AN ALLY'S GUIDE TO

TERMINOLOGY

Talking About LGBTQ People & Equality

MAP
movement advancement project ▶

INTRODUCTION

The words we use to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) people and issues can have a powerful impact on our conversations, particularly when it comes to talking with those who are not as familiar with LGBTQ lives. The right words can help open people's hearts and minds, while other words can create distance or confusion.

Designed for new allies who often face a confusing array of terminology and descriptions, this short guide offers an overview of essential vocabulary to use and avoid. For messages and approaches that can be used to talk about various issues, see MAP's online collection of messaging guides and resources at www.lgbtmap.org/messaging-guides.

GAY, LESBIAN & BISEXUAL

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✕ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **gay** (adj.) • **lesbian** (n. or adj.) • **bisexual, bi** (adj.)	"gay people" "gay man/men" "lesbian couple" "bisexual people" "He is gay." / "She is a lesbian." / "He is bisexual."	• "homosexual" • "gay" (n.) (as in, "He is a gay.")	*Gay* is an adjective, not a noun; it is sometimes used as a shorthand term encompassing gay, lesbian and bisexual orientations (though not transgender people or gender identity). Also, while many lesbians may identify as gay, the term *lesbian(s)* is clearer when talking only about a woman or women. Opponents of LGBTQ equality often use words like "homosexual" to stigmatize gay people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms.
• **being gay/lesbian/ bisexual**	"She talked about being gay/a lesbian/ bisexual." "He discussed being bisexual."	• "homosexuality" • "lesbianism" • "That's so gay." (a hurtful slur)	Talking about a person's "homosexuality" can, in some cases, reduce the life of that person to purely sexual terms. Talk about *being gay/lesbian/bisexual* instead. Also, the term "lesbianism" is considered pejorative, as is using "gay" as an insult or slur.
• **LGBTQ, LGBT** • **lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender**	"laws that protect LGBTQ people from discrimination" "people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender"	• *LGBTQ* when policy or cultural discussions are not inclusive of transgender people and/or gender identity.	Reference *LGBTQ* (or *LGBT*) when talking about issues and policies that pertain to both sexual orientation <u>and</u> gender identity. Over several years of increasingly common usage, the meaning of *LGBTQ* has become more widely understood among broad public audiences. However, it can still confuse some who are unfamiliar with its meaning and alienate those who aren't yet strong supporters. When speaking with such audiences, consider initially using *lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender* for clarity and inclusion. Also, before speaking in the media or in public, consider practicing your use of these terms aloud to ensure comfort and fluency.
• **sexual orientation** • **orientation**	"a person's sexual orientation" "Sexual orientation can be a complex topic. A person's orientation is…"	• "sexual preference" • "gay/lesbian/ bisexual lifestyle" • "same-sex attractions" • "sexual identity"	The term "sexual preference" is used by opponents to suggest that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is a choice, and therefore can be changed or "cured." Similarly, the term "lifestyle" is used to stigmatize lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Just as one would not talk about a "straight lifestyle," don't talk about a gay, lesbian or bisexual "lifestyle."

TRANSGENDER

The term *transgender* refers to people whose gender identity (the sense of gender that every person knows inside) or gender expression is different from their sex at birth. At some point in their lives, transgender people decide they must live their lives as the gender they have always known themselves to be, and often transition to living as that gender. For more information on helping people understand what it means to be transgender, read *Talking About Transgender People & Restrooms* (see back cover).

