

Choosing Our Words

At our initial editorial board meeting to plan this issue, one of our first discussions was about the language being used in the current immigration debate. Words can exalt, encourage, and include. Words can also humiliate, debase, and dehumanize. When we use a negative word to refer to someone, that person can seem less than human, unworthy of attention, or unable to make a significant contribution.

Collectively, for this issue, we have chosen to use the term “undocumented immigrant” rather than the more demeaning terms “illegal immigrant,” “illegal” or “illegal alien” to describe those who enter or stay in the United States without permission. We have done this for several reasons. First and foremost, we believe it is inappropriate to reduce a person’s humanity to an act: no human being is illegal. We do not call people who break other kinds of law “illegals.” We do not call employers who hire workers without documents “illegals” or someone who gets tickets for speeding an “illegal.” We also believe that using derogatory words to describe people can make it easier to exploit, oppress, and abuse them—to deny their humanity.

We see all immigrants, documented or not, as human beings first, with rights, dignity, courage, dreams, and hopes. As you read through these pages you will see other terms used to describe immigrants without documents in articles or quotes we have reprinted from other sources. We cannot change others’ words and retain this publication’s integrity, but we *can* choose our own.

All publications make what are called “style” decisions—many of which have to do with language use. Editors don’t usually explain these decisions. We felt an explanation of our decision makes an important contribution to the debate about immigration and creates an opportunity for critical reflection on the power of language.

Members of the Editorial Board for Issue 23: Immigration, The Current Debate