

‘Redact’ resurfaces with the Epstein files

 [cnn.com/2025/12/31/us/word-of-week-redact-cec](https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/31/us/word-of-week-redact-cec)

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Illustration by Alberto Mier/CNN

On November 30, 2019, according to [documents](#) released by the Department of Justice, the lawyer Joe Nascimento, apparently representing an unnamed employee of the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, sent an email to investigators.

“Good morning,” Nascimento wrote. “Just wanted to check-in as” — and then the rest of that paragraph disappears into nearly two full lines’ worth of solid black rectangles.

If the missing words were a mystery, the word for what happened to them was not. Along with other major swaths of the documents collectively known as the [Epstein files](#), they had been redacted.

Two hundred years ago, redact — from the Latin *redigere*, meaning to drive or send back — meant to edit, to put into writing or to organize a number of ideas or writings into a coherent form. But around the middle of the 20th century, it began to refer to one particular kind of editing. Instead of coherence, the point was concealment: to remove certain information from a document before its release, especially “for legal, security, or confidentiality purposes,” per the Oxford English Dictionary.

One of the earliest examples of “redact” as we know it today appears in a 1957 [New York appellate court opinion](#), which stated that “feasible means should have been adopted to redact” a defendant’s confession and admissions before they were introduced into evidence. Stephen Voyce, an English professor at the University of Iowa who has studied classified documents, traces this usage to the US national security bureaucracy that emerged during the Cold War and the resulting glut of information it produced.

As the advent of photocopying made it easier to disseminate material, and as the 1966 Freedom of Information Act gave the public the right to access government records, federal agencies used the solid black rectangle as a tool to control sensitive information.

What exactly constitutes as sensitive seems to be up to the discretion of individual government officials, said Voyce. The US government over the years has frequently redacted information from documents that were already public, or blacked out different parts of files at different periods, as George Washington University’s [National Security Archive](#) has detailed. Similar contradictions have plagued the Epstein files rollout — Trump’s name was redacted in one version of a document released by the DOJ and visible in another.

“There seems to be very little rhyme or reason to what’s being redacted beyond the motivations of the person doing the redaction — in this case, the DOJ,” Voyce added.

What’s redacted in the Epstein files — and what isn’t — has become a point of contention. Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers, as well as many of [the financier’s victims](#), have criticized the Justice Department for over-redaction and under-redaction. Entire pages have been blacked out in some instances, with flimsy justification from the DOJ. Meanwhile, [survivors](#) who sought to remain anonymous saw their names [published](#), and attempts to obscure other information within the records could be undone with a simple [copy and paste](#).

As with the Epstein files, botched redactions are a common occurrence. Though the computer software company Adobe deployed effective redaction tools in 2006, some entities still resort to crude techniques, resulting in improper disclosure — in 2023, Sony accidentally [spilled](#) confidential secrets about its PlayStation business because someone made redactions with a black Sharpie.

Is there a reason we call the practice of blacking out certain information “redaction” as opposed to “censorship?” Per a 2019 article in the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) on what words to use when reporting on then-special counsel Robert Mueller, “censor” has a more negative connotation, referring to the removal of morally or politically objectionable material. Voyce considers redact to be more specific. “When you redact, what you’re doing is releasing the document with exceptions, and that can take up a kind of politics of its own,” he said. “Regarding the Epstein things, you can strategically reveal some things and conceal other things.”

Others see the two words as synonymous. In a [1988 column](#) in the now-defunct Honolulu-Star Bulletin, Mary McGrory wrote about the Iran-Contra affair: “The North notebooks may be what Richard Nixon, in another ethical crisis, called a ‘dry hole.’ Right now it is impossible to tell because they have been so heavily ‘redacted’ — a new word that has replaced ‘censored.’”

In the case of the Epstein files, the distinction between “redact” and “censor” appears similarly blurred. Though the [Epstein Files Transparency Act](#) passed by Congress stipulates that files can’t be redacted “on the basis of embarrassment, reputational harm, or political sensitivity, including to any government official, public figure, or foreign dignitary,” the first batch of documents released by the DOJ contained references to former President Bill Clinton while President Donald Trump’s name was [conspicuously absent](#).

As Trump administration officials tried to defend the rollout, the public seemed [skeptical](#). Recently, Attorney General Pam Bondi wrote in a [post](#) on X that the Justice Department would “bring charges against anyone involved in the trafficking and exploitation of Jeffrey Epstein’s victims.” Users responded with a community note: “The Epstein files released by the DOJ are full of redactions and deleted pages,” adding that photos of Trump were removed “to protect him.”