

Words Matter

A guide to inclusive language

GORDON SCHOOL

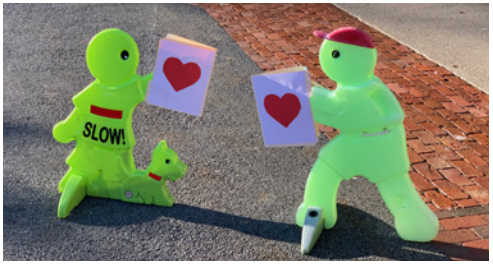
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MISSION STATEMENT

The Gordon School is a racially diverse, nursery through eighth grade, all-gender independent school in East Providence, Rhode Island. Child by child, the Gordon School community cultivates successful students by inspiring joyful learning, encouraging intellectual leadership, fostering an empathic spirit and stimulating a drive for positive societal impact.







Words matter. Gordon provides the following guidelines for word choice to help ensure that all individuals and groups of people can see themselves reflected in the language the school uses.

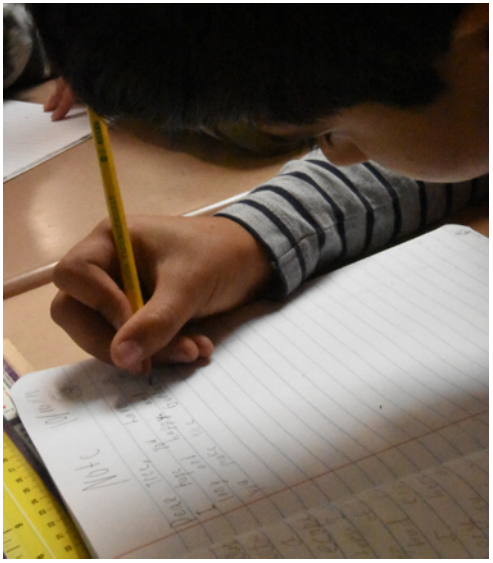
These guidelines are centered in classroom practice and the ways adults speak with students, and these guidelines also apply to communications with parents, alumni and members of the school's extended family, and with visiting families and other guests on campus.

These guidelines should be shared with Gordon families, with Gordon's community partners, and with the visiting educators, artists, and authors who spend time with Gordon students.











The default language at Gordon should affirm every member of the community. In order to do this, people must recognize that they don't know everything about the people they meet, that the way people identify can shift over time, and that language needs to adjust accordingly.

While each section in this booklet provides specific guidance, the recommendations here can be distilled into these overarching principles:

- Be mindful of language to avoid making assumptions about people.
- Remember that children and adults are in charge of the language and terms they use to identify themselves—and that these decisions can change.
- Take responsibility for mistakes that happen and make amends if possible.
- Recognize that as with all language acquisition, establishing fluency takes practice, and everyone is embarking on this journey together.

The specific guidance does not cover every situation, and practices will change over time. When approaching any new person or group, it is most important to follow their lead and respect how they wish to be addressed.

This document was modeled on the booklet "Language Values at Bank Street" developed by the Bank Street College of Education. We received permission from Bank Street to use much of their language and format, which had in turn relied heavily on a collection of sources and work from other independent schools. We are grateful to Bank Street for sharing their work with us. Since language is always changing with advances in advocacy movements, this document will be modified periodically, and we welcome suggestions and additions. This is a living document; the most current version is available at www.gordonschool.org/wordsmatter.

This booklet was first compiled in August 2020 by Carly Allard, Lynn Bowman, Katie Cahoon, Rebecca Garfield, Sandy Horton and Tamar Paull of Gordon's faculty.

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GENDER

Gordon recognizes that gender identity is a continuum, that gender is not binary, and that while many people identify as female or male, some people identify as both, as neither, as gender-fluid, or use other language to describe their gender. Gordon teachers model using language that reflects this gender diversity, honoring individuals' preferences for names and pronouns and recognizing that these might shift over the course of their time at Gordon. Teachers and group leaders also avoid assigning seats or otherwise forming groups based on gender.



