Language doesn’t change as quickly as the world of fashion, but there’s no doubt that certain words fall in and out of style.

Homosexual is among the most recent to earn a spot on the unfashionable list — as we at the Journal and Courier learned recently.

A news story about four women who had filed a complaint with the Lafayette Human Rights Commission used the term homosexual in the headline and the text of the story.

That brought an e-mail from a reader who questioned whether it was appropriate to use the term homosexual.

He said that even the Associated Press was changing its style. Most newspapers, including this one, follow AP’s lead on style — whether it’s an issue of respecting the title of Dr. for those with medical degrees or a question about capitalizing Holy Communion.

The e-mail objecting to the use of homosexual called the term offensive and said the preferred term would be lesbian in the case of the story and headline that ran March 10.

His e-mail and others on the same subject prompted a number of discussions in our newsroom. As an editor, and in hindsight, I would have preferred using lesbian rather than homosexual because it would have been more precise.

The larger issue for the newsroom is how, when and why we should accommodate groups that decide long-used words or phrases have become offensive.

The always-growing list of words and phrases that newsrooms have been asked to ban include retarded, handicapped, anti-abortion, illegal alien and foreigner. For a while, many newspapers avoided the use of “black” to describe the, substituting African-American instead, but in recent years, black has made a comeback.

Some of the requests for usage are successful, and others aren’t. Most newspapers, for example, usually avoid the use of retarded, choosing instead mentally disabled. Some activists want disabled barred as well, preferring mentally challenged. But the AP and most newspapers have decided that such euphemisms don’t adequately convey information that, if it’s to be included in the story, is pertinent and important.

The change in AP style on the use of homosexual — news of which reached the gay community before it reached newspapers or even AP bureaus — reflects Americans’ language use. For that reason, it makes sense. The language in our stories should reflect the language used in our conversations — at least to an extent.

According to Norm Goldstein, the AP Stylebook editor, the 2006 edition will include an entry that makes gay or lesbian “preferred over homosexual except in clinical contexts or references to sexual activity.”

We’ll adopt the change, although any close reader of our newspaper — or of AP copy — will tell you that compliance with the Stylebook is not 100 percent. The AP and our own writers make occasional style errors.

Undoubtedly, some will view the change as the mainstream media caving in to yet another special interest group. I concede that we try to be sensitive to different segments of our community and to accommodate them when doing so doesn’t compromise journalistic standards or the ability to convey information. The change on the use of gay and lesbian meets those standards, and it better reflects the terminology used in most public discourse on the issue.

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