Words Matter:
A Guide to Inclusive Language around Sexual Orientation

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GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
MURIEL BOWSER, MAYOR

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LETTER FROM THE MAYOR

Greetings,

As we all know, what we say and how we say it matters. Words have the power to build bridges, create mutual understanding, foster a sense of belonging, and convey respect. At the same time, they also have the power to reinforce harmful stereotypes and prejudices. Often, prejudice and discrimination manifest through how we communicate, which can perpetuate harm and oppression to historically marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community.

While the D.C. Office of Human Rights has predominantly responded to discrimination complaints brought under the D.C. Human Rights Act of 1977 and related local and federal laws and statutes, it has extended its commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable DC community by creating educational resources to help advise residents and District government employees on the importance of inclusive language.

In April of 2023, OHR released the Words Matter: A Guide to Inclusive Language around Racial and Ethnic Identity, in collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity. I am proud to announce that they have developed two more guides, *Words Matter: A Guide to Inclusive Language around Sexual Orientation* and the *Words Matter: A Guide to Inclusive Language around Gender Identity and Expression*, in collaboration with the Mayor's Office of LGBTQ Affairs (MOLGBTQA). Both guides reflect the District's strong commitment to advancing equity and builds upon our legacy of championing the human and civil rights of the LGBTQ+ community. They are intended to support our employees and residents in promoting a culture of acceptance, love, and respect.

There is a reason the District is has the highest population of LGBTQ+ adults in the nation. For the last 50 years, we have implemented various measures to provide legal protections and support services. We can continue to help our communities stay diverse and welcoming for everyone—regardless of how they identify or who they love— by choosing language that acknowledges diversity, conveys respect, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.

I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the words you use and the impact they may have on those around you. While it may seem small, it is a significant step towards building and strengthening a city that we are all proud of.
Sincerely,

Muriel Bowser
Mayor

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Words matter.

Language is constantly evolving as it adapts to cultural and social changes. Choosing the most appropriate term or phrase can be tricky, as there can be a lack of consensus among scholars, activists, and the public about a term or phrase's use. But, certain words, whether used intentionally or unintentionally, can exclude individuals, or leave an individual feeling like perhaps they are not welcome. Therefore, your conscious decision to use inclusive language can be an important first step in creating and sustaining welcoming, inclusive, and safe environments for all individuals, regardless of their identity. Additionally, it indicates that you are aware of the potentially marginalizing, insensitive, offensive, or derogatory nature of certain words and phrases and are trying to stop perpetuating discrimination, prejudice, and/or other forms of bias.

The D.C. Office of Human Rights (OHR) and the D.C. Mayor's Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Affairs (MOLGBTQA) worked together to develop this guide to serve as an educational resource for District employees and for the public as they begin to engage more regularly in conversations about sexual orientation in the workplace and in our communities. Our goal is to raise awareness, guide learning, and encourage language that centers on inclusion by being mindful of the voices and experiences of people who have been historically marginalized.

Since this guide is provided for educational purposes only, it should not be construed as legal advice or as a mandate. Rather, it should be viewed as an invitation to use language that strives not to harm, demean, offend, or oppress individuals or groups.

While this guide aims to explain the origins of problematic terms and phrases, it is not intended to encompass all possible terms, definitions, or uses. Our intention is to introduce our readers to the meanings that certain words may carry and to suggest that they be mindful of these associations when communicating.

I. Understanding Sex

This guide focuses on the commonly used terms and phrases our culture uses around sexual orientation in the United States. But, before we get into a full discussion on understanding sexual orientation, we provide a primer on understanding sex and gender. It is critical to understand the difference in these terms as they are often discussed together or around one another. Below are helpful definitions.

Definitions

Sex and gender are often used interchangeably; however, they are not the same thing. Whereas sex has a biological basis, gender is a social construct. The definitions below offer helpful distinction between the two terms.

