



The Term Inventory

Forty entries in two tiers: the precision case, the replacement, and where each one hides

Every entry here earns its place the same way: the replacement is more precise than the original. Some entries carry a second cost — exclusion or offense — and that is stated plainly where it applies. But no entry rests on offense alone; if the swap didn't make the writing clearer, it didn't make the list. Tier 1 has broad industry consensus and belongs in your standard on day one. Tier 2 entries are judgment calls: the case is given, the decision is yours — make it once, log it, move on.

How to read the columns

The problem is why the term fails as writing: vague, idiomatic, metaphor-dependent, or carrying baggage that distracts from the content. **Use instead** is the working replacement — pick the one that matches your meaning; several entries deliberately offer more than one because the original was doing too many jobs.

Where it hides is where audits actually find it.

Tier 1 — Replace now

#	Term	The problem	Use instead	Where it hides
1	tribal knowledge	Imprecise (which knowledge? held how?) and trivializes Indigenous identity; the knowledge-management discipline has already moved off it	institutional knowledge · tacit knowledge · undocumented knowledge	Workshops, delivery docs, KM content itself
2	Mexican standoff	Attaches an ethnicity to dysfunction; meaningless to anyone without the film reference	standoff · stalemate · deadlock · impasse	Social posts, sales narratives
3	master/slave	Describes a relationship most systems don't actually have; industry standards (kernel, 3GPP, INI) have replaced it	primary/replica · controller/agent · leader/follower	Architecture docs, diagrams, config keys
4	whitelist/blacklist	Color-codes trust with no technical content; the replacement states the mechanism	allowlist/denylist (or blocklist)	Security docs, product UI, API names
5	grandfathered	Legal-history idiom (with a discriminatory origin) that hides the actual rule	legacy status · exempt under prior terms · carried forward	Contracts, pricing pages, support macros
6	sanity check / sanity test	Names the author's mental state, not the check; stigmatizes mental illness	quick check · validation check · smoke test	Code review, QA docs, meeting speech

#	Term	The problem	Use instead	Where it hides
7	dummy value / dummy user	Vague (dummy how?) and derogatory	placeholder · sample value · test account	Test docs, API examples
8	crippled / crippleware	Uses disability as a synonym for "degraded"; imprecise about what's limited	degraded · feature-limited · restricted mode	Release notes, incident writeups
9	man-hours / manpower	Undercounts half the workforce; the unit is effort, not men	person-hours · staff effort · headcount	Estimates, SOWs, capacity plans
10	manned / unmanned	Same defect in adjective form	staffed/unstaffed · crewed/automated	Ops runbooks, coverage schedules
11	powwow	Borrows a specific ceremonial gathering as a synonym for "quick chat"	huddle · sync · working session	Meeting invites, internal chat
12	low man on the totem pole	Misreads the artifact (position doesn't rank status) while borrowing it	most junior person · newest team member	Org talk, onboarding docs
13	open the kimono	Orientalist and leering; says nothing the replacement doesn't say better	full transparency · share the details · open the books	Sales calls, partner decks
14	guru / ninja / rockstar (as roles)	Job-post glitter that hides the actual skill and imports cultural or religious weight	expert · specialist · senior engineer	Job posts, bios, marketing
15	sherpa (as a verb/ role)	A specific people's name as a service metaphor	guide · onboard · walk through	Customer-success decks
16	drink the Kool-Aid	References a mass death to mean "adopt enthusiasm"; opaque to global readers	fully bought in · committed to the approach	Culture decks, all-hands speech
17	off the reservation	A confinement policy as an idiom for autonomy	off-plan · outside the agreed scope · unsanctioned	Sales/ops speech
18	gyp / gypped	An ethnic slur used as a verb	shortchanged · overcharged · cheated	Informal writing, reviews
19	peanut gallery	Belittles the audience it names; historically the cheapest — segregated — seats	audience comments · side commentary (or just address the input)	Meeting speech, webinar hosting
20	spirit animal	Borrows a sacred concept as a personality quiz	favorite · mascot · "I identify with..."	Marketing, social copy

#	Term	The problem	Use instead	Where it hides
21	first-class / second-class citizen (features)	Civic-rights metaphor for API design; imprecise about the actual difference	fully supported · native to the API · partially supported	Engineering docs, roadmaps
22	blackhat / whitehat	The same color-coded trust as whitelist, one metaphor deeper	malicious actor / security researcher · attacker / defender	Security content
23	native (as in "native feature")	Ambiguous (built-in? platform-specific? first-party?) and freighted	built-in · platform-specific · first-party	Product marketing, docs
24	grandfather clause	See #5 – the noun form	legacy exemption · prior-terms clause	Legal, pricing
25	tone-deaf (figurative)	Disability as a synonym for "insensitive"	insensitive · out of touch · misjudged	PR, retro writeups

Tier 2 – Judgment calls

The precision case is real for each of these; the consensus is not. Decide per your audience, log the decision in your standard, and stop relitigating it.

#	Term	The precision case	If you replace it	Notes
26	blind spot	Disability metaphor; "gap" is usually the actual meaning	gap · unexamined area	Widely used clinically; audience-dependent
27	war room	Combat metaphor for a meeting room; escalation language inflates routine work	incident room · command center · working session	Established in incident practice
28	kill switch	Precise in engineering contexts; jarring in customer-facing copy	emergency stop · shutoff	Keep internally; consider replacing customer-facing
29	abort	Precise POSIX/aviation term; charged in some audiences	cancel · stop	Context decides; API names may be fixed
30	black box (opaque system)	The metaphor is doing real work and has a flight-recorder collision	opaque system · unobservable component	Often worth keeping; define it
31	evangelist (role)	Religious borrow; the job is advocacy	advocate · champion · developer relations	Title inertia is real
32	bible (the "X bible")	Religious borrow for "authoritative doc"	handbook · reference · canonical guide	Replacement is strictly clearer
33	mecca (a "mecca for X")	A sacred site as a superlative	hub · center · destination	Same

#	Term	The precision case	If you replace it	Notes
34	cakewalk / walk in the park	Origin-tainted idiom (cakewalk) with a plain replacement	straightforward · low-effort	Precision case: says nothing about why it's easy
35	low-hanging fruit	Pure idiom; hides the actual prioritization criterion	quick wins · lowest-effort items · highest ROI items	Precision-only entry
36	boil the ocean	Idiom; opaque to some global readers	over-scope · try to do everything at once	Precision-only entry
37	circle the wagons	Frontier-conflict idiom for defensiveness	close ranks · go defensive · align internally	Origin plus opacity
38	hold down the fort	Military-frontier idiom; harmless to most, opaque to some	cover for me · keep things running	Mildest entry here – that's why it's Tier 2
39	postmortem	Death metaphor for a learning ritual; precise alternatives exist and are gaining ground	retrospective · incident review	Widely institutionalized; decide and log
40	dark pattern	Color-coded trust again; the regulator's term is now "deceptive"	deceptive pattern · manipulative design	FTC and academic usage moving already

Using the inventory

- **Seed your standard.** Move Tier 1 into your terminology standard's deprecated-terms table mostly as-is; walk Tier 2 in one working session, decide each, and record the decision — the worked Meridian example shows what those logged decisions look like.
- **Feed the gate.** The deprecated-term column becomes the gate's term scan (see the gate addendum) and, verbatim, a grep list any CI job can run.
- **Audit with it.** The pilot blueprint's scoring sheet cites entries by number, so findings stay consistent across reviewers.

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