

So You Want to Be an Ally

 juliepagano.com/blog/2014/05/10/so-you-want-to-be-an-ally/

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I have been writing a lot lately about things that I think allies should *not* do. [Quizzes](#) and [ally smells](#) and twitter rants, oh my! It's probably possible to derive some things an ally *should* do from there, but I doubt that's the best way to learn. I hope this post will help potential allies learn some of the things they should do while still avoiding the stuff I mention in those other posts.

Disclaimer: I hope this writing is helpful to some people as a starting place. That's all it should be. Many other people have their own thoughts on this, and I am not an authority. I am a white, cisgender, middle-class, able bodied, queer woman. I am a member of an oppressed group on a couple axes, but also have a great deal of privilege. My advice here comes from both being the oppressed person working with allies and as the privileged person trying to be an ally. This should not be read as a canonical resource, but instead as one person's advice on some places to start.

I put these sections in a vague order, but keep in mind that this isn't a nice path you go through and magically you're an ally. These are steps you have to continually go through over and over again. You *never* stop working on becoming an ally.

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What is an ally?

Before we start, it is important that we're on the same page about what we're talking about here. What is an ally. Below are two useful definitions that say roughly the same thing in different ways.

Allies are people who support a group who are commonly the subject of discrimination, prejudice, etc, but who are not members of that group.

- [Geek Feminism Wiki](#)

An ally is a member of the "majority" group who works to end oppression in [their] personal life through support of and as an advocate for the oppressed population.

- [Intro to Power, Privilege, Oppression, and Allyship from NASCO](#)

These definitions are not quite enough by themselves. It is also important to consider the model for how one becomes an ally. Some people believe it is a label they can give themselves. Others believe it is an ongoing process, and it is about the work, not the label. I subscribe to the latter model, and I think you should too. The former model often leads to the sort of behavior I talk about in my ["ally smells" posts](#).

I recommend reading [On the Fixed State Ally Model vs. Process Model Ally Work](#) from Shakesville to get a better understanding of these two models and why the latter is preferable. The follow-up, [Process Model Ally Work, Part Two](#) is also worth reading.

"That approach is helpful to me, because it subverts any instinct to defend myself on the basis that I

| am A Good Ally and instead challenges me continually to behave like one.”

Education

Education is step one in this process. As with most skills, you need some baseline knowledge to properly apply them. This step is *critical*. No, that introductory level women’s studies class you took once upon a time doesn’t give you a pass. NO EXCEPTIONS. **NONE**. If you try to skip this step, you’re doing it wrong.

You might think you’ll get away with it, but people will know.

Self-Education

Most of you are probably starting at a 101 level. What do I mean by 101 level? I mean that you are at a beginner or introductory level of learning. You’re just getting started. You know very little or nothing at all. That’s totally ok! Everyone has to start somewhere. I was once there with feminism. I’m still there on many topics.

At a 101 level and even beyond it, you should be doing a lot of self-education. Why? Because providing individual education on these topics can be incredibly exhausting for the people you are trying to ally yourself with.

Many of your questions can be frustrating or even hurtful to the very people you are trying to help. Partly because the questions come from a lack of understanding. Partly because of the scale. It might be manageable if these questions were rare, but they’re not. Many people get these questions daily. It can be exhausting to be regularly expected to be a “teacher,” especially when the information can be found elsewhere.

Imagine if someone stopped you every day of your life to ask you a simple coding question that could be answered with a [quick google search](#). It’s like that, but worse because the questions are frequently on sensitive topics about someone’s life. One part of being a good ally is respecting the time and energy of those you are allied with. Trying to self-educate before you ask questions is an important way to do this.



let me  that for you

"feminism 101"

Google Search

I'm Feeling Lucky

Starter Resources

Here are some 101-level resources that can help you get started on self-education. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Don't stop at these. This is just the beginning.

Making Mistakes

Learning about making mistakes is a very important part of the process of becoming an ally. Everyone makes mistakes. *Everyone*. In the process of trying to be helpful, you are going to screw up. I know. I've done it. I still do.

Ideally, you want to learn how to handle mistakes ahead of time because it's difficult to figure out in the heat of the moment. A good ally responds well to being called out on their mistakes. They hold themselves accountable for those mistakes. They make amends, when possible. They make a real effort to avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

I recommend reading my post [On Making Mistakes](#) about this topic.

Feeling Uncomfortable

Part of the process of becoming an ally is being uncomfortable. Learning about things like [privilege](#) and examining your own privilege is uncomfortable. Realizing you've made mistakes in the past is uncomfortable. Making mistakes now is uncomfortable. Evaluating your own biases is uncomfortable. This discomfort is important.