Sex (sex assigned at birth, birth sex, biological sex)

Sex is a medical classification made based on one's internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, chromosomes, and gonads. Typically, most people are born biologically male or biologically female. Some people may be born intersex.

Intersex is an umbrella term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with, or naturally develops in puberty, a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the characteristics of a biological male or a biological female. For example, a person might be born appearing to be biologically female on the outside but has the reproductive anatomy of a biological male on the inside. Though there is some debate about which variations in sexual anatomy count as intersex, medical experts often say the number of children born with intersex traits occurs 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 births. Because some individuals are born with subtler forms of variations, it is difficult to get an accurate estimate of how many intersex individuals are in the U.S.

It is important to note that the variations in sex characteristics (chromosome patterns, gonads, genitals, etc.), is a natural variation in humans—it is not a disease or a disorder. More importantly, there is much diversity and complexity in the experiences of people who are intersex. Though the term "intersex" is usually included in the LGBTQIA+ acronym (defined below), it is not a gender identity or a sexual orientation; despite this, intersex individuals may still experience similar bias, stigma, and fear as other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Though some intersex individuals may identify as intersex, others may identify as male, female, transgender, non-binary, or any number of identities within the gender spectrum (discussed below).[1]

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[1] Many people may be unfamiliar with what it means to be intersex or to have intersex traits. You can describe someone who is intersex with one of the following: 1) "Frankie" is intersex; 2) "Frankie" is an intersex person; 3) Intersex people are...; or 4) People who are intersex. You should avoid using outdated or inflammatory language like disorders of "sex" development" or "hermaphrodite."

Gender

Gender refers to the social and cultural differences a society assigns people based on an individual's biological (assigned at birth) sex. These differences are usually split into the norms, behaviors, and roles that are associated with being biologically male or biologically female. However, gender is not fixed; it exists along a spectrum because it is a personal identity that is not linked to one's biological sex. You can learn more about gender, gender identity, and gender expression in the *Words Matter: A Guide to Inclusive Language Around Gender Identity and Expression.*

II. Understanding Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

While sex and gender may be important aspects of a person's identity, they tell us little about the person's sexuality or sexual orientation. Like sex and gender, sexuality and sexual orientation are often use interchangeably. Though they are closely related, there are important distinctions between the two.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a holistic term for someone's sexual behaviors, attractions, likes, dislikes, and preferences.[2] Though it is often used interchangeably with sexual orientation, sexuality covers more than just who you are attracted to—it includes what you enjoy and how you enjoy it. It should not be used as a synonym for sexual orientation.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is the enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction. [3] It is separate from gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sex. Like gender, sexual orientation exists along a spectrum and may be fluid. Most experts believe that sexual orientation is generally not something a person chooses, it is just a natural part of who a person is.

Table 1 provides examples of some sexual orientations and their definitions. This list should not be considered as comprehensive.

Table 2 provides some terms related to sexual orientation you should know. This is not a comprehensive list.

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[2] Brook. (ND). What is Sexuality? https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/what-is-sexuality/.
[3] University of California San Francisco LGBT Resource Center (UCSF). (ND). Definitions. https://lgbt.ucsf.edu/glossary-terms.

Table 1: Examples of Sexual Orientation

Identity	Definition
Asexual	A spectrum of identities of people who experience little to no sexual attraction to others of any gender. Some still desire romantic relationships and may also engage in sexual activity.[4]
Bicurious	An orientation that describes people who have an openness or curiosity about having sexual relations with a person of the same gender.
Bisexual	An orientation that describes people who are sexually, romantically, and emotionally attracted to more than one gender, including ones that are like and different than their own.[5]
Demisexual	A sexual orientation on the asexual spectrum that describes people who experience sexual attraction only under specific circumstances, such as after building a romantic or emotional relationship with a person.
Gay	An orientation of men who are sexually, romantically, and emotionally attracted to other men; this definition should not be used to refer to the entire LGBTQ+ community.[6]
Heterosexual (Straight)	An orientation of men who are sexually, romantically, and emotionally attracted to other men; this definition should not be used to refer to the entire LGBTQ+ community.
Heteroflexible	An orientation that describes people who are primarily heterosexual but who may have interest in same-sex relationships (see definition of fluid below)
Lesbian	An orientation of women who are sexually, romantically, and emotionally attracted to other women.