Instead of...	Say...
boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, miss or mister, brothers and sisters	**sevens, folks, people, readers, novelists, dramatic players, scientists, mathematicians, community members, friends**
you guys	**you, you all, y'all, class, sixth graders**
he *or* **she**	*their name, or* **they** *unless you know their preference*
the girl or the boy on this page *when reading a book*	**the child, kid, person, friend, protagonist...**
sweetheart, handsome, beautiful	**you, the person in the blue shirt** *or their name*
using a gender-based pattern to seat or line up students, etc.	*Find other ways to group students (patterns on clothing, color of clothing) or make line or seat spots by calling on students by table, interest, numbers.*
mailman, fireman, caveman	**mail carrier, firefighter, cave dweller**
complimenting appearance that reinforces gender stereotypes	**Tell me why that dress is special to you, You look so happy today, I can see that you are very excited about your new haircut, I bet you can run really fast in those new sneakers, That's an awesome dinosaur on your shirt.**
if you use the girls' locker room *or* **if you use the boys' locker room**	**Head to the locker room or bathroom where you change.**
boys' bodies, girls' bodies	*Don't make assumptions about people's gender identities based on their appearance or presentation.*
A person is normal *referring to a person who is not trans*	*That person is* **cisgender.**
boys basketball *or* **girls lacrosse**	*Gordon athletics has green teams for students who identify as girls and non-binary, and blue teams for students who identify as boys and non-binary.*

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FAMILIES

Gordon teachers model inclusive language by choosing words that reflect the fact that families are formed and structured in many ways. Refrain from making assumptions about who students live with, what gender these people are, whether they sleep in the same place every night, whether they see their parents, etc.



Instead of...	Say...
moms and dads	**grownups at home, families**
parents *as a generic term for the adults in a child's home*	**families** **parents and caregivers** *with older students* **grownups** *with younger students*
nanny, babysitter	**caregiver**
is adopted, **was put up for adoption**	**was adopted, was placed** *This doesn't need to be brought up unless the family or child is choosing to bring it up as part of their identity.*
husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend *if you don't know their partner's gender identity*	**spouse, significant other, partner**
real parents	*Avoid making a distinction between "real" parents and other parents. If appropriate, use* **biological family, adoptive family** *or* **birth parent.**
brother, sister	**sibling**

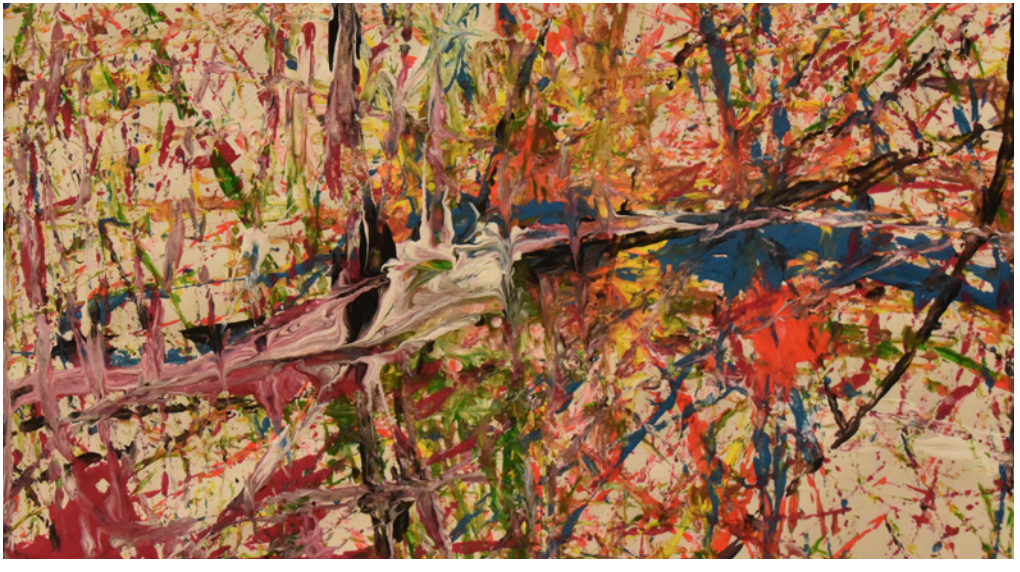


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SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Gordon recognizes humans exist along a sexual orientation continuum, and people get to love who they want to love. Gordon teachers model using language that reflects sexual orientation diversity. They try not make heteronormative assumptions or assumptions about how adults identify themselves in the present or how children might identify themselves in the future. Sexuality can be fluid along the course of a person's life.

Instead of...	Say...
Do you have a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife?	**Do you have a partner?** **What do you call the person(s) you are with?**
projecting norms of heteronormativity: **Oh, he's such a ladies' man.** **Boys will love those eyelashes.** **Your mom and dad must be so proud.**	*Affirm character traits that are non-gendered and don't assume heteronormativity:* **It's great that they are such a good friend to others.** **Your family must be so proud.**





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RACE AND ETHNICITY

People have racial and ethnic identities that are personal and familial. Gordon teachers model inclusive language by avoiding assumptions about how people identify racially or ethnically. Race is a social construct, but racism is real. Before inquiring about how someone identifies racially, people should ask themselves, "Why do I need to know this?"

