

How to Use Inclusive Language: Respecting the LGBTQIA+ Community in Your Writing

LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and other identities that are included in the community such as pansexual and nonbinary. Increasingly in academia and in people's personal lives, LGBTQIA+ related topics have become very common. While allyship and advocacy are very important, it is of the same importance to ensure that LGBTQIA+ people are actually listened to and respected. This means understanding what language can be harmful. Even if the writer's intention is to help, not knowing the historical background behind some terms and how it has been used against LGBTQIA+ people can have dire consequences. Not only can it be offensive to the people who read it, but it can be used by others to reinforce harmful narratives about the community as a whole.

Some words to avoid and ones to use instead

Below are some words to avoid and ones to use when writing about LGBTQIA+ individual and topics. Though this is not a complete list, this section will address words that are commonly used, but are outdated, offensive, or inaccurate.

- "homosexual": This word can be used to stigmatize gay and lesbian people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms, thus dehumanizing them. Instead use **gay** or **lesbian** as an adjective rather than a noun.
 - ✓ Tommy is **gay**.
 - ✓ Ada is **lesbian**.
 - "lifestyle": This word can be used to suggest that being LGBTQIA+ is a choice when it is not. Instead use **sexual orientation** or **gender identity** when appropriate.
 - ✓ Being bisexual is a **sexual orientation**.
 - ✓ Being nonbinary is a **gender identity**.
 - "transgendered", "transman", "transwoman", "transperson": All of these words imply that being transgender is a noun when it is an adjective. This rhetoric can be used to dehumanize or otherize transgender people. Instead use **transgender** or **trans** to describe a person who is transgender. The correct usages when referring to transgender individuals would be **transgender man**, **transgender woman**, or **transgender person**.
 - ✓ Tommy is **transgender**.
 - ✓ He is a **transgender man**.
- It is worth noting that while some nonbinary, genderqueer, or genderfluid people identify as transgender, not all do. It is best to use the terms that they use to describes

themselves as rather than making assumptions when writing about them.

- “hermaphrodite”: This can be used to stigmatize people who have to individuals with biological sex characteristics which are not typically male or female. Instead use the term **intersex** as an adjective rather than a noun.

- ✓ John is **intersex**.

- “biological male”, “biological female”: As biological sex and gender identity are often conflated to mean the same thing, asserting that someone is a biological male or female can be used to disregard their gender identity. In addition, some people are intersex and have sex characteristics which are not typically male or female. It is better to say that they were either **assigned male at birth** (AMAB) or **assigned female at birth** (AFAB).

- ✓ Kerry was **assigned male at birth**.

- ✓ Drew was **assigned female at birth**.

- “two genders”, “both genders”: Asserting that there are only two genders disregards people who may identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, or other gender identities. In addition, claiming that people who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or other similar sexual orientations like “both genders” is often inaccurate as they can be attracted to more than two or all genders. It is better to use the terms **all genders** or **multiple genders**.

- ✓ People of **all genders** are welcome at the event.

- ✓ Drew is attracted to **multiple genders**.

- “preferred pronouns”: This can imply referring to someone by their pronouns they identify with is optional when it shouldn’t be. Instead, call them **gender pronouns**, **personal pronouns** or simply **pronouns**. For more information, see the worksheet “How to Use Inclusive Language: Gender Pronouns”.

- ✓ Tommy’s **pronouns** are he/him/his.

- ✓ What **pronouns** do you use?

A note on the word “Queer”

The word “queer” has a complicated relationship with the LGBTQIA+ community. Many use it as an umbrella term to include all sexual orientations and gender identities and to some it is the “Q” in the acronym. However, it makes others feel very uncomfortable and reject being identified as such. The reason for this is because it was historically used as a slur to dehumanize the community. Even though the word has been widely reclaimed, it is best to be mindful of how it can be perceived. This means avoiding applying it to the community as a whole, but respecting those who do identify as such.

Additional things to consider

As indicated previously, culture and language are everchanging and what may be acceptable to some in the community may not be acceptable for all. It is ultimately up to the writer to be responsible with the language they use when writing about the LGBTQIA+ community in order to be a good ally. All of the sources consulted in the making of this worksheet and further reading are provided to serve as a starting point for personal research.

Works Cited and Further Reading

"An Ally's Guide to Terminology: Talking About LGBT People and Equality." *GLAAD*, GLAAD, 2012,
www.glaad.org/publications/talkingabout/terminology.

"Good Practices: Inclusive Language." *University of Maryland Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Equity Center*, University of Maryland, lgbt.umd.edu/good-practices-inclusive-language.

"Intersex." *LGBTQ Center*, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
lgbtq.unc.edu/resources/exploring-identities/intersex.

"Is it OK to use the word 'queer'?" *Dictionary.com*, 2020, www.dictionary.com/e/s/gay-speak/#is-it-ok-to-use-the-word-queer.