[4] Trevor Project, The. (2024). Understanding Asexuality: FAQs.
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-asexuality/.
[5] Trevor Project, The. (2021). Understanding Bisexuality: FAQs.
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-bisexuality/.
[6] Trevor Project, The. (2021). Understanding Gay and Lesbian Identities: FAQs.
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-gay-lesbian-identities/

Table 1: Examples of Sexual Orientation

Identity	Definition
Pansexual	A term that describes people who can experience sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction to any person, regardless of that person's gender identity or sexual orientation.
Polysexual	A term that describes people with a sexual orientation that involves sexual or romantic attraction to people with varying genders; polysexuals may identify as bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, or queer among many others.[7]
Pomosexual	A term used to refer to people who reject sexuality labels or do not identify with any of them; it is not necessarily an identity.
Queer	A sexual orientation AND a community for those who do not fit neatly into current sexual orientation identities; while it still may have negative and derogatory connotation, it has resurfaced as a common and socially acceptable way for LGBTQ+ people to refer to themselves and their community; it should be used sensitively and respectfully, especially by those who are not in the community.
Questioning	The process of exploring, learning, or experimenting with one's gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexuality.[8]

[7] Abrams, M. (2022). "47 Terms that Describe Sexual Attraction, Behavior, and Orientation)." Health Online. https://www.healthline.com/health/different-types-of-sexuality
[8] Trevor Project, The. (ND). The Coming Out Handbook. https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/guide/the-coming-out-handbook/

Table 2: Examples of Sexual Orientation

Identity	Definition
Bi-positive	An attitude toward bisexual persons that is validating and accepting.
Closeted	A word that describes people in the LGBTQ+ community who do not publicly or openly share their sexual identity, sexual attraction, sexual behavior, gender expression, or gender identity; it refers to the metaphorical hidden or private place an LGBTQ+ person comes from in the process of making decisions to "come out." [9]
Coming Out	A phrase that may describe the process of telling someone else how they identify in terms of their romantic or sexual orientation or gender identity; may also be a lifelong process of self-acceptance.[10]
Downlow (On the downlow; DL)	Originated in communities of color to describe men who typically identify as straight but secretly have sex with men.
Family of choice	A group of people who are chosen for their support and validation that may be missing from one' family of origin.
Family of origin	A person's biological family.
Fluid	Refers to the fact that sexuality, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior can change overtime and vary based on circumstances; primarily used to describe people who experience shifts in their sexuality, sexual attraction, or sexual behavior. [11]
MSM	A public health reference for the behavior rather than the sexual orientation of heterosexual men who have sex with men (MSM).
Out	A person who self-identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and/or transgender in their personal, public, and/or professional lives. [12]

[9] Abrams, M. (2022). "47 Terms that Describe Sexual Attraction, Behavior, and Orientation)." Health Online. https://www.healthline.com/health/different-types-of-sexuality.
[10] UNC Chapel Hill LGBT Center. (ND). Coming Out. https://lgbtq.unc.edu/resources/exploring-identities/coming-out/
[11] Abrams (2022).
[12] GLAAD. (ND). Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ. https://www.glaad.org/reference/terms.

