

# THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHRASE GUIDE

*Strictly For Your Consideration*

As our world is rapidly changing, 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.

**Here are some 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.

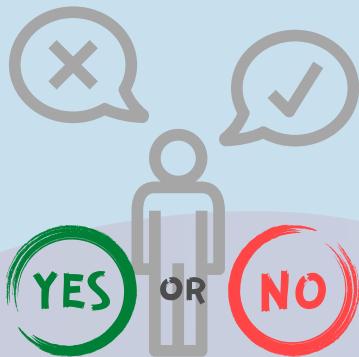
**✓ INSTEAD:** People with felony convictions; people who have been incarcerated.

**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

These phrases will help to accurately and respectfully talk about people's identities, situations, and roles in society



# THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHRASE GUIDE

*Strictly For Your Consideration*

Aim to avoid idioms or phrases that have obvious or even subtly demeaning connotations related to groups or cultural traditions

**Here are some 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.

Retire outdated and problematic phrases and metaphors

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

**X “POW-WOW.”**

A pow-wow is an inter-tribal social gathering that includes dance, singing, and ceremonial elements. Many tribes and Native organizations hold them on a regular basis. Using this term out of context to refer to a meeting or a quick chat or conversation trivializes the significance of these gatherings.

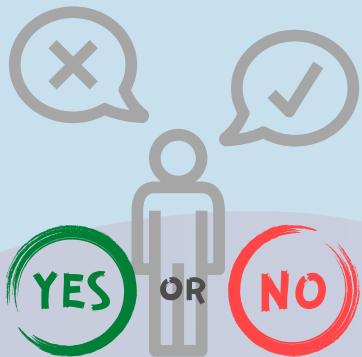
**✓ INSTEAD:** Chat, brief conversation, quick talk, brainstorm.

**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.

Source Cited: Advancement Project, a multi-racial civil rights organization, and The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice communication lab.



# THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHRASE GUIDE

*Strictly For Your Consideration*

Let's thoroughly examine the implications of word choices to avoid reinforcing values that might be considered problematic (*such as militarism or extreme individualism*), derogatory or offensive.

**Here are some examples:**

## ✗ “REFORM”

(Used with education, immigration, welfare, tax, etc.). Someone once pointed out, we don't tend to try to “reform” things that we like. In all of these cases, it's the policies that we want to reform, but by skipping that word, we are maligning public education, immigration, or taxes themselves.

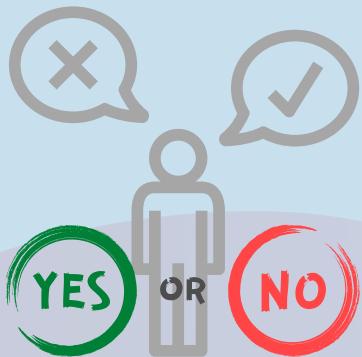
✓ INSTEAD: Clearly identify what we want to reform: policies, rules, approaches, etc. (e.g. education policy reform).

Discuss policies and solutions in realistic and accurate ways that spur the action social justice advocates want

## ✗ “TOUGH ON CRIME,” OR “WAR ON DRUGS.”

Research shows that militaristic language and punitive metaphors inspire fear and lead to unduly harsh policy responses.

✓ INSTEAD: Investing in healthy and safe communities; a healthy and safe approach to laws about drugs.



# THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHRASE GUIDE

*Strictly For Your Consideration*

It is important to choose language that emphasizes shared interests and discredits "us vs. them" distinctions. By highlighting the cultural, economic, and historical connections we all share, communications can emphasize a community-focused mindset over staunchly individualistic thinking.

**Here are some examples:**

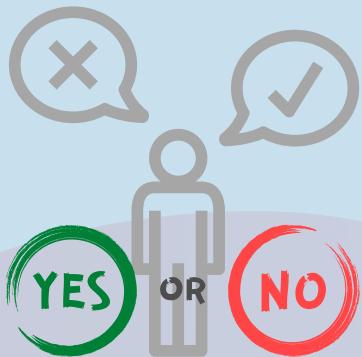
Bad policies hurt us all, threatening values and disrupting communities. Good policies move us all forward. Instead of metaphors and phrases that encourage extreme individualism or competition, social justice advocates should consider phrases that reinforce interconnectedness and the value of cooperation.

Lift up unity, participation, and cooperation over division, extreme individualism, and competition

## **X** “LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD.”

Team-based metaphors suggest that someone always must win and someone else must lose.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Emphasize the common good, that we’re stronger together. We should share the “ladder of opportunity” and not pull it up behind us.



# THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHRASE GUIDE

*Strictly For Your Consideration*

Our country has an abundance of resources, and should be a place where everyone has an equal opportunity. To reinforce that idea, we should avoid discussing options and policy approaches in zero-sum terms, which tap into the fear-based part of our brain that is concerned about scarcity and individual survival. Advocates can keep conversations productive by pointing to how policies and programs benefit society at large.

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

### **X “DIVIDE UP THE PIE,” OR “DO MORE WITH LESS.”**

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.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Emphasize that we’re a prosperous country that should include everyone in enjoying our national wealth – but our plentiful resources are disproportionately divided right now to the benefit of a select few.

Reinforce prosperity over scarcity

### **X “MAKING TOUGH CHOICES,” OR “REIN IN SPENDING.”**

Using economic arguments as the basis for social change belies the moral reasons to adjust systems and policies to be in line with our values. For example, the ills of mass incarceration and flawed drug policy need to be addressed not only because current approaches are too costly, but also because they inflict harm on families, communities, and society.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Speak to commonsense reasons for changing misguided policies that don’t fit with our society’s values

### **X “ON WELFARE/FOOD STAMPS/SECTION 8.”**

Talking about people being “on welfare” or “on food stamps” reinforces the scarcity-based view that those individuals are “on the dole” getting something for nothing. But these shared programs exist to benefit society overall. We don’t talk about people being “on the U.S. Postal Service” or being “eligible to use the interstate highway system.” Context helps illustrate how a program is fulfilling its purpose and reinforces how that support will be there for others when they face hard times.

**✓ INSTEAD:** Speak to commonsense reasons for changing misguided policies that don’t fit with our society’s values