When you feel uncomfortable with what you are learning, being called out on mistakes, or things you hear oppressed people say, sit with that discomfort. Really think on it. Be careful not to lash out at others because you are uncomfortable. This is an excellent time for introspection. Why do you feel uncomfortable? How does that discomfort align with your beliefs and interest in being a good ally? How should you handle your discomfort?

Hopefully, the outcome of this discomfort and introspection is personal growth. Growing as an ally and as a person. I remember being a "baby feminist" who was annoyed with the constant use of the term privilege. I didn't get it. It made me uncomfortable. It took me time sitting with it, learning, and evaluating why I was uncomfortable to really get it and move forward. That discomfort was critical to some of my growth as a person and increased my ability to empathize with people who are oppressed where I have the privilege.

Listening

Writing and other resources can give you a baseline of understanding, but they're not nearly enough. Listening is critical for respecting people as individuals and increasing your knowledge and empathy.

I do really mean *listen* here. Don't do the thing where you listen just enough to wait for your turn to talk. Don't listen just for things to pedantically argue about. Really listen to people.

Respecting Individuals

Background reading can help you understand how *some* people in a specific demographic feel about something, but no one person or even many people can speak for *every person* in that demographic. Making assumptions about people tends to end badly both for you and for them. People have individual identities and thoughts, needs, wants, labels, boundaries, etc. that go with them. The best way to learn about these things is to listen to what people tell you about themselves and their experiences.

Not only do you need to listen, but you need to *hear* what they say. When someone tells you these things, they are saying "I trust you enough to respect me as a person and keep this in mind." Don't let them down. Don't argue with them about these things or demand explanations unless there is a really good reason (e.g. someone asks that you refer to them by a word you are deeply uncomfortable using, you need a little more information to make sure you

meet someone's needs). Morbid curiosity and pedantry are not good reasons.

Below are some examples of things that you can make sure you do if you are a good listener:

- Use the labels/pronouns/names/etc. they request you use.
- Avoid using labels/pronouns/names/etc. they request you avoid.
- Avoid topics they say upset them. (e.g. a specific kind of joke may be upsetting because of their history)
- Be thoughtful about their accessibility needs (e.g. facing someone who reads lips when you speak to them)
- Respect [boundaries](#) they set.

Increasing Your Knowledge and Empathy

Not everything you can learn is going to come from a book or an educational guide. Some knowledge comes from hearing people's accounts of their lived experiences. When someone is willing to share, take the time to hear what they say.

Individual stories help with empathy. It can be difficult to empathize with academic writing. It's much easier to empathize with a real human being telling you about their life. For example, some men don't believe that there's sexism in the tech industry until a female friend tells them some of their stories because it makes it *real* for them.

Academic writing on a topic also tends to come from a very limited viewpoint. Hearing stories from people with a variety of backgrounds gives you much more diverse knowledge of what's going on. You want to hear from a variety of voices. Also, make sure you're not just listening to people you always agree with. Remember how important I said discomfort can be? Keep that in mind when you decide who you listen to.

More Education

Educating yourself is a continual part of the ally process. I recommend educating yourself from a wide variety of places. There's no canonical resource on these issues, so learning from a variety of resources is helpful to see the wider landscape of ideas.

Below are some resources and people I enjoy that you might also like. These are not comprehensive lists. I recommend also looking elsewhere and getting recommendations from others. I make no promises about the content in places I recommend as I have not reviewed all of their content and cannot be sure what they will contain in the future.

These lists should only be a place to help you get started. Take a look at who you follow on twitter, what blogs you read, etc. Are there enough diverse voices? Regularly seeking out new people to learn from, so that your education does not stagnate.

People to follow on twitter

These are some people I like to follow on twitter because I learn from them. Please be respectful of these people if you choose to follow them. I'm sending you to their feeds to *listen*. I strongly discourage you from tweeting at them until you've been following them for a good long while and have a good sense of how they use twitter, their boundaries, and what they consider acceptable engagement on twitter.

- [Allison Kilkenny](#)
- [Amadi](#)
- [Ana Mardoll](#)

- [Ashe Dryden](#)
- [Coraline Ada Ehmke](#)
- [Dr. Kortney Ziegler](#)
- [Kat Haché](#)
- [Jane Doe, MD](#)
- [Krona](#)
- [Lauren Voswinkel](#)
- [Leigh Honeywell](#)
- [Lindy West](#)
- [Lynn Cyrin](#)
- [Meagan Waller](#)
- [Mikki Kendall](#)
- [Melissa McEwan](#)
- [Molly Knefel](#)
- [S.E. Smith](#)
- [Shanley](#)
- [Suey Park](#)
- [Tim Chevalier](#)
- [Trudy](#)

Some of my lists on twitter are also a good place to look:

- [Tech Women](#)
- [Feminist](#)

Things to Read

These are some places with writing I often enjoy reading. Please review the guidelines on these sites and respect them.