Table 2: Examples of Sexual Orientation (continued)

Identity	Definition
Outing	The act of publicly revealing (sometimes based on rumor and/or speculation) another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent; this can be dangerous and even lethal for individuals.
Passing	A term most used to discuss the frequency and extent to which an LGBTQ+ person is perceived as or assumed to be cisgender and straight.
Same gender loving	A term used by the Black LGBTQ+ community to convey same-gender sexual orientation; it emerged in the 1990s as a culturally affirming Black homosexual identity. [13]
Sexual attraction	Refers to experiencing sexual desire or arousal in relation to another person or group of people.[14]

The LGBTQ+ Acronym

Sexual orientations are often represented by the LGBTQ acronym. This acronym and its several variations, including but not limited to LGBTQ+ and LGBTQIA+, often describe people who do not exclusively identify as cisgender or exclusively heterosexual. The letters stand for the following:

L– Lesbian
G– Gay
B– Bisexual
T– Transgender
Q – Queer or sometimes Questioning
I – Intersex
A– Asexual
+– all other orientations identities that do not fit within the lettered categories.

It should be noted that while transgender and intersex people are included in the acronym, they are not considered sexual orientations. Referring to the LGBTQIA+ community as the "gay community" should be avoided. Outside the United States, you may see or hear the acronym SOGIESC, which refers to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

[13] GLAAD. (ND). Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ. https://www.glaad.org/reference/terms
[14]Abrams (2022).

III. Understanding Romantic Attraction

As the name suggests, there is a difference between sexual and romantic attraction. Romantic attraction is the experience of having an emotional response that results in the desire for a romantic, but not necessarily sexual relations, relationships, or other interactions with another person or oneself.[15] It is an aspect of self and identity that involves:

- How you identify
- The way you experience romantic desire (if any)
- The gender identities or sexual orientations of the people you engage in romantic relationships with (if any)
- The gender identities or sexual orientations of the people you are romantically attracted to (if any) [16]

Table 3 provides examples of some types of romantic relationships and relationship structures.

Table 3: Romantic Attractions or Relationship Types and Related Terms

Romantic Attraction or Relationship Type	Definition
Aromantic	A romantic orientation that describes people who experience little or no romantic attraction to others and/or lacks interest in forming romantic relationships.[17]
Autoromantic	A romantic orientation that describes a person who is romantically attracted to themselves.[18]
Ethical non-monogamy	An umbrella term for relationships in which there is more than one sexual or romantic partner and all partners are consenting.
Open relationship	An umbrella term for all forms of non-monogamy (including swinging, threesomes, polyamory, throuples, etc.) OR a term for couples who have agreed that sexual encounters are allowed outside their relationship.
Polyamory	The practice or potential for having more than one romantic love.

[15] Abrams (2022)
[16] *ibid.*
[17] *ibid.*
[18] *ibid.*

Table 3: Romantic Attractions or Relationship Types and Related Terms (continued)

Polygamy	The act of marrying more than one person. Polygamy does not fall under the umbrella of ethnical non-monogamy because often the people (usually women) are not consenting; the practice is illegal in the United States.
Sapiosexual	A word used to describe those who experience attraction based on intelligence, rather than sex or gender. [19]

[19] *ibid.*

IV. Best Practices and General Guidelines for Using Inclusive Language for Sexual Orientation

Using inclusive language is important, particularly for people who have historically been excluded and marginalized based on their actual and/or perceived sexual orientation. General guidelines for using inclusive language for sexual orientation are included below:

- **First, understand that language is always evolving.**
  - As we continue to learn about each other and grow, language will continue to change and evolve at an accelerated pace. Its evolution is driven by academia, social justice movements, social media, and technology. Therefore, it is important to seek out new information and actively listen to historically marginalized communities about which terms or phrases are acceptable to them.
- **Second, be thoughtful and intentional about the language (verbal and non-verbal) you use.**
  - This can include researching terms of which you are unsure of the meaning or history of.
  - Avoid making generalized statements about sex, sexual orientation, or sexuality and confusing them with gender identity or expression.
  - Remember to be conscious of your non-verbal body language to create an atmosphere of openness and non-judgement.
  - Respect the privacy of others.
  - This includes their sexual orientation. Avoid gossiping and sharing information that is not relevant.
  - Outing someone can lead to potential harm and violence.
- **Third, be sensitive to self-identification.**
  - People have a right to choose how to identify themselves, including their sexual orientation. It is recommended that you refer to the person's chosen description of their sexual orientation (in situations where it is appropriate to discuss the person's sexual orientation at all). Avoid assuming someone's sexual orientation.
  - Individuals who have not publicly shared their sexual orientation may not consider themselves closeted. Avoid referring to them as closeted unless that is how they self-identify (and use the reference only in situations where it is appropriate). Likewise, some men may not want to be referred to as downlow or on the downlow.

