

# PAGE Anti-Oppression Guide

This guide was developed by Progressive Action, Global Exchange (PAGE), a network of US-Americans abroad and global citizens who work to fight the Trump agenda; take action against the rise of hate, exclusion, bigotry, and inequality in the US and beyond; and build solidarity and community in their countries of residence.

This is an introduction for PAGE members and chapters who want to incorporate an anti-oppression approach in their work. These ideas are not new. They are compiled for your use, but they are the result of the tireless work of black, indigenous, LGBTQ+, and immigrant activists and communities. PAGE is grateful to all those whose work has informed this guide.

Please send comments, questions and feedback to [engage.with.page@gmail.com](mailto:engage.with.page@gmail.com).

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# THE BASICS

## What is Anti-Oppression?

Anti-Oppression is a commitment to dismantle systemic violence inflicted on marginalized communities, often benefitting the powerful. This violence may be emotional, economic, physical, environmental, psychological, or generational.

## Why is this important to PAGE?

PAGE organizes against oppressive government and institutional agendas. To work against these systems, we must understand how oppression manifests in our communities and lives. We must confront our role in perpetuating – or benefitting from – oppressive practices, big and small. If not, we focus only on oppression's symptoms, not its causes.

In other words, leaders like Trump are not the only problem. They could not have been elected outside of national systems and cultures of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression. These structural forms of oppression exist in our schools, courts, prisons, economies, airports, farms, military bases, and beyond. We may feel removed from the decisions made by our governments and others in power about these institutions. We are much closer than we think.

For example, a white teacher may not be personally responsible for the criminalization of young men of color, but the way they discipline a black student could impact the rest of that child's life. A US-American working abroad as a manager in a multinational office may think that they respect their local colleagues, but the way the manager speaks over local staff in meetings reproduces long-term structures of colonial domination. Any one of us shopping for new clothes or groceries may not feel like we're exploiting the earth or other workers, but where we put our money matters. In other words, to have a neutral stance in the face of oppression is not neutral all all; institutional violence continues partially because of this neutrality. As responsible humans, we must actively understand and fight these systems in order to achieve progress.

We can't achieve this goal without interrogating our own privileges and complicity. It is our belief that, as Audre Lorde states, **“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”** We must examine our individual thoughts, relationships with others, and methods of change to make sure that they are not replicating cycles of oppression.

## Global Exchange & Anti-Oppression

PAGE organizes across a diverse set of countries, cultures, and individuals. We cannot ignore the power dynamics of our locations – sometimes in countries dependent on the US for aid or alliances – and the membership of our chapters. Our meetings bring together people from powerful countries and people historically seen as having less power.

If you're a wealthy, white, [cisgender](#)\* male, aid worker living in India, you will have a completely different immigrant experience than a black, poor, student living in France. Your experience as you engage in social justice work will depend not only on your identity, but also on your country of residence's relation to the global power structure. We will (and should) be working alongside many different types of immigrants and locals in our work, and it is imperative that we not only understand, explore, and these relationships, but that we directly address and counter harmful dynamics.

*\*cisgender: a person whose gender identity and assigned sex at birth are the same (i.e. not transgender)*

### **Remember, doing this work is hard.**

It might make you feel awkward, uncomfortable or upset. However, it's critical to do it - so our activism can be inclusive, and so that it can affect meaningful change.

As you do anti-oppression work, you will likely discover that you're perpetuating oppressive systems in some way, or that you carry deeply ingrained oppressive beliefs. In fact, if you don't discover this, you're probably not doing it "right." We have all grown up in a world where these systems are so pervasive that they are impossible to escape. As you realize, or as others help you realize, how you are carrying and perpetuating these systems, we encourage you to **resist the urge to be defensive**. We are all constantly learning, and when you make one of these realizations, it's an opportunity to learn how to be a better person and a better activist.

# KEY WORDS

**Oppression:** A systemic use of power by advantaged groups, at the expense of disadvantaged communities. Oppression can lead to death, disempowerment, self-hatred, illness, poverty, marginalization, and other negative effects. Racism, homophobia, xenophobia, classism are all types of oppression.

