

AN ALLY'S GUIDE TO

TERMINOLOGY



Talking About LGBT People & Equality



movement advancement project ▶

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 others can create distance or confusion. For example, the abbreviation *LGBT* is commonly used within the LGBT movement and should be used to communicate with those audiences; however, it can be confusing and alienating to people who don’t understand what the abbreviation means. When talking to mainstream media and audiences, try to use *lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender* on first reference for clarity and inclusion—but if there is a need for brevity in repeated subsequent references, shorten to *gay and transgender* rather than “LGBT.” Use *LGBT* in longer written documents such as reports if the abbreviation is first defined.

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, as well as a few key messages for talking about various issues. MAP’s **Talking About LGBT Issues** series, online at www.lgbtmap.org/talkingaboutseries, provides additional recommendations and resources.

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.”</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 “LGBT” can confuse and alienate those who aren’t yet strong supporters—though it is essential when talking to LGBT and strongly supportive audiences. Use terms that allow your audience to stay focused on the message without creating confusion about your intended meaning.</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 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.

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transgender (adj.) 	<p>"transgender person"</p> <p>"transgender advocate"</p> <p>"transgender inclusion"</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. Never use the term "transvestite" to describe a transgender person.</p> <p>The shorthand <i>trans</i> is often used within the LGBT community, but may not be understood by general audiences.</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. When 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>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gender identity • gender expression 	<p>"Everyone should be treated fairly, regardless of gender identity or expression."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "sexual identity" (the correct term is <i>gender identity</i>) • "transgender identity" (use <i>gender identity</i> to refer to a person's internal sense of gender) 	<p>Not everyone who is transgender identifies that way; many transgender people simply identify as male or female. Also, note that <i>gender identity</i> (one's internal sense of gender) and <i>gender expression</i> (how a person outwardly expresses their gender) are not interchangeable terms.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transition 	<p>"She began transitioning last year."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "sex change" • "sex-change operation" • "pre-operative" / "post-operative" • "pre-op" / "post-op" 	<p><i>Transition</i> is the accurate term that does not fixate on surgeries, which many transgender people do not or cannot undergo. Terms like "pre-op" or "post-op" unnecessarily fixate on a person's anatomy and should be avoided.</p>

OVERVIEW: TALKING ABOUT EQUALITY FOR LGBT PEOPLE

Effective conversations about LGBT people and equality are framed in authentic, emotionally compelling ways that resonate with people's values.

When conversations about equality are rooted in the common ground we share, it's difficult to cast LGBT people as being "other," "different" or "not like me." It also makes it more difficult for Americans to ignore or dismiss the harms and injustices that LGBT people face.

When talking about equality for LGBT people:

- Use the language of common values, beliefs, hopes and dreams.
- Make it about people and their stories, not policies.
- Remind people that LGBT people are everyday Americans who live ordinary lives. LGBT people are neighbors, friends and co-workers who also work hard, provide for their families, walk the dog, mow the lawn, shop for groceries, etc.

For example: *"This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love."*

For more information, see [Talking About LGBT Issues: Overall Approaches](#), available at www.lgbtmap.org.

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fairly and equally • fairness and equality 	<p>"Everyone should be treated fairly and equally."</p> <p>"She supports fairness and equality."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "rights" • "civil rights" • "gay rights" 	<p>"Rights" language is generally unpersuasive with most audiences, and civil rights comparisons can be especially alienating to African Americans.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intolerance • rejection • exclusion • unfairness • hurtfulness 	<p>"This is the kind of exclusion and intolerance that divides our community."</p> <p>"Rejection by one's family can be the most hurtful of all."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "hate" / "haters" / "hatred" • "bigot" / "bigots" / "bigotry" • "prejudice" 	<p>Avoid highly charged, argumentative terms like "hate" and "bigotry," which are likely to alienate people. Instead, use language that is measured and relatable to create empathy and a sense of how rejecting attitudes and actions hurt LGBT people.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anti-gay/anti-transgender activists • far-right activists 	<p>"the hurtful rhetoric of anti-gay activists"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "religious extremists/extremism" • "anti-gay Christians" 	<p>Avoid language that unfairly paints an entire religious tradition or denomination as being anti-LGBT or extremist.</p>

TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES

In conversations about marriage for same-sex couples, it is important to:

- 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 in 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 marriage.
- 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.

For more information, see [An Ally's Guide to Talking About Marriage for Same-Sex Couples](#), available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.freedomtomarry.org.

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marriage • exclusion from marriage • denial of marriage 	<p>"Denying someone the chance at happiness that comes with being married, just because they're gay, seems hurtful to me."</p> <p>"I believe in treating the others the way that I want to be treated. I wouldn't want anyone to tell me that I couldn't marry the person I love, and I don't want to do that to anyone else."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "gay marriage" • "same-sex marriage" 	<p>Gay couples and straight couples want to marry for similar reasons: to stand in front of family and friends and make a lifetime commitment to the person they love.</p> <p>When possible, simply talk about <i>marriage</i>, without modifiers or qualifiers. If additional clarity is needed, use <i>marriage for same-sex couples</i>. Also, while the term "marriage equality" can be helpful when talking with those who are supportive of marriage for same-sex couples, it can create confusion and barriers to understanding for other audiences.</p> <p>Don't use terms like "gay marriage." Just as it would be inappropriate to call the marriage of two older adults "elder marriage," it is inappropriate to call the marriage of a same-sex couple "gay marriage" or "same-sex marriage." Simply talk about <i>marriage</i> instead.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • love, commitment, responsibility, promise • taking care of the one you love • freedom • treating others as you want to be treated (the Golden Rule) • not sitting in judgment of others 	<p>"Marriage is about loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, in good times and bad."</p> <p>"In our country, freedom means freedom for everyone, and that includes the freedom to marry the person you love."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "marriage rights" • "marriage benefits" 	<p>There is sometimes a misperception that same-sex couples only marry for "rights" and "benefits." To avoid this, focus on the values of <i>love</i>, <i>commitment</i> and <i>responsibility</i> that same-sex couples bring to marriage, and the importance of a couple being able to take care of and be there for each other.</p> <p>In addition, it's vital to remind people of our shared beliefs—in freedom, in not sitting in judgment of others, and in treating others as we would want to be treated.</p> <p>Finally, focus on how gay and straight couples share similar hopes and dreams for marriage. But instead of taking shortcuts by using phrases like "exactly the same" or "just the same," spend time exploring the common ground, beliefs and values that we share.</p>

TALKING ABOUT NON-DISCRIMINATION LAWS

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.”)