- **Remember:**
  - **Avoid phrases and words that indicate a heteronormative bias.**
    - For example, assuming that a person is in a heterosexual relationship is a form of heteronormative bias. When describing a couple, avoid defaulting to a heterosexual relationship (for example, avoid asking a man whether he has a "wife" and instead ask whether he is married; avoid asking a woman whether she has a "boyfriend" and instead ask whether she is dating.
    - For example, saying that a person who recently came out is going through a "phase".
  - **In the workplace, avoid asking personal questions about someone's dating history/practices.**
    - Asking these types of question may force someone to be open about their sexual orientation (or gender identity) when they do not want to be or may create an uncomfortable environment in which the person has to be evasive in answering the question so that they do not out themselves.
- **Finally, when in doubt, ASK!**
  - Ask about confidentiality when it comes to their sexual orientation, particularly about whether someone is out in professional or HR settings.
  - For example, if you know someone's sexual orientation–based interactions outside of work, ask whether they are also out at work to avoid unintentionally outing them in the work setting.

a. Understanding Heteronormative and Heterosexist Language

The LGBTQ community is often subjected to unthoughtful, non-inclusive language that tends to marginalize people (See Table 4). Most of the outdated and/or offensive language used to describe or label members of the LGBTQ community is rooted in bias that assumes being straight and cisgender is the only acceptable norm. These biases and prejudices serve to perpetuate microaggressions against the LGBTQ community.

Table 4 includes examples of these terms, while **Table 5** provides examples of outdated and/or offensive terms.

Table 4: Types of Prejudice faced by the LGBTQIA2+ community

Discrimination Type	Definition
Biphobia	Prejudice or hatred toward bisexual people, expressed in speech or actions. [20]
Heteronormative	The perspective that all relationships should be between cisgender, heterosexual people; inaccurately assumes that heterosexual relationships are the "norm" and heterosexuality is the default.
Heterosexism	Prejudice or discrimination against the LGBQT+ community on the premise that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation. [21]
Homophobia	Prejudice or hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community expressed in speech or actions. [22]

Table 5: Outdated and/or Offensive Heteronormative and Heterosexual Biased Language

Term	Definition
Cishet	A person who is both cisgender and heterosexual; may be considered derogatory.
"Deviant"; "Disordered"; "Dysfunctional"; "Diseased"; "Perverted"; or similar descriptions	These words are sometimes used to portray the LGBTQ+ community as less than human, mentally ill, or as a danger to society; they should be avoided unless they are used in direct quotes that clearly reveals the bias of the person being quoted.

[20] GLAAD (ND).
[21] Anti–Defamation League (ADL). (ND). "What Is Heterosexism and What Can I Do About It? ADL. A word used to describe those who experience attraction based on intelligence, rather than sex or gender. [17]
[22] GLAAD (ND)