*Example:* Flint, Michigan has polluted water not only because the US has privatized public goods, but because Flint is majority black. Environmental violence against communities of color, and indigenous communities without power in the government is rampant in the US and globally.

**Solidarity:** The action of showing up for marginalized communities, listening to them, and working alongside them in the struggle for justice.

*Example:* A US-citizen chaining themselves to trucks to prevent undocumented people from being deported.

**Ally:** A person who possesses some kind of privilege and who supports anti-oppression work by using their position of power in order to challenge institutionalized oppression.

*Example:* A white person who educates their family about the history of police violence against black communities.

**Accomplice:** Someone who is willing to put their privilege (their safety, resources, etc.) on the line along with activists from marginalized communities.

*Example:* In pre-civil war USA, a white abolitionist who risked arrest, or murder in order to secure the passage of slaves into free territory, or during the Civil Rights era, white college students who would risk death to register black folk to vote in the south.

**Positionality:** A framework in which we recognize that aspects of our identities (which are given more or less value depending on dominant social values) mark where we fit in the social structure of our society, and how we relate to others based on this “position.”

*Example:* In the US, in restaurants, men are most often given the check at the end of the meal since they are expected to be the providers.

**Intersectionality:** An approach to anti-oppression work that recognizes that people belong to many identity groups with various degrees of privilege and oppression, and that their needs, experiences, and social positions are found at these “intersections.” All oppression is connected; we cannot fight against one without fighting all and we must focus our efforts on those most marginalized. This idea is most often cited in understanding the intersections of gender, race, and class; a white, middle-class

woman experiences misogyny and sexism in a very different way than a working-class woman of color.

*Example: A group fighting for equal pay does not only focus on white-collar, white cisgender women's rights, but also supports brown and black women, transgender women, immigrant women, and women working as housekeepers.*

# 5 PRINCIPLES OF ANTI-OPPRESSION

Most of us support systems of oppression in our communities and countries – even if we don't intend to. In order to work against these systems, we need to explore how we, as individuals, engage in oppressive practices on a daily basis. This process of self-reflection and collective work doesn't happen in a week or a month; it's ongoing. It may challenge and change the way we live. At PAGE, we believe this makes it all the more important to pursue, and to do with others.

**The principles below help guide us through the process of becoming less oppressive.** We also have [several anti-oppression exercises](#) you can do with PAGE or other groups (or by yourself) to put these principles into action.

## Principle 1: Finding your positionality, or “Where am I starting from?”

We all come to this work from different places. Whether you are a seasoned activist, or a newbie to the world of social justice, it helps to ask yourself the basic questions about your values and assumptions of this world. Our values are often beautiful expressions of human diversity, but they can also convey the interests of those in power in our communities, and are used to keep others in positions of marginalization, weakness, or exploitation. The way we give meaning to our world not only tell us who we are, but how our societies operate.

The way we organize our communities tells us where different types of people fit in our social structure. Our position within our society depends on the cultural signifiers we possess, such as constructions of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, health, and religion. This notion is called [positionality](#). Societies separate people by these categories of identity, then preference some identities over others.

## Principle 2: Learning and unlearning

Learning about oppressed people's theories, his/herstories, and visions: Mainstream education systems generally ignore, discredit, and/or misinterpret the work done by marginalized and minority groups. History, instead, becomes the story of those in power, and attributes progress to those in positions of privilege. In order to build more inclusive and just societies, we need to learn about the tireless work done by communities and people of color, immigrants, the poor, women, indigenous people, LGBTQ+ folk, and people who belong to the majority religion. This is especially true as right-wing governments attack hard-won gains in the areas of inclusion, gender equity, reproductive rights, immigration and refugee rights, environmental sustainability, and beyond. It may be difficult to find these resources and stories, as our systems of history-writing, popular media, and politics prioritize representations of the powerful. Ask questions and keep looking!

