



# Writing for Change

RAISING AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCE, POWER, AND DISCRIMINATION

## 3.1 Understanding Pejorative Terms

### **Objectives**

Identify and analyze pejorative terms.

Explore attitudes surrounding the terms.

Describe how the terms contribute to perpetuation of stereotypes and ineffective communication.

Explore how and by whom meaning is determined.

### **Materials needed**

Copies of the handout

Possibly, reference materials

### **Time needed**

An hour or more

### **Instructor directions**

Have your students read the given scenario and follow the directions.

Have them present the arguments they develop, and/or discuss how their thinking has changed as a result of the exercise.

### **Variation**

Divide into groups and have one side argue in favor, the other against the bill.



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## 3.1 Understanding Pejorative Terms Handout

### Directions

Consider the following scenario:

A bill has been introduced into your state House of Representatives mandating removal from all place names (streets, cities, rivers, mountains, valleys, etc.) of a particular word derived from the language of a people indigenous to the region. The word has been appropriated and used by the current dominant group, whose ancestors displaced the indigenous group several hundred years ago.

Supporters of the bill say they favor it because the term being removed is pejorative: it has a literal meaning of “genitalia,” and has acquired implied meanings of “promiscuous,” and “diseased.”

Opponents of the bill say it is unnecessary because no disparagement is intended by those who use the word. They point to its definition in a widely used dictionary, which sets forth the meaning of the word as “a sexually mature adult.”

You work for a group lobbying in support of the bill. You know that the House of Representatives is made up primarily of people of the dominant group, who speak the dominant language (in this case, English), rather than the indigenous group. Your job is to testify in favor of the bill at a hearing of a House committee, in which you will have five minutes to present your case. You are assigned to focus on the language aspect of the argument (rather than, for example, the costs associated with changing the place names).

Using some or all of the following considerations, explain to the Committee why they should recommend for passage of the bill into law:

What is the denotation (factual meaning) of the word? How do you know?

What are the connotations (implied meanings or associations)? How do you know?

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How does use of this word contribute to stereotypes about the people to whom it is applied?

How does it interfere with the recognition of variety within the group to whom it is applied?

How does it interfere with the recognition of similarities between people in the group to whom it is applied and people outside of that group?

What is the role or responsibility of the speaker or user of the word? What is the role of intention in language?

What is the role or responsibility of the listener (recipient or target of the word)? What is the role of perception in language?

What is the relationship between intention and perception (or, how is language a two-way street)?

What are some parallel examples you could provide in the dominant language?

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Who was Thomas Bowdler? What is “bowdlerizing”? Who and what determines the meanings of words as published in reference works?

What is a substitute word or phrase you would suggest to people who have been using the pejorative term unintentionally?

What different denotations and connotations does the substitute term have for the group to whom it refers?

What are the potential effects on the indigenous group of the removal of the term? What are potential benefits to the dominant group?

**Variation**

Divide into groups. One side argue in favor, the other against the bill.