
PROMISING PRACTICES FOR LGBTQIA2S+ COMMUNICATIONS

“Language is a tailor’s shop in which nothing quite fits” - Rumi

This style guide was developed by the Gender and Sexuality Campus Center staff team at Michigan State University and is intended to provide information for LGBTQIA2S+ inclusive practices in written communication to campus partners. These recommendations are based in current and emerging better practices in the field of LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to be used for general guidance rather than concrete rules. Language is always changing. Our “Promising Practices” documents reflect the current better practices for inclusion in communication at the time that they are published. As in all communications, context matters: the ways LGBTQIA2S+ individuals refer to themselves may differ from the recommendations in this guide and should be respected. As a rule, always mirror the language a person uses for themselves.

BASICS OF TALKING ABOUT THE LGBTQIA2S+ COMMUNITY

When talking about the entirety of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, you can either use the singular “community” or plural “communities” There are many communities under this umbrella - if you are talking about more specific communities, name them. For example, if a university policy regarding to gender-affirming healthcare is being referenced, the writer should refer to the effect on “transgender students” rather than “LGBTQIA2S+ students.”

When possible, ask what terminology is used and claimed by those being referred to, and mirror that language.

SEX VERSUS GENDER

Gender is the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, identities, and attributes that a given society deems masculine or feminine. For the purposes of this document, when we refer to gender, we are focusing on gender identity, a person’s internal understanding of their gender and the language they use to describe this understanding. This is distinct from their sex.

Sex or *Birth-Assigned Sex* is the designation that refers to a person’s biological, morphological, hormonal, and genetic composition. One’s sex is typically assigned at birth and classified as either male or female. “Assigned-at-birth” serves to imply that sex assignment is without the agency of the individual.

Man and *woman* are gender identity terms, whereas *male* and *female* are birth-assigned-sex terms. They are not interchangeable.

GENDER IDENTITY TERMS

Gender identity terms like the following are adjectives, not nouns.

Cisgender

- An identity term for individuals whose gender identity aligns with their birth-assigned sex.

Transgender

Last updated on 6/25/2021

- An identity term for an individual whose gender identity does not match or is at some distance from their assigned-sex-at-birth.

Gender non-conforming

- An identity term for a person who does not conform to cisheteronormative constructs of gender and binary gender roles.

Non-binary

- An identity term for a person who identifies outside of the gender binary.

Genderqueer

- An identity term for people who conceptualize their gender as existing outside of, not included within, or beyond the gender binary.

Agender

- An identity for individuals who often conceptualize their gender as not aligning with gender categories, having no other words that quite fit, and not caring about the project of gender altogether.

YES:

- “a transgender person”
- “the transgender woman”
- “the trans/transgender community”
- “a genderqueer student”
- “the non-binary person”
- “my gender non-conforming friend”
- “the cisgender community”
- “a cisgender man”
- “those cisgender people”

NO:

- “the transgenders”
- “a transgender”
- “the transgendereds”
- “that genderqueer”
- “a non-binary”
- “the cisgendereds”
- “a cisgender”
- “biological gender”
- “biological man”

Even when talking within a medical, legal, or other context where sex-assigned-at-birth and/or legal name is required, still refer to a person using their chosen name and gender identity. If someone was assigned-male-at-birth but identifies as non-binary, refer to them as a “nonbinary person/individual”. Legal name and birth-assigned-sex can be listed *in addition to* a person’s name and gender/pronouns, but should be kept private and not used to address the person

When talking about transgender and cisgender people in the same context, you must either use a modifier, or not use a modifier, for both.

YES:

- “Julia is a transgender woman and Emma is a cisgender woman”
- “Julie and Emma are both women”

NO:

- “Julia is a transgender woman and Emma is a woman”

SEXUAL IDENTITY TERMS

Last updated on 6/25/2021

Sexual identity is the preferred term to “sexual preference/orientation/lifestyle” as these imply that sexual identity is a choice. Sexual identity terms, like the following, are adjectives, not nouns.

