My dad likes to tell the story about when he learned that being politically correct is not all it’s cracked up to be. He used to work at a school for the mentally disabled and one of his colleagues was a black man with a lot of wisdom and professionalism. I’m not sure how it came up, but one day my father referred to this man as an African American in conversation. He stopped my dad short saying something along the lines of, “Wait, wait, wait. I’m not from Africa. I’ve never been to Africa nor do I have any intentions of going to Africa. My parents are from Indiana and so were their parents and so am I. I’m not African, so why would you call me an African American? I’m a black dude. And you’re a white guy. What’s so wrong with that? Nobody had to tell you that you were white. You just are. It’s all right. So let’s cut the politically correct bull-crap and call each other what we are.” The day my dad got told off for trying to be polite is a day he never forgot—or let me forget.
Even if I can joke about my dad lecturing me like the teacher he is when he tells me life lesson stories like this, I get where he’s coming from. When did we become so obsessed with not offending each other? Furthermore, why are we so easily offended? Personally, it takes a lot to offend me—slow to anger and all that jazz—but what stings most is that I am living in constant fear of offending others. According to etiquette coach Sarah Hacala in her book *Saving Civility*, “What is rude to you may not be rude to me” (page 9). I agree with her up to a point; generally all people don’t like to have people ignore them or cheat them, but generational differences occur at the pop culture line, i.e. younger generations are offended differently than older ones. Today’s youth are increasingly sensitive to any whiff of racism and many are just itching to label people as xenophobic. They may see you as ignorant or slow if you do not refer to an ethnic group by the latest term that is seen as the least offensive. The older generations, however, naturally tend to use language that is less embellished with words that aid in talking around a subject such as ethnicity. Our parents and their parents tend to get directly to the point and are confused or irritated when people my age use words like First Nations for what they refer to as Indians or Native Americans. So we can’t really use one term in conversation with all ages of people. We have to change our behavior based on who our audience is. I don’t know about you, but I was raised that you treat everyone equally. I don’t do well with having different masks that I have to don for different occasions. Therefore, when I abide by politically correct law, I offend people like my dad’s colleague who are tired of such jargon and when I don’t, my peers are ready to burn me at the stake for being racially insensitive.
At this point, you may be thinking, “Well, I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t! What can possibly be done?” Well, I’m glad you asked. I propose that we all act in accordance with our own comfort zone and just thicken our skin. There will always be people with the intention of offending others, no matter what they’re offended by. But if we don’t let it bother us, eventually those people will get bored and move on. When we rob these politically correct movers and shakers of a tantrum, they’ll give up because all they usually want is a reaction. Additionally, there are also people who will always take offense no matter what. While I do not have ground-breaking advice for dealing with these people—bedsides socking them in the face—if we stick to our guns, they too will eventually realize their actions are not drawing the attention they desire and consequently give up. And then, the other people who genuinely try not to offend others will never do wrong because whether they say “black or African American” or “white or Caucasian,” no one will be offended either way.

It doesn’t stop with issues of racism, though. If you’ve ever experienced a December in America, you’re sure to have heard the “Happy Holidays/Merry Christmas” debate. Christians generally want to wish a “Merry Christmas” to those they come into contact with around the holiday season and non-Christians generally prefer “Happy Holidays” so as to not offend anyone who doesn’t celebrate Christmas. Personally, as long as you’re well-wishing, I don’t care what you say. This is another situation, however, where the fear of not saying the right thing overshadows every conversation we have. I feel like I can’t say “Merry Christmas” to people of the Hindu faith or “Season’s Greetings” to those of the Christian faith. Either way, someone is bound to get offended. But there are people who give me hope. One such person is Joel Osteen—televangelist
extraordinaire—who stated in an interview with the Christian Post, “…there's a lot of pressure today to be politically correct, but people are realizing, too, that you have to be open to express your faith” (Vivaldo). Part of living in accordance with PC law is recognizing that there are people out there who will differ from you in opinion; this means that you can’t be politically correct and also be offended when people who differ from you profess their beliefs to you. Hence, we all need to grow up and stop getting hung up on the minor differences in the way we wish peace to each other. If we lose sight of that, we may as well not greet each other at all. Ben Stein—a brilliant actor, lawyer, and commentator who is Jewish—perfectly exemplified this idea of rolling with the punches in a CBS commentary when he said, “It doesn't bother me a bit when people say, ‘Merry Christmas’ to me. I don't think they are slighting me or getting ready to put me in a ghetto. In fact, I kind of like it. It shows that we are all brothers and sisters celebrating this happy time of year” (Stein).

Some people would even go so far as to say that political correctness is a form of speech restriction that reduces our free speech. It can be loosely compared to Newspeak in the famous George Orwell novel 1984. In the novel, Newspeak is a euphemistic language adopted by the government to snuff out any words that hint at rebellion and to make unappealing concepts seem less so on the face. For example, “bad” is referred to as “ungood” or even “doubleplus ungood” (Orwell). We see this in English with words like “passed away” instead of “died” and “let go” instead of “fired.” While I realize that euphemisms have a place in our culture and that our society has not gone as far as the novel (at least not yet), our obsession with terms designed to be less offensive are really not worth our time. Instead, these politically correct terms are merely another hoop we
have to jump through to avoid stepping on the toes of the ever-sensitive individuals who seem to be running our society.

I suggest that instead of searching our vocabulary for less sharp words, we should desensitize ourselves. It always sounds nice, especially in academia, to use the most PC terms to impress professors and colleagues that you are up to date on the latest lingo; in actuality, though, it is fluff that needs to be trimmed to get to the real content of conversation. How many times have you read an article or an essay that contains wordy sentences that seem to drag on forever but not ever really say anything? Sometimes it pays to be pithy. Live as if you only have a limited amount of words you can convey in your entire lifetime. Then, what actually comes out of your mouth will be more thoughtful and more meaningful.

Let’s all make a pact to get directly to the point and cut out all the unnecessary crap. The best example of this crap is—you guessed it—politically correct terminology. When we shave down our sentences to the true, unhindered meaning, we have no reason to be PC. Instead of Newspeak, let’s adopt Realspeak. If everyone is real with each other, the mentality that fuels ignorant behaviors such as prejudice and stereotypes will eventually just melt away. If we let ourselves mature into a society that is slow to anger, then racial slurs, bigoted jokes, sexist comments, and all the other products of ignorance will not manifest. There will be no fear of offending someone who is different by asking a question to better understand his culture. Instead, we open up a dialogue in which all parties can teach each other without anxiety of violating some political correctness code. As was astutely stated in “Politics and the English Language,” another work by Orwell, “If thought corruptions language, language can also corrupt thought.”
Works Cited