I am sending you here to read and learn. I strongly discourage you from attempting to comment on or contribute to any of these spaces until you have been reading them for a good long while and have a sense of the expected behavior. Some of these spaces explicitly ask that only members of certain groups comment, and you should respect that. If you decide to comment, you should always review the comment policy first and make sure your comment is in line with it.

- [FWD \(feminists with disabilities\) for a way forward](#) - No longer updated, but the content there has been recommended and the blogroll points to a variety of other resources.
- [Geek Feminism Blog](#) - Exists to support, encourage, and discuss issues facing women in geek communities, including science and technology, gaming, SF fandom, and more.
- [Geek Feminism Wiki](#) - Includes information about: women in geek communities, issues they face, incidents that occur to illustrate those issues, responses (especially articles etc online) to those incidents, advice, and resources.

- [Gradient Lair](#) - The personal blog of [@thetrudz](#) that focuses on the subjects that interest her (art, media, social media, socio-politics and culture) on an anecdotal, experiential and empirical level with regards to the experiences of Black women. This is not a 101 space - please review [the blog's 101](#) before proceeding.
- [Model View Culture](#) - Aims to present compelling cultural and social critique, highlight the work and achievement of diverse communities in tech, and explore the use of technology for social justice.
- [Shakesville](#) - A progressive feminist blog about politics, culture, social justice, cute things, and all that is in between.
- [Sociological Images](#) - Encourages all kinds of people to exercise and develop their sociological imagination by presenting brief discussions of compelling and timely imagery that span the breadth of sociological inquiry.
- [Tiger Beatdown](#) - Feminist blog. It isn't really updated any more, but a lot of the old content is really good and worth reading. I'm especially fond of a lot of the stuff from [Flavia Dzodan](#).

Podcasts to Listen to

These are some podcasts that I enjoy. Your mileage may vary.

- [Citizen Radio](#) - Podcast that focuses on leftist politics and humor that often covers relevant topics. They also cover cats, veganism, and jiu-jitsu. The first 10ish minutes is usually the "douchebag buffer" (they tend to tell personal stories and talk about their cats). Warning: there are sometimes dick jokes.
- [Radio Dispatch](#) - Progressive political podcast that often covers relevant topics.

Asking Questions

So what do you do when you've tried to self-educate, and you still have questions or need clarification? It can be ok to ask questions, but it's important how you go about it. You should be respectful of the other person's time and boundaries. You should try to aim for asking friends or acquaintances first, if possible. People are generally disinclined to answer questions from strangers.

Before you ask your question, I recommend checking to make sure the person is interested in helping you out.

"Is it ok if I ask you a <topic> 101 question?"

"Would it be ok if I ask you a question about <topic>?"

"I was reading <resource>. Would you be willing to discuss it with me?"

If the answer to this is "no" (or no response at all), you should politely respect that no and move on. Again, not everyone has the time or energy to be a teacher.

The answer might be a deferral to a future time or medium. Things like "Not right now. Let's schedule a time to talk about this." or "How about you email me, and I'll see if I'm up to answering." If you're up for asking your question later or on a different medium, thank them and work with them to ask your question on their terms. If you're not up for it, thank them for the offer and move on.

If the answer is "yes," keep in mind that this person is setting aside some of their time to help you. Be polite and thoughtful with your question. Make sure you're avoiding the type of rude or hurtful questions that are covered in some of the 101 resources. Listen to their answer and ask thoughtful follow-up questions, as needed.

As a discussion progresses, the other person may get tired and request to stop. If this happens, stop and thank

them for their time. Their willingness to start the discussion does not mean a willingness to continue it beyond their comfort level.

Avoiding Bad Behavior

This is really important. What you do well doesn't make up for bad behavior. On the flip side, bad behavior can completely overshadow any good work you might be doing. Understanding some of the common mistakes made by others can help you try to avoid them.

I recommend checking out my [Bad Ally Quiz](#) and my series of posts on "ally smells". The post on [boundaries](#) is critical. Getting this wrong can have dire consequences for you and the people whose boundaries you violate. I think understanding and respecting boundaries is one of the most important skills an ally needs to have.

