

AN ALLY'S GUIDE TO

TERMINOLOGY



Talking About LGBT People & Equality



movement advancement project ▶

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INTRODUCTION

The words we use to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and issues can have a powerful impact on our conversations. 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gay (adj.) • lesbian (n. or adj.) • bisexual, bi (adj.) 	<p>“gay people”</p> <p>“gay man/men”</p> <p>“lesbian couple”</p> <p>“bisexual people”</p> <p>“He is gay.” / “She is a lesbian.” / “He is bisexual.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “homosexual” • “gay” (n.) (as in, “He is a gay.”) 	<p><i>Gay</i> 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 <i>lesbian(s)</i> is clearer when talking only about a woman or women.</p> <p>Opponents of LGBT equality often use words like “homosexual” to stigmatize gay people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being gay/lesbian/bisexual 	<p>“She talked about being gay/a lesbian/bisexual.”</p> <p>“He discussed being bisexual.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “homosexuality” • “lesbianism” • “That’s so gay.” (a hurtful slur) 	<p>Talking about a person’s “homosexuality” can, in some cases, reduce the life of that person to purely sexual terms. Talk about <i>being gay/lesbian/bisexual</i> instead. Also, the term “lesbianism” is considered pejorative, as is using “gay” as an insult or slur.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (on first usage) • gay and transgender (on repeated subsequent references, as needed for brevity, TV or radio ads, etc.) • LGBT (with LGBT and allied audiences; in longer written documents such as reports, after defining) 	<p>“people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender”</p> <p>“laws that protect gay and transgender people”</p> <p>“Only 29% of LGBT adults in the United States report they are thriving financially, compared to 39% of non-LGBT adults.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “LGBT” (with those who are not yet strong supporters) 	<p>Reference both sexual orientation <u>and</u> gender identity when talking about issues pertaining to the entire LGBT community. (See Transgender on the next page for more information.)</p> <p>The abbreviation <i>LGBT</i> is commonly used within the LGBT movement and is essential when talking with LGBT and strongly supportive audiences; however, it can confuse people who are unfamiliar with its meaning and alienate those who aren’t yet strong supporters. When talking to mainstream media and audiences, try to use <i>lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender</i> on first reference for clarity and inclusion—but if there is a need for brevity in repeated subsequent references, shorten to <i>gay and transgender</i> rather than “LGBT.” Use <i>LGBT</i> in longer written documents such as reports after the abbreviation is defined.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sexual orientation • orientation 	<p>“a person’s sexual orientation”</p> <p>“Sexual orientation can be a complex topic. A person’s orientation is…”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “sexual preference” • “gay/lesbian/bisexual lifestyle” • “same-sex attractions” • “sexual identity” 	<p>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 LGBT people and suggest that their lives should be viewed only through a sexual lens. Just as one would not talk about a “straight lifestyle,” don’t talk about a gay, lesbian or bisexual “lifestyle.”</p>

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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transgender (adj.) 	<p>“transgender person”</p> <p>“transgender man”</p> <p>“transgender woman”</p> <p>“transgender advocate”</p> <p>“protecting people who are transgender”</p> <p>“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.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “transgendered” • “a transgender” (n.) • “transgenders” (n.) • “transvestite” • “tranny” 	<p><i>Transgender</i> 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.</p> <p>Always use a transgender person’s chosen name. Also, a person who identifies as a certain gender should be referred to using pronouns consistent with that gender. If it isn’t possible to ask what pronoun a person would prefer, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person’s appearance and gender expression.</p> <p>The term <i>trans</i>, often used within the LGBT community, may not be understood by unfamiliar audiences.</p> <p>While terms like <i>transgender man</i> and <i>transgender woman</i> 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).</p> <p>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.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gender identity • gender expression 	<p>“fair and equal treatment based on gender identity and expression.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “sexual identity” (the correct term is <i>gender identity</i>) 	<p>The terms <i>gender identity</i> (one’s internal sense of gender) and <i>gender expression</i> (how a person outwardly expresses that gender) are not interchangeable. These terms can be unfamiliar and confusing to many people; referring to <i>transgender people</i> is often clearer.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transition 	<p>“A transgender woman grows up knowing she’s a girl, even though she was born and raised as a boy. So later in life she transitions to live as a woman.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “sex change” • “sex-change operation” • “pre-operative” / “post-operative” 	<p><i>Transition</i> 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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people who are not transgender 	<p>“transgender people and non-transgender people alike”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “cisgender” (with those who are not yet strong supporters) 	<p>The term “cisgender” tends to confuse and alienate unfamiliar audiences. Use everyday language that is clear and relatable instead (see Usage Example).</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • someone who doesn’t identify as either male or female 	<p>“Most people know from childhood that they’re male or female. But some people don’t fit into either gender, and don’t identify as either male or female.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “nonbinary” / “gender-nonconforming” / “genderqueer” (with those who are not yet strong supporters) 	<p>Terms like “non-binary” and “gender non-conforming,” while comfortable and familiar for many in the LGBT community, tend to confuse and alienate unfamiliar, conflicted audiences and are seen as insider-speak or talking over their heads. Instead, use everyday language that describes these concepts in more relatable, non-insider ways (see Usage Example).</p>

GENERAL TERMINOLOGY & APPROACHES: TALKING ABOUT LGBT ISSUES

Conversations about LGBT 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 LGBT 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 LGBT people face.

When talking about equality for LGBT people, **use language that emphasizes our common values, beliefs, hopes and dreams—and which reminds people that LGBT 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 earn a living, meet their obligations, provide for themselves and their families, and build a better life.”

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fair, equal treatment • treating people fairly and equally 	<p>“Everyone, including LGBT people, should be treated fairly and equally by the laws of our state.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “rights” • “civil rights” • “gay rights” / “LGBT rights” 	<p>Don’t talk about “rights,” “civil rights,” or make 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.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discrimination • rejection • exclusion • unfairness 	<p>“Protecting people from discrimination is about treating others as we want to be treated. It’s not for me to judge.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “hate” / “haters” / “hatred” • “bigot” / “bigots” / “bigotry” • “prejudice” 	<p>Don’t descend into name-calling. Calling anti-LGBT 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 LGBT people and their families.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anti-gay/anti-transgender/anti-LGBT activists • opponents 	<p>“the hurtful rhetoric of anti-gay activists”</p> <p>“those who oppose protecting LGBT people from discrimination”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “anti-gay religious extremists/ extremism” • “anti-gay Christian groups” 	<p>Many religious people and faith traditions support LGBT people. Avoid language that unfairly paints an entire religious tradition or denomination, or religion more broadly, as being anti-LGBT or extremist.</p>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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

