

Suggestions for Promoting Inclusive Language

Language plays an important role not only in reducing heterosexual bias, but also in increasing the visibility of LGBT people and promoting positive images. Lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people often feel ignored by the general media which take the heterosexual orientation of their readers for granted. Unless one is referring specifically to heterosexual people, writing and speaking should be free of heterosexual bias. Ways to increase the visibility of LGBT persons include the following:

- Using examples of LGBT people when referring to activities (e.g., parenting, athletic ability) that are erroneously associated only with heterosexual people by many readers.
- Referring to LGBT people in situations other than sexual relationships. Historically the term homosexuality has connoted sexual activity rather than a general way of relating and living.
- Omitting discussion of marital status unless legal marital relationships are the subject of writing. Marital status per se is not a good indicator of cohabitation (married couples may be separated, unmarried couples may live together), sexual activity, or sexual orientation (a person who is married may be in a gay or lesbian relationship with a partner). Furthermore, describing people as either married or single renders LGBT people as well as heterosexual people in cohabiting relationships invisible.
- Referring to sexual and intimate emotional partners with both male and female terms (e.g., “the adolescent males were asked about what age at which they first had a male or female sexual partner”).
- Using sexual terminology that is relevant to lesbians and gay men as well as bisexual and heterosexual people (e.g., “when did you first engage in sexual activity” rather than “when did you first have sexual intercourse”).
- Avoiding the assumption that pregnancy may result from sexual activity (e.g., “it is recommended that women attending the clinic who currently are engaging in sexual activity with men be given oral contraceptives,” instead of “it is recommended that women who attend the clinic be given oral contraceptives”). Try to keep a clarity of expression and avoidance of inaccurate stereotypes about lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered persons. Stigmatizing or pathologizing language regarding LGBT people should be avoided (e.g., “sexual deviate,” “sexual invert”). Authors should take care that examples do not further stigmatize LGBT persons. An example such as “Psychologists need training in working with special populations such as lesbians, drug abusers, and alcoholics” is stigmatizing in that it lists a status designation (lesbians) with designations of people being treated. Avoid comparisons of lesbians or gay men with parallel groups. When comparing a group of gay men or lesbians to others, parallel terms have not always been used. For example, contrasting lesbians with “the general public” or “normal women” portrays lesbians as

marginal to society. More appropriate comparison groups might be “heterosexual women,” “heterosexual men and women,” or “gay men and heterosexual women and men.”

Adapted from: Safe Zone Resource Manual, University of South Carolina, 2003.