TERMINOLOGY AT A GLANCE
TALKING ABOUT LGBT PEOPLE & EQUALITY

MAP
movement advancement project ▶

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 others can create distance or confusion.

Terminology At a Glance is a quick reference for new allies who want to support LGBT people but can face an array of confusing terminology and language. For the full *Ally's Guide to Terminology: Talking About LGBT People & Equality*, visit www.lgbtmap.org/talkingaboutseries.

LESBIAN, GAY & BISEXUAL

✓ Terms	✗ Avoid	Why?
• **gay** (adj.) • **lesbian** (n. or adj.) • **bisexual, bi** (adj.)	• "homosexual"	Anti-gay activists often use words like "homosexual" to stigmatize gay people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms.
• **sexual orientation** (or just **orientation**)	• "sexual preference" • "gay lifestyle" • "same-sex attractions"	Terms like "sexual preference" and "gay lifestyle" are used by anti-gay activists to stigmatize gay people and suggest that being gay is a choice, and therefore can and should be "cured."
• **gay and transgender** • **lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender**	• "LGBT" (when talking with people who aren't yet strong supporters)	Reference both sexual orientation and gender identity when discussing issues pertaining to both gay and transgender people. While the abbreviation "LGBT" can confuse and alienate those who are not yet supportive, it's essential when talking with LGBT and supportive audiences.

TRANSGENDER

✓ Terms	✗ Avoid	Why?
• **transgender** (adj.) (e.g., "he is transgender," "she is a transgender veteran")	• "transgendered" • "a transgender" (n.), "transgenders" (n.)	*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. Also do not use terms like "transvestite" to describe transgender people.

The term *transgender* refers to people whose **gender identity** (the sense of gender that every person feels inside) or **gender expression** is different from the sex that was assigned to them 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.

Always use a transgender person's chosen name, and pronouns consistent with the person's name, appearance and gender presentation.

TALKING ABOUT EQUALITY

✓ Terms	✗ Avoid	Why?
• **fairly and equally** • **fairness and equality**	• "rights" / "gay rights" • "civil rights"	"Rights" language is generally unpersuasive with most audiences, and civil rights comparisons can be especially alienating to African Americans. Instead, talk about why *everyone should be treated fairly and equally*.
• **intolerance, rejection, exclusion, unfairness**	• "hate" / "hatred" • "bigot" / "bigotry"	Avoid highly charged terms like "hate" and "bigotry," which can alienate people. Use language that is measured and relatable to create empathy and a sense of how anti-gay attitudes and actions hurt LGBT people.

Effective conversations about LGBT people and issues are framed in authentic, emotionally compelling ways that resonate with people's values. When possible, use the language of common values and beliefs; make your conversations about people, not laws and policies; and remind people of what this is really about: *Everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, provide for their families, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love.*

✓ Terms	✗ Avoid	Why?
• **employment/housing protections** • **fair & equal treatment**	• "rights" • "employment/housing rights"	Talking about "rights" in this context can make people think about opponents' false claims about "special rights." It can also make people resistant to the idea of non-discrimination protections.

When talking about non-discrimination laws that protect LGBT people from being unjustly fired from their jobs, remind people of our common, shared values:

- **Fair and equal treatment, for everyone** (*"All residents should be treated fairly and equally by the laws of our city/state."*)

- **The importance of hard work and the chance to earn a living** (*"All hardworking people in our city/state, including gay and transgender people, should have the chance to earn a living and provide for themselves and their families. Nobody should have to live in fear that they can be legally fired for reasons that have nothing to do with their job performance."*)

✓ Terms	✗ Avoid	Why?
• **marriage** • **denial of marriage, exclusion from marriage**	• "gay marriage" • "same-sex marriage"	Gay couples and straight couples want to marry for similar reasons: to stand up in front of family and friends and make a lifetime commitment to the person they love. Simply talk about *marriage,* without modifiers (or *marriage for same-sex couples,* if needed for clarity)—never "gay marriage" or "same-sex marriage."
• **love, commitment, responsibility, lifelong promise, taking care of the one you love** • **freedom, the Golden Rule, not sitting in judgment of others**	• "marriage rights" • "marriage benefits"	There is sometimes a misperception that same-sex couples marry for "rights" or "benefits." Avoid this by focusing on the values of love and commitment that embody marriage for all couples, gay and straight alike. In addition, it's vital to remind people of our shared beliefs—including treating others the way we want to be treated, not sitting in judgment of others, and how in our country, freedom means freedom for everyone, and that includes the freedom to marry the person you love.

When talking about marriage, focus on the values of marriage and what marriage is about: loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, for better and for worse.

Help people understand and grapple with how same-sex couples are hurt when they are shut out of marriage—and help people think about how they would feel if someone told them that they couldn't marry the person they love.

Remind people of our shared beliefs—particularly the Golden Rule, freedom, and not sitting in judgment of others—and how those values are at the heart of people's journeys toward supporting the freedom to marry.

Don't be drawn into debating opponents' fear-based strategies. Instead, keep the conversation focused on why marriage matters—to you, and to the people you know and love.

✓ Terms	✗ Avoid	Why?
• **adoption by loving, caring parents** • **lesbian & gay parents** • **two moms, two dads**	• "gay adoption" • "rights" • "adoption rights"	Adoption and parenting are about creating stable, loving homes for kids, and about making sure children have the nurturing environment that allows them to thrive and succeed. Discussions about parenting and adoption shouldn't focus on "rights," but rather on the importance of creating stable, loving families and legal ties that protect children, whether their parents are gay or straight.

When talking about adoption, focus on the best interests of children and why adoption matters to kids. Emphasize how caring lesbian and gay parents provide children with the love, stability, protection, security and guidance that every child deserves—and how adoption decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis by child health and social service authorities, not politicians, based on the best interest of the child.

Use the language of everyday family life. Emphasize the daily routines that so many parents share—making lunches, changing diapers, putting Band-Aids on scrapes, supervising homework, etc. Help people understand that good parenting is good parenting, whether the parents are gay or straight.

MAP
movement advancement project ▶