



15 ways your property descriptions could violate fair housing

Describing a space in a way that appeals to all buyers isn't 'politically correct,' it's the law (and it's just good business)

BY [CHRISTY MURDOCK](#)

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I write a lot of [property descriptions](#) for agents and brokers throughout North America, and often, as part of the research process, I look at the previous description for property details or look at descriptions for listings in the same neighborhood to get insight on location and amenities.

In doing so, I see my fair share of poorly written [property descriptions](#), but more importantly, I see information and phrases that should never appear in a property description. Some of my clients' multiple listing services flag questionable words and phrases, while others do not. Some of my clients take my fair housing-related recommendations with good grace, while others do not.

Let me be clear — there may be hair-splitting among different associations and different MLSs about the specifics of certain terms and descriptors. The goal, however, is less about rigid adherence to a set of rules and more about making everyone feel comfortable and seen. This can be difficult if you don't confront your unconscious biases or if you don't admit that discriminatory language is a problem in the first place.

Key to making good decisions on this front is the willingness to [practice empathy](#) and see the topic from a perspective other than your own. If your knee-jerk reaction is that "people are too easily offended" or "people are making a big deal out of nothing," you may struggle with entering into the lived experience of others.

Here are some words and phrases that I no longer use in property descriptions. I encourage you to rethink them in your own marketing materials as well.

Neighborhood-related phrases

Many of these are common phrases that you'll see in property descriptions as part of the picture of the neighborhood and the home's location.

Great schools

You already know that you [shouldn't be talking about schools](#), but this phrase still pops up frequently. If you wish to talk about proximity to local schools, you can do so by including the distance to area schools, but you shouldn't be making any assertions or assumptions about the schools in the neighborhood and their quality.

Safe neighborhood/quiet neighborhood

Not only is this loaded from a [Fair Housing perspective](#); you shouldn't be making these assertions since you don't have a basis for telling potential clients what type of experience they'll have in a neighborhood. Your assessment of safe or quiet may not be someone else's. In addition, these are often used as coded language to describe neighborhoods that are predominately white, upscale, or child-free.

Nice neighbors

Similarly, making assertions about the neighbors can be misleading and inaccurate. When it comes down to it, you don't know what the neighbors are really like or how they're likely to greet a newcomer to the neighborhood.

Walking distance

For those who are older or who are struggling with limited mobility, [walking distance](#) may be a misleading or problematic assertion. It's much easier to provide fractional mileage by using Google Maps. For example, "This charming neighborhood is conveniently located near Trader Joe's (0.2 mi), Whole Foods (0.4 mi) and Glenmuir Park (0.6 mi)."

Near churches

You may be amazed that this still happens, but here and there I see this pop up in property descriptions. Perhaps worse is when a specific church is mentioned as a local landmark since it suggests not only that the prospective buyer should be church-going, but that they should be from a specific denomination.

Property-related phrases

These phrases come up frequently in property descriptions in relation to the layout or contents of the home itself.

Master's suite/bedroom/bathroom

This is a phrase that should be avoided on a number of counts, not least of which is the assumption that the owner of the home is or should be a man. In place of this, consider owner's suite/bedroom/bathroom or primary suite/bedroom/bathroom.

Great family home

Many agents automatically think in terms of the [traditional nuclear family](#) when marketing a property. However, buyers come in [all shapes and sizes](#), including those who are single, unmarried couples, childless by choice or not, retirees, or anyone who doesn't fit the mid-20th century image of a heterosexual married couple with two children.

It is not only offensive to say that a certain type of property is for families; it's offensive to assume that a family has to look a certain way or that some families are more legitimate than others.

Great family room/playroom for the kids

Similarly, a bonus space should not be marketed for its family or kid-friendliness. It may make an ideal media room, home office, hobby space, gathering place or entertaining space.

Private backyard for playtime with the kids

Here too, a fenced backyard is not designed for playtime with the kids. It can just as easily be enjoyed by those without children, and the property description should not make assumptions about the makeup of the people who will live there.

She-shed and man-cave

A reference to a [she-shed or man-cave](#) can be alienating – and inaccurate, as well. A person who enjoys watching football or woodworking can be either gender. A person who enjoys relaxing with a cup of tea in a beautiful space can be either gender.

It is not only silly to make these types of artificial distinctions, it is short-sighted. Such a description can alienate a buyer who might be interested in the listing but afraid that they'll have to make major changes to the décor to neutralize the space.

People-related phrases

These phrases specifically allude to either the current owner, a potential buyer, or make some reference to aspects of identity.

Handyman's special

Besides suggesting that the home is ideally suited for a man, it also suggests that the buyer needs to be handy or skilled at home improvements and repair. This is shortsighted, since it may discourage buyers who would be willing to fix up the home by outsourcing labor.

Fisherman's/Hunter's retreat

Here too, there's the suggestion that the buyer will be a man. Moreover, it suggests that the person who buys will want to fish and hunt, whereas some [rural buyers](#) are simply looking for some land for homesteading, gardening, or quiet enjoyment of nature. By aligning this type of property with hunting and fishing, you could be turning off some conservation-minded buyers.

Grandma's house

This pops up as a frequent description for a neat, tidy, and somewhat outdated home. Aside from the fact that it might be a turnoff for some buyers, it suggests something about who the seller might be, which could raise security concerns or influence the negotiation process.

Perfect for ...

This phrase is almost always the precursor to a problematic assertion or suggestion. You don't need to say for whom a property is perfect. It's perfect for anyone who wants it and who has the money or ability to finance it. That's the whole point of fair housing.

Phrases related to race, gender identity, sexuality, nationality, cultural identity

It should go without saying but any word or phrase related to any of these items should be left out of your property descriptions.

A single point of view is not the only one that matters. By making property descriptions more appealing to a wider variety of potential buyers, you create the circumstances for housing to be truly fair and for the homebuying experience to be more enjoyable and more meaningful for everyone.

Christy Murdock is a Realtor, freelance writer, coach and consultant and the owner of [Writing Real Estate](#). She is also the creator of the online course [Crafting the Property Description: The Step-by-Step Formula for Reluctant Real Estate Writers](#). Follow Writing Real Estate on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#).