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✕ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **transgender** (adj.)	"transgender person" "transgender man" "transgender woman" "transgender advocate" "protecting people who are transgender" "I'm a transgender man. I was born and raised as a girl, but inside I always knew I was male. Many years ago I transitioned from female to male, and now I live life as the man I've always known myself to be."	• "transgendered" • "a transgender" (n.) • "transgenders" (n.) • "transvestite" • "tranny"	*Transgender* is an adjective, not a noun. Be careful not to call someone "a transgender." Do not add an unnecessary "-ed" to the term ("transgendered"), which connotes a condition of some kind. Always use a transgender person's chosen name—and ask what pronouns they use (e.g., he, she or they). If it isn't possible to ask what pronouns a person would prefer, use pronouns consistent with the person's gender expression (see below). The term *trans,* often used within the LGBT community, may not be understood by unfamiliar audiences. While terms like *transgender man* and *transgender woman* are commonly used, they are not universally understood. Unfamiliar audiences often think, for example, that a transgender man is a man who identifies as a woman. Consider pairing these terms with a reference to a person's direction of transition (see Usage Example to the left). Not everyone who is transgender identifies that way. Because transgender men are men, and transgender women are women, some transgender people may simply identify as male or female, without modifiers.
• **gender identity** • **gender expression**	"fair and equal treatment based on gender identity and expression."	• "sexual identity" (the correct term is *gender identity*)	The terms *gender identity* (one's internal sense of gender) and *gender expression* (how a person outwardly expresses that gender) are not interchangeable. These terms can be unfamiliar and confusing to many people; referring to *transgender people* is often clearer.
• **transition**	"A transgender woman grows up knowing she's a girl, even though she was born and raised as a boy. So she transitions to live as a woman."	• "sex change" • "sex-change operation" • "pre-operative" / "post-operative"	*Transition* is the accurate term that does not fixate on a person's anatomy or on surgeries, which many transgender people do not or cannot undergo. It can also be helpful to clarify a person's direction of transition (for example, from female to male) when first referencing that a person is transgender.
• **people who are not transgender**	"transgender people and non-transgender people alike"	• "cisgender" (with those who are not yet strong supporters)	The term "cisgender" tends to confuse and alienate unfamiliar audiences. Use everyday language that is clear and relatable instead (see Usage Example).
• **gender non-binary** • **someone who doesn't identify as either male or female**	"I'm gender non-binary. Most people know from childhood that they're either male or female, but that wasn't true for me."	• *non-binary* as a standalone term without "gender" (for broad and/or unfamiliar audiences)	The term *gender non-binary* can confuse and alienate unfamiliar audiences because it is not self-explanatory. Help people understand what it means using everyday language—e.g., "People who are gender non-binary don't fit into male or female gender categories. Some identify as a blend of male and female genders, while others don't identify with either gender. Many gender non-binary people use the pronouns *they* and *them*."

GENERAL TERMINOLOGY & APPROACHES: TALKING ABOUT LGBTQ ISSUES

Conversations about LGBTQ people and equality are most effective when we can talk in genuine, emotionally compelling ways that connect with the values of our audience. Showing people how they can support LGBTQ people and equality in a way that is consistent with their beliefs and values can help people work through any inner conflict they may feel. It also makes it more difficult to ignore or dismiss the discrimination and other harms that LGBTQ people face.

When talking about equality for LGBTQ people, **use language that emphasizes our common values, beliefs, hopes and dreams—and which reminds people that LGBTQ people are everyday Americans who live everyday lives.** For example:

"The America I believe in is a land of opportunity and freedom, where people who work hard and meet their responsibilities have the chance to get ahead. Updating our nondiscrimination law would help ensure that all people, including those who are lesbian, gay bisexual or transgender, have a fair opportunity to provide for themselves and their families, live free from discrimination, and build a better life."

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✕ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **fair, equal treatment** • **treating people fairly and equally**	"Everyone, including LGBTQ people, should be treated fairly and equally by the laws of our state."	• "rights" • "civil rights" • "gay rights" / "LGBTQ rights"	Avoid talking about "rights," "civil rights," or making direct comparisons between different kinds of discrimination, especially when it comes to discrimination based on race. Such comparisons can alienate many African Americans and others, creating unnecessary distance where there would otherwise be common ground.
• **discrimination** • **rejection** • **exclusion** • **unfairness**	"Protecting people from discrimination is about treating others as we want to be treated. It's not for me to judge."	• "hate" / "haters" / "hatred" • "bigot" / "bigots" / "bigotry" • "prejudice"	Don't descend into name-calling. Calling anti-LGBTQ opponents "bigoted" or "hateful" can alienate those who are honestly wrestling with the issues. Instead, use language that is measured and relatable to create empathy and a sense of how discrimination hurts LGBTQ people and their families.
• **anti-gay/anti-transgender/anti-LGBTQ activists** • **opponents**	"the hurtful rhetoric of anti-LGBTQ activists"	• "anti-LGBTQ religious extremists/extremism" • "anti-LGBTQ Christian groups"	Many religious people and faith traditions support LGBTQ people. Avoid language that unfairly paints an entire religious tradition or denomination, or religion more broadly, as being anti-LGBTQ or extremist.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit www.lgbtmap.org/messaging-guides for more resources on talking about religious exemptions, transgender people and restrooms, family acceptance and transgender youth, suicide and LGBT populations, and much more.

TALKING ABOUT
Religious Exemptions

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Transgender People & Restrooms

TALKING ABOUT
Family Acceptance & Transgender Youth

TALKING ABOUT
Transgender Students & School Facilities Access

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Suicide & LGBT Populations