For more information, see [An Ally’s Guide to Talking About Nondiscrimination Protections for LGBT People](#), available online at www.lgbtmap.org.

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • employment/workplace/housing protections 	<p>“This law protects high-performing workers from being unfairly fired just because they’re gay or transgender.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “rights” • “employment/housing rights” 	<p>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.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • treating people fairly and equally 	<p>“All residents of our state should be treated fairly and equally.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “fighting discrimination” 	<p>There is a difference between referring to <i>non-discrimination laws</i> (a term that accurately describes these kinds of laws) and talking about “fighting discrimination,” which is generally unpersuasive and can lead to polarized, partisan reactions.</p>

TALKING ABOUT OPEN MILITARY SERVICE

When talking about open military service for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender personnel:

- **Focus on how open military service supports a strong national defense.**
- **Talk about the shared values that open military service—and military service itself—embodies.**

For additional information, visit OutServe-Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (www.outserve-sldn.org) and SPART*A (www.spartapride.org).

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • open military service (or open service) • gay/transgender service members/troops/personnel 	<p>“Strong majorities in the U.S. support open military service for gay and lesbian personnel.”</p> <p>“In 2014, an estimated 15,000 transgender service members were on active duty or in the Guard and Reserves.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “gays in the military” • “soldiers” (when broadly referring to the troops) 	<p>Use <i>service members, troops, personnel</i> or <i>military personnel</i> to describe those serving throughout our nation’s armed forces. The term “soldiers” applies only to personnel serving in the U.S. Army.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • service, duty, courage, sacrifice, patriotism, honor, integrity 	<p>“Open military service is about serving one’s country with honor and integrity.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “rights” • “equality” 	<p>When talking about military service, focus on the ideals that Americans associate with our nation’s armed forces. Don’t talk about “rights” in conversations about military service, which is really about service, duty, courage, sacrifice, patriotism, honor and integrity.</p>

TALKING ABOUT PARENTING & ADOPTION

When engaging in conversations about adoption and parenting:

- **Focus on the needs and best interests of children.** Emphasize how caring lesbian and gay parents can provide children with the love, stability, protection, security and guidance that every child deserves.
- **Use the language of everyday family life.** Emphasize the routines that so many parents share. Talk about making lunches, changing diapers, playtime and naptime, bedtime stories, putting Band-Aids on scraped knees, supervising homework, and more. Help people understand that good parenting is good parenting, whether parents are gay or straight.
- **Emphasize why adoption matters to children.** Adoption is about creating stable, loving families and legal ties that protect children, whether their parents are gay or straight.
- **Create an emotional connection through compelling stories.** Illustrate how children are hurt by laws that prevent them from being adopted by their lesbian or gay parents. For example, in states that ban *second-parent adoption* (where one partner in an unmarried couple adopts the other partner's child—which can occur in both gay and straight relationships), a child can be denied medical coverage under a non-legally recognized parent's health insurance plan. In addition, a non-legally recognized parent can be barred from visiting their child in the hospital or from consenting to emergency medical treatment for an injured child. And if a child's legal parent dies, that child could be ripped away from his or her surviving parent and away from the only home they've ever known.

For more information on talking about parenting, adoption, joint adoption and second-parent adoption by LGBT parents, see *An Ally's Guide to Talking About Adoption by LGBT Parents*, available at www.lgbtmap.org.

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adoption by loving, caring parents • adoption by lesbian and gay parents • two moms, two dads 	<p>"Not allowing qualified, loving lesbian and gay parents to adopt hurts kids, keeps them in government care, and deprives them of the forever homes they so desperately need."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "gay adoption" 	<p>Always keep the focus on loving, caring parents. Also, talking about <i>parents</i> rather than "couples" helps emphasize what adoption means to kids—the chance to find a forever home with loving parents.</p> <p>Help people understand that <i>No child should be denied the stability and love of a forever home simply because the parents who want to provide it are lesbian or gay.</i></p>
<p>This is about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the best interests of children • taking care of and providing for children • providing children with love, safety, security, stability, and forever homes • making adoption decisions on a case-by-case basis based on the best interests of the child 	<p>"Adoption and parenting are about creating loving, stable homes for kids, and about making sure that children have the nurturing environment that allows them to thrive and succeed."</p> <p>"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."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "rights" • "adoption rights" 	<p>Discussions about parenting and adoption should not focus on "rights"—but rather on how loving, caring lesbian and gay parents can provide children with the love, stability, security and guidance they need to thrive and succeed.</p> <p>When talking about second-parent adoption and state parenting laws, emphasize how children are hurt when laws deny them the security and permanency of having two legal parents: <i>Every child should have the security of knowing that their ties to their parents are safe and secure. No child should be denied health insurance coverage or face being ripped away from the only family they've ever known because the law treats one of their parents as a legal stranger.</i></p>

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movement advancement project ▶

2215 Market St. • Denver, CO 80205
303-578-4600
www.lgbtmap.org