Unlearning racist/oppressive values that the dominant culture has taught you: Learning and unlearning go hand in hand. Since you likely did not learn about the accomplishments, thoughts, and visions of marginalized folk, mainstream thought probably filled in the gaps of this education with misinformation and lies. In our society, we continue to hear and see these falsehoods in the media, in conversations with our

family and friends, and in the education system. This information is passed down through generations, and threads itself into our daily interactions with one another - how we greet people at the supermarket, who we sit next to on public transportation, who speaks in a meeting, where we want to send our kids to school. These falsehoods lead to further marginalization and subjugation of people. In order to unlearn these dominant values, we must actively suppress the expressions of these values. For example, men should purposely refrain from taking up more space than women. White folk should cease speaking over people of color. It's often easier to change the practice of the value before the value itself changes.

How can the teaching of history be damaging? Check out these articles from Texas.... [How Texas Teaches History](#) and [Texas Textbook Called Out as Racist Against Mexican-Americans](#)

### **Principle 3: Practicing solidarity and becoming an accomplice**

Once you have learned about the breadth and depth of work done by oppressed groups throughout the world, and have started to unlearn some of the [lies](#) (intentional or otherwise) told about these people, you can begin to use your privileges as a white person, US-passport holder, cis-person, able-bodied person, male, religious majority follower (or heritage), and/or resourced person to work for the liberation of all people.

As discussed above, an ally is a person who possesses some kind of privilege and who supports anti-oppression work by using their position of power in order to challenge institutionalized oppression. An accomplice is someone who is willing to put themselves (their safety, resources, etc.) on the line along with activists of color. If you're just starting out social justice work, you might start out by being an ally and moving towards being an accomplice. This [resource](#) offers some examples of how being an ally is different than being an accomplice.

Finally, we strive for [solidarity](#) instead of unity. Solidarity means actually standing by marginalized communities, listening to them, and working alongside them in the struggle for justice. In contrast, calls for "unity" have often meant silencing or ignoring the needs of certain marginalized groups.

### **Principle 4: Centering the work on those most marginalized/affected**

Often when we start (or continue) to fight against injustice or oppression, we are overcome with emotions. We want to show up and show out. We want to feel powerful, and united. We want to take action.

However, before we do what feels good, we must always make sure that our activities prioritize the wellbeing of those who are most affected. Actions are never perfect, and there will always be people who disagree with a tactic, but you should make sure that anything you do engages folks affected by the topic from beginning to end of the process. This is true regardless of what the action is, whether a march in your town, a potluck to welcome refugees, or viewing of a movie. Here are some questions you can ask:

- Who is this event for? Who is the target audience?
- If you are planning an event around an issue impacting marginalized/oppressed groups, ask: Are these perspectives included and prioritized in the organizing committee? Are their voices or concerns leading the discussion?

Engage people as early as you can, so they can provide feedback and leadership up front. If you wait, they may need to correct your mistakes later, which isn't fair.

If you're a US-American living in a poor country, and working to support people with less power than you, it's particularly important to take the approach of solidarity. When we don't take this approach, and instead assume we know best before consulting with people the most affected, we risk replicating colonialism and other systems of oppression.

### **Principle 5: More learning and unlearning (and teaching)**

Like all of us, social justice theories are constantly evolving, and we need to keep up! This is important because we have been learning falsehoods since childhood, and continue to receive these messages through all forms of media. We have a responsibility to share these conversations and challenges with our communities and loved ones – particularly when we are in positions of privilege and power. It is NOT the job of a marginalized and oppressed person to teach those with privilege what they should do differently.

We should also share this knowledge with our loved ones, if we can do so safely. While doing this, try to take the approach of “calling people in,” rather than “calling people out” or shaming them. The first means inviting others to learn more about anti-oppression approaches, or to place their behavior or words into an anti-oppressive context. It may sound like, “Hey little brother, why did you use the word “gay” to describe the homework you didn't want to do? Let's talk about what that word means for people and how it's not OK to use it in a negative way.”

This is not to say that you should never call people “out” for their oppressive behaviors (especially people in power). Shame can be a powerful tool, but there is a time and space for it. Think about why you want to call someone out: to feel superior? to hurt them? to push them to change? If your goal is to help them change, calling someone out is often ineffective and alienating, especially for loved ones.