In addition to these resources, listen when people tell you something is a problem. If someone says they don't like something, stop doing it. If someone says stop, you stop. People will often let you know that you're behaving badly, but you have to be willing to hear it.

In Jokes and Other Language

One small tangent I want to take on the topic of bad behavior is in-jokes and other language. Sometimes allies will hear the people they are allied with use certain terms or in-jokes and think they are ok for them to use too. Be very careful there.

Sometimes oppressed people "take back" oppressive terms for their own use. It is generally considered incredibly bad form for someone who is not a member of that group to use that term. I recommend avoiding these terms entirely as an ally to err on the safe side.

In-jokes are really tricky areas. Some of them fall in the same category as the oppressive terms. Sometimes it can be appropriative when someone else uses a group's in-jokes. Understand that not all in-jokes shared by the group you are allied with are appropriate for you. Tread lightly.

Helping

So you've done some self-education and listening. You think you've got the baseline knowledge and skills. You're ready to help! Let's talk about some things you can do.

Below are some of my thoughts on things you can do. I also highly recommend Shanley's post [What Can Men Do?](#) for male allies.

Support

A good place to start is being supportive. You can support individuals or organizations financially via PayPal, Patreon, or other donation mechanisms. You can help distribute and share the writing, projects, and other work of the people you're supporting. You can provide a supportive voice of agreement when they need it. You can volunteer to help out at an event doing some supporting tasks. You can support someone in applying for a job or a promotion. Support can take many forms.

Education

Helping educate others in your privileged group is something very useful you can do. As I mentioned earlier, this work can be exhausting for the people you are allied with. Help lessen that load. You are also in a good position to empathize with where they are, having been there once yourself. This will allow you to share your experiences to

help them learn. Some people are more likely to listen to someone like them and may be more receptive to what you have to say. Take advantage of this.

Standing Up

Standing up is a difficult, but very important thing that allies can do. Not only can do, but *should* do, if they are able to. The people you are allied with are often left to do this hard work on their own. You have privilege that can make it easier and safer for you to stand up when it is needed. This work is hard, but I never said being an ally was supposed to be easy.

Here are some examples of standing up:

- Asking someone not to use inappropriate language (e.g. “Hey, using the word ‘lame’ as a negative isn’t cool. I’d appreciate it if you use a different word.”, “Please don’t use that word.”)
- Calling out inappropriate behavior (e.g. “I noticed you keep cutting off in meetings. Let’s make sure she gets a chance to talk in the future.”, “Stop staring.”, “This blog post is inappropriate. Please revise it or take it down.”).
- Holding people accountable for their inappropriate behavior (e.g. not putting them in positions of power, “We can’t be friends if you keep behaving this way.”, “You need to apologize.”).
- Make sure the needs of people are considered (e.g. “Our event needs to be at a location that is accessible.”, “Yes, we need a code of conduct.”).

In addition to doing these things on your own, you should be willing to step up when someone you are allied with asks for help or says they don’t have the energy to do something. I’ve taken to calling out “I need an ally for this” in these situations. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it when someone answers the call.



Mentoring and Leadership

Another thing that allies sometimes do is help out with mentoring or leadership roles in organizations and

movements focused on oppressed groups. Many new allies jump at these opportunities before the other items I listed. I consider this an “ally smell.” In my opinion, these should be the *last* roles you try to fill as an ally.

Why? Because these are roles that should be filled by the people you are allied with. They are the best qualified to lead their own movements and mentor other members of their groups. These movements and groups are about their members and their members should be in the lead. You are supporting cast. Allies who immediately want leadership positions are suspect because they don’t seem to understand their role. There have been many cases in the past of “allies” who jumped at these leadership roles and used them to abuse and gaslight certain members of the group they were supposedly allied with.

This is not to say you cannot do these things. However, you should try to focus on the other types of work I mentioned. That work frees up the people you are allied with, so that they have the time and energy to focus on mentoring and leadership. You can still help too if there are not enough other people to fill these roles, but be careful how you go about it.

There are places where allies are a good fit for leadership and mentoring. One of these is groups focused on teaching other allies. For example, some folks have put together reading groups to help allies educate and support one another. It can also be useful to take leadership roles in communities where you can use that power to help others. For example, if you help organize a conference or user group, you will be in a position to push for things like a code of conduct and making sure venues are accessible.

Conclusion

Being an ally is really important, but it is also hard work. As I said at the start, these are steps you have to continually go through over and over again. You *never* stop working on being an ally, but you can slowly get better at it. It’s not a label. It’s a process. One I hope you will join me in trying to work on.

P.S. I would love to add more resources to this piece. Please feel free to let me know if you think I should add something.