"Fag"; "Faggot"; "Dyke"; "Homo"; "Sodomite" or similar epithets	While these words have been reclaimed by some members of the LGBTQ+ community and used to describe themselves, they should be avoided as many members still consider these epithets offensive and derogatory.
Gay marriage	Use of gay marriage or same-sex marriage suggests that marriage for couples with the same gender identity is somehow different or less equal than cisgender, heterosexual marriages.
Gay rights	Using the term gay rights erases an infinite number of sexual orientations and suggests that only the rights men who have sexual or romantic relationships with other men are important enough to single out.
Homosexual	Because of the clinical history of the word "homosexual," it is often used by anti–LGBTQ+ activists to suggest that people attracted to the same sex are somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered, which has since been discredited by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association.
Lifestyle	An inaccurate term used by anti–LGBTQ activists to denigrate LGBTQ+ people and inaccurately implies that being LGBTQ+ is voluntary or a "choice". [21]
Sexual preference	Is typically inaccurately used to suggest that being attracted to the same sex is a choice and therefore can and should be "cured" or "changed."
Special rights	LGBTQ+ people are not asking for rights that are different from the rights of cis-gendered, straight people but rather full equality under the law and an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression.

[21] *ibid.*

b. Suggested Examples of Inclusive Language around Sexual Orientation

Examples of some inclusive language around sexual orientation are provided in **Table 6.**

Table 6: Inclusive Sexual Orientation Related Language

Term	Definition	Suggested Alternatives
Boyfriend/Girlfriend/ Husband/Wife/ Mom/Dad	You should not assume someone is in a heterosexual relationship or has a traditional family structure; however, people certainly may proudly describe their own partner as a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife.	Partner/Significant Other/Spouse/Parent/ Guardian
Homosexual	The word homosexual has a negative medical and legal history.	Gay; Lesbian; Bisexual etc. or LGBTQ+ community
Openly Gay/Lesbian/ Bisexual/ Transgender	While technically accurate, the phrase implies a confessional aspect to publicly acknowledging one's gender identity or sexual orientation.	Person's gender identity or sexual orientation

V. Resources

A. Mayor's Office of LGBTQ Affairs
- Connect LGBTQ+ residents with the city services they may need. https://forms.gle/rjhTtn77NgiRVisD6
- Advocate on behalf of programs and policies that benefit the lives of LGBTQ+ residents.
- Provide grants to community-based organizations who serve the LGBTQ+ community and LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.Host events that enrich, promote, and bring together the LGBTQ+ community of the District.
- Sign up to receive our Newsletter: https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/DCWASH/subscriber/new

B. Select Organizations
- SMYAL
- GLAAD
- Trevor Project/ Trevor Space
- GLSEN
- National LGBTQ Task Force
- Capital Pride
- LGBT National Help Center
- The DC Center
- Whitman-Walker
- Wanda Alston
- Us Helping Us
- HIPS DC

C. Read (Books and Articles)
- Johnson, P. (2018). *Black. Queer. Southern Women: An Oral History*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Funk, M. (2019). *The Book of Pride: LGBTQ Heroes Who Changed the World*. Harper Collins Publishers.
- Lorde, A. and Gay, R. (2020). *The Selected Words of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton.
- Davis, C. (2021). *The Queen's English: the LGBQTIA+ Dictionary of Lingo and Colloquial Phrases*. Clarkson Potter
- Cenziper, D. and Obergefell, J. (2016). *Love Wins : The Lovers and Lawyers who Fought the Landmark Case for Marriage Equality*. Harper Collins.
- Jones, C. (2016). *When We Rise : My Life in the Movement*. Hachette Books.
- Plant, R. (2011). The Pink Triangle : The Nazi War Against Homosexuals. Henry Holt and Company.
- Johnson, D. (2009). The Lavender Scare : The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government. University of Chicago Press.
- Styker, S. (2017). Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution. Basic Books.

D. Watch (Select Films and Documentaries)

- Kanopy (free with a DC Public Library Card and DCPL has a dedicated section for LGBTQ+ films)
- Life without Sex (2018) (YouTube)
- What Is Sexuality (YouTube)
- The Normal Heart (2014)
- Pride (2014)
- Prayers for Bobby (2009)
- Moonlight (2017)
- Milk (2008)

E. Listen (Select Podcasts)

- Private Parts Unknown
- The Sex Wrap
- Lesbian Chronicles
- Busy Being Black