Within all discourse, there are terms that most accurately and respectfully acknowledge people’s identities and positions within society. In general, consider using language that puts personhood first and emphasizes humanity.

This can often be done by using terms as adjectives rather than nouns (i.e. Black or White people vs. Blacks and Whites; LGBTQ people vs. gays and lesbians; young people vs. youths) or by actively putting “people” first (i.e. people with disabilities vs. disabled people; people living in poverty vs. poor people; people who are homeless vs. homeless people). Here are a few examples:

**X “EX-CON,” “CRIMINAL,” OR “FELON.”** Terms that label people by past or present convictions posed against them reduce their identity to the violations they’ve been accused of rather than their humanity. Instead, describe people as people first and foremost, not by their mistakes.

**✓ INSTEAD:** People with felony convictions; people who have been incarcerated.

**X “MINORITY.”** The word minority is originally a mathematical term meaning “the smaller part or number; a number, part or amount forming less than half of the whole.” As demographics shift in our nation, the accuracy of such a term is fleeting. However, it is most important to scrap the term because of its diminutive connotation. Try using “people first” terminology instead.

**✓ INSTEAD:** People of color.

**X “LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE.”** Totem poles are vertical sculptures primarily traditional to tribes in the Pacific Northwest. The term “low man on the totem pole,” when used as an idiom to describe a person of low rank, inaccurately trivializes the tradition and meaning of the totem poles, which do not have a hierarchy of carvings based on physical position.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Person of lower rank, junior-level.

**X “GYPPED.”** The term gypped is used colloquially to imply being ripped off or swindled. The dated term derives from “gypsy” and perpetuates negative and unfair stereotypes.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Ripped off, swindled, cheated, conned.

There are some phrases and colloquialisms with discriminatory or offensive roots, which are sometimes little known. It is important to learn, and then retire, these terms when possible.

Aim to avoid idioms or phrases that have obvious or even subtly demeaning connotations related to groups or cultural traditions. Here are a few examples:

**X “TURN A DEAF EAR,” “TURNING A BLIND EYE” OR “THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND.”** It is best to avoid idioms that cast a negative connotation on people’s various physical abilities. Drop the idiom and instead use terms that cut to your point without offending others.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Ignoring, insensitive, misguided.

**X “POW-WOW.”** A pow-wow is a social gathering for ceremonial purposes, and many tribes still hold them on regularly. Using this out of context to refer to a meeting or a quick chat or conversation trivializes the long tradition that is still maintained today by many tribes.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Chat, brief conversation, quick talk, brainstorm.

Advancing a social justice agenda starts with being smart and deliberate in how we frame our discourse. The Social Justice Phrase Guide is your go-to tool to craft inclusive messages. Whether developing language for your organization, communicating through media platforms, or engaging in personal discussions, follow these guidelines to successfully communicate across communities.

This guide is a collaboration of Advancement Project, a multi-racial civil rights organization, and The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice communication lab.
Talking Sections

Speak to commonsense reasons for change. Emphasize that we’re a prosperous country instead: “divide up the pie,” or “do more with less.” “making tough choices,” or “rein in spending.”

Here are a few common scarcity pitfalls to be aware of:

X Discussing resource allocation in competitive terms or saying certain folks need to “do more with less” pits groups against one another instead of providing a space to work collaboratively toward mutually beneficial outcomes.

- Emphasizing the common good, that we’re a prosperous country.
- Reinforcing prosperity over scarcity.
- Accurately and respectfully talk about people’s identities, situations, and roles in society.
- Retire outdated and problematic phrases and metaphors (e.g. education policy "reform." police, "war on drugs.").
- Clearly identify what we want to reform.
- Cleanly identify that we want to reinforce.
- Talk about policies and solutions in realistic and accurate ways that spur the action social justice advocates want.
- Tell up unitary participation and cooperation over division, extreme individualism, and competition.
- In all of these cases, it’s the policies that we want to change, not the policies themselves.
- Accurately describe the problem.
- Ask for support that will move us forward.
- Use metaphors and phrases that reinforce the value of cooperation and the interconnectedness of our social systems. When describing resource allocation, use language that emphasizes how policies and programs benefit society at large.
- Point to how policies and programs benefit society.
- Advocate for policies and programs that keep conversation productive by constructing scenarios and hypothetical worlds that hinge on the role or experience of one who used TANF as bridge while between jobs, a family that used Section 8 to find a home closer to work and school.

Research (used with education, immigration, welfare, fare, tax, etc.). As linguist Anat Shenker-Osorio points out, we don’t tend to try to “reform” things that we like.

For example:

- Reform (used with education, immigration, welfare, etc.).

In investing in healthy and safe communities; Clearly identify what we want to reform:

-instead:

-Instead of metaphors and phrases that encourage extreme individualism or competition, social justice advocates should consider phrases that reinforce interconnectedness and the value of cooperation.

For example:

- St相通 it up unity, participation, and cooperation over division, extreme individualism, and competition.
- Reinforce prosperity over scarcity.
- Accurately and respectfully talk about people’s identities, situations, and roles in society.
- Retire outdated and problematic phrases and metaphors (e.g. education policy "reform." police, "war on drugs.").
- Clearly identify what we want to reform.
- Cleanly identify that we want to reinforce.
- Talk about policies and solutions in realistic and accurate ways that spur the action social justice advocates want.
- Tell up unitary participation and cooperation over division, extreme individualism, and competition.
- In all of these cases, it’s the policies that we want to change, not the policies themselves.
- Accurately describe the problem.
- Ask for support that will move us forward.
- Use metaphors and phrases that reinforce the value of cooperation and the interconnectedness of our social systems. When describing resource allocation, use language that emphasizes how policies and programs benefit society at large.
- Point to how policies and programs benefit society.
- Advocate for policies and programs that keep conversation productive by constructing scenarios and hypothetical worlds that hinge on the role or experience of one who used TANF as bridge while between jobs, a family that used Section 8 to find a home closer to work and school.