Instead of...	Say...
minority, non-white *in regards to race or ethnicity*	**Black, indigenous or person of color** *if they identify as such*
What are you? **Where are you from?** **Where are you really from?**	**What is your cultural or ethnic background?**
mixed race, half *anything*	**multiracial** *People can "fully" belong to multiple identifiers.*
color blind, I don't see color	*No one is color blind as it pertains to race.* *People see skin tones and make assumptions about how someone identifies racially.*
diverse person, diverse student	*A person is not diverse. A group of people can be diverse.*
Caucasian	**white** *This is a more accurate description of light-skinned people of European descent.*
Latin, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Latine *or* **Spanish**	*This language is evolving and there are a variety of strongly held opinions about these terms. When you are referring to an individual, try to learn how the person prefers to be identified. When speaking generally, choose your preference but acknowledge that your choice is imperfect and that there are alternatives.*
avoiding saying someone's race	**A person appears to be [insert race].** *or* **Do you mind sharing how you identify?** *You can't be sure of someone's race based solely on appearance. If you really need to know how someone identifies racially, you could follow up and ask that person, and explain why you are asking:* **Gordon finds it useful to track the race and ethnicities of our faculty and staff. Here are the categories we use.**

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RELIGION

Gordon teachers model inclusive language and avoid making assumptions about people in conversations that touch on religion. As a guiding framework, it may be helpful to say, “Some people believe in a god or many gods and some people do not believe in any god.” Also, not all religions celebrate specific days, and many religions have significant holy days that are not about celebration.

Instead of...	Say...
What religion are you?	**Do you have religious or spiritual beliefs? Are there any religious or spiritual traditions that are important to you?**
What did you get for Christmas, Hanukkah, or any religious holiday?	**Do you celebrate holidays? What did you enjoy about your time off?**
Happy holidays!	**Have a great break!**
pretending no one is religiously observant	*acknowledging holidays and observances when it feels appropriate*





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ABILITIES

Gordon teachers avoid assuming that everyone has the same physical and cognitive abilities, and use language that allows for a variety of learning styles, needs and preferences. Many of these language choices aim to emphasize and acknowledge a person first, and to avoid defining them by their capacities or abilities.

Instead of...	Say...
A person is **learning disabled.**	*A person is* **neurodivergent** *or, if possible, name or describe the way the person is neurodivergent.* *A person is* **dyslexic, has dysgraphia.**
special needs, differently abled, *or other vague euphemisms*	*Speak directly and specifically about disability, neurodivergence, and, when appropriate, a specific phenomenon like autism, visual impairment, reliance on mobility devices, etc.*
A person is **handicapped.**	*A person is* **disabled, has a physical disability** *or is* **living with a physical disability.**
treating **disabled person** *or* **person with disabilities** *as the one correct term*	*This language is evolving. Some people see their disability as an essential part of who they are and prefer to be identified with their disability first:* **I am a disabled person.** *Others prefer language that puts the person first:* **I am a person with disabilities.** *When you are referring to an individual, try to learn how the person prefers to be identified. When speaking generally, choose your preference but acknowledge that your choice is imperfect and that there are alternatives.*
A person **is ADHD.**	*A person* **has ADHD.**
A person is **able-bodied,** *is* **normal.**	*A person is* **not disabled.**
normal, not normal *in terms of learning style or affect*	**neurotypical, neurodivergent**
handicapped bathroom, entrance, etc.	**accessible**
suffers from	**has**
crazy, insane	**hectic, disorganized, upset, counter-intuitive** *or another, more accurate word*

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SOCIOECONOMICS

Gordon teachers model using language that avoids making assumptions about people's socioeconomic status and access to money.

Instead of...	Say...
Where did you go for break? **What did you do over break?**	**What was a meaningful moment of connection from your break?** **What is something new you learned over break?** **What was a moment you felt totally relaxed over break?**
Everyone has the [insert item].	**Some people have the [insert item].** **Not everyone has the [insert item].**
saying or implying that public schools are bad and private schools are good	**There are many school options available to students and families. We can't make assumptions about a school that we do not attend.**
To describe status, someone is **upper, middle or lower class.**	**has enough, has more than enough, has less than enough**





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This guide does not cover all situations. Thoughtful questions are usually the best way to get information, and that information will help you avoid saying incorrect things. Be aware that people may not always welcome questions and a response is not something they are obligated to give.

Do you have questions, thoughts, feedback or suggestions for additions? Please contact Alethea Dunham-Carson at adunhamcarson@gordonschool.org. This is a living document and will change over time; the most current version is available at www.gordonschool.org/wordsmatter

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