog owners."
 7. "He doesn't like men."
 8. "She needs a job to do—she'll be destructive otherwise."
 9. "We think he's part Chihuahua, which explains his behavior."
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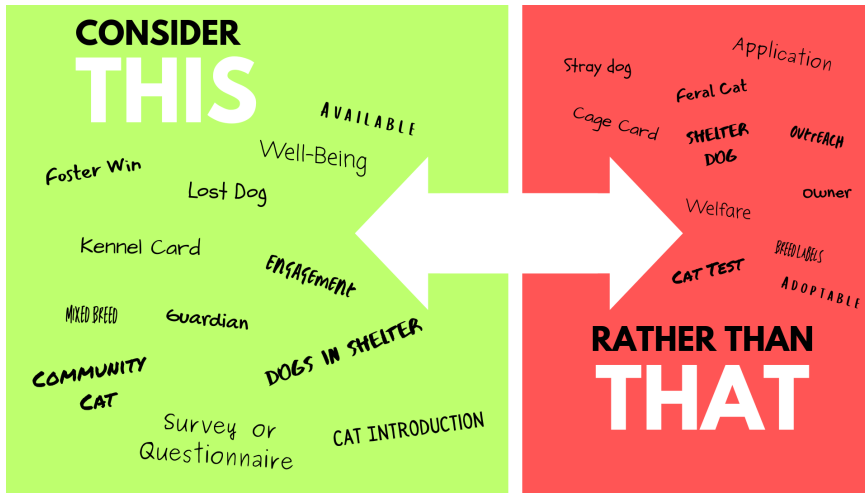
Sample Policy Lines for Discussion

1. "We always require vet checks for our dogs."
2. "All adopter dogs must meet the shelter dog before adoption."
3. "We do not adopt to anyone under 25 years old."
4. "Every adopter must have prior breed experience for X breed."
5. "If we waive our policies, we'll end up with dogs being returned."
6. "Either we do strict screening, or the dogs won't be safe."

Social Media Templates

[Words Matter: Social Media Templates](#)

[Consider This Poster Template](#) - 



Presentation Deck



Canva - Transforming Big Dog Adoptions - A Take Action Guide to Language and Labels