*If and when you are called out for something you say or do, it will likely feel bad. We encourage you to apologize, listen, and try to do better next time. Don't become defensive. Your words hurt someone; it's your job to learn from your mistake.*

# ACTIVITIES & EXERCISES

*We encourage you to use these activities in your PAGE group, with friends, or by yourself, as a way to put the anti-oppression principles in practice. We adapted some from existing resources (where indicated) and created others based on our experience.*

## Positionality Reflection

Take 5-10 minutes to journal about each question. If you are doing this in a group or with a partner, take a few minutes to reflect on each one, then share.

- Where do you come from (country, state, city, family, or friend group)?
- What are your values? How do they give you strength?
- What communities are you a part of? Pick one and think about - who is included in this community? Who is not included?
- What are the injustices or inequities that you have experienced in your community? What are the injustices or inequities that you see others experiencing?
- Who is defined as “bad” in your community? (Some examples: Who is the “bad guy” in the media? Who do politicians blame for problems? Who is the punchline of a joke at the school cafeteria or playground?)
- What type of work or employment is seen as “good”? Who does this work? What work is seen as “bad”? Who does this work? How are different types of work compensated?

**PAGE Tip:** In an increasingly globalized world, the needs of powerful states are often imposed as global priorities and values. Many members of PAGE are immigrants from powerful countries. Think about the power dynamics in your country of residence. Who controls resources? Who gets access to private or public space? How are you treated, as a foreigner, resident, or citizen?

## Power/Privilege Walk

This exercise is an often-used experiential activity for a group to discuss intersections between privilege and identity. It’s a great tool to explore how different groups are marginalized within society and community systems. It takes 15-20 minutes and we recommend at least 30 minutes to debrief! Here’s a [guide](#) for this exercise.

## Personal Reflection: The Audre Lorde Questionnaire to Oneself

As part of her 1977 essay, “[The Transformation of Silence Into Action](#),” Audre Lorde offers these questions (and prompts) below. They are part of her effort to encourage writing and thinking about the ways in which we experience oppression, and turn our silences into active practice. We’ll let them speak for themselves, but we recommend you give yourself at least 30 minutes to journal and reflect or discuss.

- What are the words you do not have yet? [Or: for what do you not have the words yet?]
- What do you need to say? [ List as many things as necessary]

- What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them still in silence? [List as many as necessary today, then write a new list tomorrow and the day after.]
- If we have been socialised to respect fear more than our own need for language, ask yourself: 'What is the worst that could happen if I tell this truth?' [So, answer this today and every day]

You can read more of Lorde's work in [Sister Outsider](#).

## Learning New (Old) Histories

- Check out our [Your Anti-Oppression Education Reading List](#). We have compiled a reading, watching, and listening list for our continued education, designed to complicate mainstream narratives and values of our history and present. This list is not comprehensive, and is US-centric, but is a good foundation for anti-oppression work. (We encourage people to add to the list from people in different countries!)
- Find a partner (or a group). Have each person pick one book/article to read this week.
- As you read, think about:
  - How is this article/reading different from what I learned previously (in school, life, media, etc.)?
  - How does this article/reading complicate my understanding of my society and history?
  - How can I act on what I have learned?
- Next time you meet, summarize the articles to each other and discuss the three questions above.

**PAGE Tip:** While you may be trying to learn about the political, social, or historical situation of your country of residence, be sure to include marginalized groups' perspectives. For example, ask yourself, "who wrote/produced this narrative?" Try to find alternative authors via organizations, NGOs, academia, or individuals from marginalized groups.

## What is an Accomplice?

- Take 5 minutes to brainstorm:
  - How do you define ally and accomplice?
  - When have you been an ally or accomplice?
  - When have you needed or benefitted from an ally or accomplice?
  - When has an ally or accomplice hurt your cause or intention?
- Read this [article](#) from Indigenous Action, and this [resource](#) for white folks looking to move towards being accomplices.
- Reflect by yourself or with a group:
  - How did these pieces challenge your definitions of ally and accomplice?
  - What kind of work have you done as an ally - where may you have been harmful instead of helpful?
  - What are three things you can do to be a more engaged, respectful accomplice?

