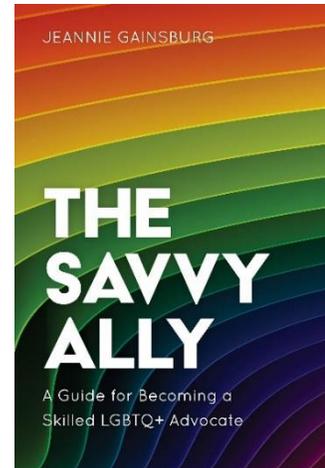


# Common LGBTQ+ Etiquette Bloopers

(Sections of this handout were taken from *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*)

This handout offers information on best practice LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus so much more!) language tips, outdated terms, and cultural faux pas. It also offers some pointers on how to mess up properly.



## Best Practice Language Tips

### Remember That *Transgender* Is an Adjective

People get very creative with the word *transgender* and the shortened version *trans*. In most situations creativity is a great thing. In this case it's not, and some of the creative variations of the word *transgender* can be quite offensive. The words *transgender* and *trans* are adjectives: descriptive words that describe a noun. The same is true for the words *gay* and *queer*, but the words *transgender* and *trans* seem to get misused the most.

#### Correct

A transgender man  
Trans folks  
They are a transgender person

#### Incorrect

A transgender  
The transgenders  
They are a transgendered person

Another creative variation of the word *transgender* is the incorrect word *transgendering*. People transition, they don't transgender.

### Use Language That Reflects Transitioning as a Lifelong Journey

Do avoid the phrase "completed transition" or any other language that implies that a transitioning person is "done," like a cinnamon roll in the oven. Every trans person has their own unique decisions to make about the process, and these decisions may alter throughout their lifetime as their finances change and their bodies age. Their transitioning journey may or may not include legal name changes (on some or all documents), hormone therapies, and/or various surgeries.

## Avoid the Words *Preferred* and *Preference*

For years it was common to ask people to share their preferred pronoun. Many people have now moved away from the word *preferred*, instead simply saying, “What pronoun do you use?” The word *preferred* implies that the person has selected it, rather than that it is something that’s part of their identity. You would probably never ask a cisgender (i.e., not transgender) person what their preferred pronoun is. It’s just their pronoun. Asking for preferred pronoun also implies that the person prefers a specific pronoun but that any pronoun will do, when typically this is not the case.

You should also avoid the words *preferred* and *preference* when you are talking about whom people are attracted to. I often hear people say, “That’s his sexual preference.” It is more respectful to say, “That’s his sexual orientation.” Once again, the word *preference* implies that someone’s attraction is a choice rather than a part of who they are. Listen to the difference in these two sentences: “I am attracted to women” and “I prefer to sleep with women.” The second sentence sounds like, “Yeah, I prefer to sleep with women, but ... if there are none around, anyone will do.”

## Be in the Present

If we stay focused on the present, then we should be able to follow these simple rules when we talk with and about transgender people.

- 1) Always use people’s current name and pronoun, even when talking about someone’s past.
- 2) Do not ask what a transgender person’s name used to be.
- 3) Do not ask to see a pre-transition photo.

For many transgender individuals, the time before they transitioned was a painful one when they were forced to express themselves in a way that felt wrong. Using an old name or pronoun for a transgender person, asking what their name used to be, or asking to see an old photo may be asking them to go back to a very unhappy place.

### Pop Quiz

When should you change the name and pronoun for a coworker who is transitioning?

- A. When the coworker tells you to please use their new name and pronoun.
- B. When the coworker tells you to please use their new name and pronoun and their name has been legally changed.
- C. When the coworker tells you to please use their new name and pronoun, their name has been legally changed, they have completed a medical transition, and they are wearing their “Done!” sticker.

Answer: A

## Use This Term Instead of That One

Here are some outdated terms that are generally falling out of favor. There are still some LGBTQ+ people who use them to refer to themselves and we should obviously mirror those terms back when we hear them being used. In general, however, it's a respectful starting point to swap the outdated term for the new term as listed here.

### **Use *Transgender* Instead of *Transsexual***

*Transsexual* is a dated term that is falling out of favor, especially with younger generations. Some people dislike this word because it has the word *sexual* in it, which tends to reinforce the mistaken notion that all things LGBTQ+ are about sex. Others feel that the word *transsexual* is inaccurate, because the term focuses on a person's sex rather than their gender identity. In addition, the term *transsexual* can hold a negative connotation, as it was originally used within psychological communities to diagnose people with mental disorders. Most people use the term *transgender* or simply *trans*.

### **Use *Cross-Dresser* Instead of *Transvestite***

*Transvestite* is another outdated term. Cross it out in your head and replace it with *cross-dresser*. A cross-dresser is a person who enjoys wearing clothing that society doesn't consider appropriate for their gender. Cross-dressing is about a person's gender expression. It tells us nothing about their gender identity or their orientation.

### **Use *Gay* Instead of *Homosexual***

Many people dislike the word *homosexual* for the same reasons that people dislike the term *transsexual*. It has the word *sexual* in it, and the term was originally used within psychological communities to diagnose people with mental disorders.

### **Use *Typical* Instead of *Normal***

When we are discussing gender identities, gender expressions, or biological sexes that are common or expected, it's respectful to use the word *typical*. Try to avoid the word *normal*. The opposite of normal is abnormal, which has a pretty icky connotation.

### **Use *Intersex* Instead of *Hermaphrodite***

*Hermaphrodite* is a dated and inaccurate term that pathologizes natural body variation. When talking about intersex individuals, also avoid words like *condition* or *disorder*. These words imply that being intersex is wrong or unnatural. Intersex people have natural biological variations.

### **Avoid the Word *Lifestyle* Altogether**

Living in the woods without electricity and a flush toilet is a lifestyle. Being LGBTQ+ is not. It's just who someone is. Do avoid the word *lifestyle* in the context of LGBTQ+ people and lives. There is no gay lifestyle just as there is no straight lifestyle.

**“The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.”**

– John Powell

## Pop Quiz

You've just finished reading this handout and realized that you are guilty of having made one or several of these faux pas. You should (check all that apply):

- A. Give up. You're obviously a terrible person and a hopeless ally.
- B. Forgive yourself. We didn't learn this stuff in high school.
- C. Put in the work to get it right the next time.

Answer: B and C

You're not a terrible person. Everyone makes mistakes. Being an ally is an ongoing journey of messing up, learning, and growing. So, make an appropriate apology when possible. Forgive yourself. And find some tricks and strategies for getting it right the next time.

## Messing Up Properly

What should an apology look like if you do make a mistake? In general, it should be similar to accidentally bumping into someone. If you bump into someone on the street you are unlikely to walk by without saying anything, but you are also unlikely to get down on your knees, tell the person how awful you feel, and beg for their forgiveness. You will probably simply say something like, "Oh, excuse me," and move on. If you're reading this handout, my guess is you are a person who is interested in being as respectful as possible, so it's likely that when you mess up you are going to feel terrible and your instinct might be to over-apologize. In general, this makes the situation worse because you have shifted the focus onto yourself. The person who you messed up with now may feel the need to make *you* feel better. So, try not to draw too much attention to your mistake. Simply apologize and move on—but do put in the work to get it right the next time.

For strategies to get it right the next time, check out the Savvy Ally Action video "What to Do When You Mess Up." Available at [www.savvyallyaction.com](http://www.savvyallyaction.com).



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2021