



## Using Words That Embrace A Wider Audience

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If I told you that a minimum of 10% of your audience would instantly feel more connected to you if you wore yellow on stage, how many of you would re-consider your wardrobe choices? Maybe a few of you are going, WOW! That is why I get so many new leads when I wear my lucky yellow shirt? I have a tip for you that is just this simple and may save some speakers from losing the shirt on their back.

In a world that tries to be "politically correct" we as speakers try to stay up on the latest terms to describe communities in our speeches. We may be familiar with words like "alternative lifestyle," but chances are we don't realize that the language we use in our work can cloud our message, close doors to future opportunities, and hurt our business. Within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) communities and others, words are also constantly being created to represent "new" combinations of identities. You may be asking yourself, "Is there a difference in what these words or letters mean and what do I need to understand to be a more inclusive speaker, writer, or trainer?"

As companies, universities, and associations become more inclusive of diversity, offer domestic partner benefits, and amend their non-discrimination policies, hiring practices, and sexual harassment procedures, it is imperative for speakers, writers, and trainers to understand the current trends and the history of language representing LGBT communities. In this article, I briefly review the history of labels in the LGBT community while also using humor and common sense when trying to navigate complicated politics and personal preferences. After reading this article, you should have a foundation to check your own language for clarity, assumptions, or other acts of exclusion that clouds the message you are trying to deliver.

In the shadows of the "Politically Correct" or "PC" movement, there are many folks trying to use the most inclusive and supportive language to describe others. These words are often even created as the political pendulum sways from left to right or steadies in the center. However, it is important to also note that language and language preferences are very individual things determined by personal identity, community membership, and politics. Language also varies by age, gender, class, race and ethnicity, and region of the country. So what are you to do? I have had a number of conversations about my language choices so I thought I would share these with you and then you can decide where to go next. As speakers, writers, trainers, etc., it is imperative to check one's

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language to be as inclusive as possible if not at a minimum clearly addressing our target audience.

I use LGBT to name the non-heterosexual community. Well, actually I use Queer, but that seems to ruffle feathers in some places, so I have adjusted to LGBT again. I have even “caught” myself using Gay as the umbrella term in some areas. So what is the difference and who cares? To some, Gay connotes white men that are romantically or sexually attracted to other men. This can feel marginalizing to women and bisexuals not to mention the trans community, because usually there are strict social constructs set in place as to what “man” means with little wiggle room. Then there was GLBT, I mean GLB, actually, GL. The modern gay movement was made visible through active white gay (G) men and a few lesbian (L) women (recruited from the Women’s Liberation front that weren’t as welcoming to Lesbians) who bravely stepped forward during early equality protests and marches. To be more inclusive to women and their involvement in the movement (again, I am implementing the same rigid social constructs as to what “woman” means) L was placed first and the B added due to the silencing and invisible status of the bisexual community that largely, in my opinion, still exists today. T was added much later on to include the trans population in the movement even though many trans people identify as heterosexual. Both the B and T often find their home in “not the norm” but then are kicked out again from the “norm” in the non-heterosexual community. Queer is a perfect example of a historically negative and derogatory label that has been reclaimed by a significantly younger population of LGBT identified folks and signifies an inclusive community of non-heterosexual people, but often includes Allies as well. It is important to reiterate that these terms mentioned are more commonly used within white communities and there are hundreds of others. These terms are more visible due to the privilege white LGBT community members have in our society to be heard. As far as who cares... when someone calls you the wrong thing, you care and when you are trying to be inclusive you care, otherwise it is individual preference.

Reclaiming words and even inventing new terminology is rapidly expanding an individual’s sense of community. As “wordsmiths” it is important to recognize that language varies greatly by region, age, ethnicity, country, etc. If you are comfortable using certain words over another, take a moment and explain your word choice. Be prepared to answer questions about new terms for participants as well as learn new terminology from them. Even during the conversations leading up to the contract agreement, clarify who will be in the audience and what language is used within the organization. Recognize that the person you are speaking with may not know these answers or have the correct answers; at least, you can know that you are trying to be

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inclusive and if/when you are questioned you can recall the conversation. Lastly, as speakers, we can help a new inclusive term become more recognizable by setting the example and using the terms publicly.

Lastly, I frequently get asked how many gay people are there in a given community. I usually respond with how many straight or heterosexual folks are in that community? I really do get asked this a lot and let me explain why I answer the way I do. 1) In a recent National Survey where a blank line was given for Sexual Identity, 298 responses were given. 298! So if we are constantly creating language to define ourselves, it would be hard to identify what is what and who is who. 2) Sexual and Gender Identity are fluid elements of one's life that change by relationship and experience so at any given point it would be impossibly inaccurate to take an estimated guess. However, for you number crunchers, here is a safe bet. Keeping Kinsey's study in mind, though loaded with methodological problems and even more problematic conclusions, he determined in the late 50s to 60s that roughly 10% of a given population could feasibly be questioning their sexual identity at some point. This 10% may not actively pursue a different identity and all that goes with it and may not even change how they identify, but internally question. This is a safe number to lean on if hard pressed to give a number, but like language, this is an every changing population and identity.

So where to go from here? You can either bite your tongue and take up knitting or track your own language use. What I mean by tracking your own language is to see which words you use in which cases. Are you making any assumptions about the person, couple, or population by using that word? Have you asked the folks you are labeling if that is the correct word to use? Simply asking in the first place prevents us all from wearing mint flavored shoes. This way you don't misrepresent someone's identity, use the wrong pronoun or name, or miss an opportunity to play match maker. Recently, I attended a public workshop on buying a house. A lesbian couple came in and sat down next to me. They had two homes in the area to sell and were interested in buying a larger home. They shared with me their motivation, budget, and were very serious about using this particular realtor as he had been highly recommended. During the program, the realtor continually used "Mr. and Mrs. Buyer or Seller" in his examples as well as gendered examples involving a woman on the front row owning a boutique and another male participant driving an expensive sports car. The couple quietly left the workshop prepared to take their business elsewhere.

"Who cares?" You may be asking. Well, I am new to the real estate market, but a multi-million dollar budget, two starter homes recently renovated and ready to sell, in a buyer's

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market, great credit rating – yeah, that described this particular Mrs. and Mrs. Buyer and Seller. So be careful, march forward nicely. When you hit bumps, recognize perfection can't be attained by everyone or it would cease to be perfect. Otherwise, start working on a scarf and looking into a new career. Remember that a minimum of 10% of your audience will feel connected, received a clear message from your work, and refer to or hire you if you use inclusive language.

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