## An Accomplice at Home

- Sometimes, the hardest - but one of the most meaningful - things we can do to challenge oppression is to have tough conversations within our communities, families, or friend groups.
- The Fifty-Three Percent Project has some tips for how to do that! Check them out [here](#).
- The [NYTimes Run-Up podcast](#) also did a series of episodes (the ones with “Dialogues” in the title) where family members or close friends who voted differently during the 2017 US election respectfully questioned each other about their views.

## Bonus BuzzFeed Exercise: How privileged are you?

It may [clickbait](#), but it can still be a conversation starter.

# HOW TO BE AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PARTICIPANT IN MEETINGS

Facilitators play an important role in ensuring that meetings are as unoppressive as possible. However, participants can also prepare themselves. Our Toolkit gives some basic tips on "[The Art of Facilitation](#)." This resource will focus on preparing yourself to be an anti-oppressive participant.

## TIP 1: Taking Up Physical and Verbal Space

- **Physical space:** Be conscious of how much actual space you occupy in the room with your body, especially if you are in the dominant and/or privileged group (ie cismen, white, etc.).
  - Men should purposely refrain from taking up more space than women and people of non-binary genders. For example, don't take up the space of two chairs if your body only needs one.
  - People with white privilege should refrain from taking up more space than people of color. For example, some organizing/activist groups ask that white people give up their chairs for people of color, if seating is limited, especially when the discussion is about issues that people of color face.
- **Verbal space:** Be conscious of how much and how you speak. Especially if you are in the dominant and/or privileged group, try to listen more and speak less.
  - White folk should cease speaking over people of color, especially about issues that are central to POC's lived experiences
  - Men should refrain from speaking over women, and people of non-binary genders.
  - If we are discussing a topic that doesn't directly affect you, don't try to be the first to speak. Give space for others to chime in. Silence is ok. And don't try to make it about you.
  - Do not interrupt people. Not only is this rude, but this action is often used to silence minority groups.

## TIP 2: Consent & Safety

- Remember to ask for consent before touching people. Don't assume that everyone will appreciate your hug, pat on the back, or kiss.
- Remember to get consent before speaking about someone else's opinion or experience. If someone tells you something privately, they should decide if they want to share that in a group.

This [post](#) is much more thorough explanation of surviving social justice spaces.

This [Safer Space Policy](#) from Students for Cooperation is a good resource for facilitators and participants.

# RESOURCES:

## Anti-Oppression Reading List

*This list is not comprehensive, and US-centric, but is a good foundation for anti-oppression work. This is a list of lists that have been compiled by educators, and activists. There will probably be some of the same suggestions in the lists. If you see something that's missing, or have suggestions, especially from a non-US centric perspective, please let us know at [engage.with.page@gmail.com](mailto:engage.with.page@gmail.com)!*

### Reading

- [Systems of Oppression Reading List](#)
- [White Feminism: A Reading List](#)
- [Ta-Nehisi Coates's Reading List](#)
- [The 101-Level Reader: Books that Help You Better Understand Your Biases and the Lived Experiences of People](#)
- [Melissa Harris Perry Black Feminism Syllabus](#)
- [Fuck Trump Reading List](#)
- [Freedom School Summer 2015 Reading List](#)
- [Alternative Reading List Project: Colonialism & Post-Colonialism](#)
- [An Anti-Colonialism Reading List](#)
- [Decolonizing Science Reading List](#)
- [LGBTQ+ Definitions](#)

### Watching

- [10 Black History Documentaries to Watch](#)
- [10 Social Justice Documentaries You Can Stream on Netflix \(US\)](#)
- [Ferguson Documentaries](#)
- [Documentaries to Watch for Reform and Justice](#)
- [11 Documentaries about Immigrants](#)

### Listening

- [Racial Justice Podcasts](#)
- [Social Justice Podcasts](#)
- [Racial and Social Justice Podcasts for Teen](#)