YES:

- “Will is gay”
- “Emma is bisexual”
- “a queer person”

NO:

- “Will, the gay”
- “that bisexual”
- “a queer”

TERMS TO AVOID

Some LGBTQIA2S+ terms that have been used in the past are outdated, offensive, and should not be used unless a person or group has specifically reclaimed that word as part of their identity

- Homosexual
 - Avoid using the term “homosexual” as it is pathologizing (unless someone has expressly claimed that identity).
 - Instead use:
 - The preferred term for the specific community in question, or
 - Gay/Lesbian, or
 - LGBTQIA2S+
- Dyke
 - Originally a derogatory term for a lesbian, with lesbians beginning to reclaim the word in the 1970’s. Today, many lesbians affirmatively refer to themselves as dykes
 - Instead use:
 - Lesbian, or
 - Women who love women (WLW), or
 - Women who have sex with women (WSW)
- Fag
 - A derogatory word used to denote a gay man. Occasionally used as a self-identity affirming term by some members of the queer and trans community.
 - Instead use:
 - Gay, or
 - Men who love men (MLM), or
 - Men who have sex with men (MSM)
- Hermaphrodite
 - an outdated term for an intersex person/a person with intersex condition
 - Instead use:
 - Intersex person
- Lifestyle
 - An offensive term attributed to the queer and trans community, often deployed by people to trivialize these identities and experiences. This term supports an understanding of sexual and gender identity as “a choice” or behavior that can be “corrected.”
 - Instead use:
 - Identity
- Transsexual
 - Individuals whose assigned sex at birth does not match their gender identity and who, through gender affirmation surgery and/or hormone treatments, seek to change their physical body to better align with their gender identity. The term “transsexual” is not interchangeable with the term “transgender.”

- Best practice is to avoid characterizing people by their transition status and simply refer to the individual by their gender identity and/or chosen identity terminology
- Queer
 - Though the term queer has largely been reclaimed and is now used widely, it has historically been a pejorative and those using it should be aware of the context, tone, and whether or not it is claimed by the group(s) being referred to

REFERRING TO PEOPLE

For more guidance around the following sections, particularly within the University Systems context, refer to the GSCC's Promising Practices document on name, gender, and pronouns

Instead of saying that someone "identifies as ____" [their identity], say that someone "is ____" [their identity].

YES:

- "Emma is queer"
- "Julia is a transgender woman"
- "Lee is a man"

NO:

- "Emma identifies as queer"
- "Julia identifies as a transgender woman"
- "Lee identifies as a man"

NAME

Where not specifically prevented by law, use names, rather than legal names, in all contexts.

YES:

- "name"
- "legal name"
- "given name"
- "chosen name"

NO:

- "real name"
- "preferred name"
- "nickname"

If you are required to keep a record of legal name, also give the option of including a chosen name, and always refer to someone by their chosen name. Remember that when talking about transgender and cisgender people in the same context, you must either use a modifier or not use a modifier for both. This means that if you are talking about a cis person and a trans person, do not say "Lee, a trans man, and John, a man" (if John is cis). Instead say "Lee, a trans man, and John, a cis man" or "Lee and John, the men"

PRONOUNS

Always use the pronouns someone uses to refer to themselves. Do not refer to someone's pronouns as their "preferred" pronouns. Simply call them "pronouns". Some people use the term "gender pronouns." While this is less problematic than "preferred pronouns", we still recommend simply using the term "pronouns".

Do not assume pronouns based on gender identity or gender presentation.

Some common pronouns and how to use them:

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Examples
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She walked the dog. She walked her dog. That dog is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He cooked dinner. He cooked his dinner. That meal is his.
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They drove the car. They drove their car. That car is theirs.
Ze	Hir	Hirs	Hirself	Ze painted the picture. Ze paints hir picture. That picture is hirs.
Per	Per	Pers	Perself	Per went shopping. Per went shopping by perself. That shopping bag is pers.
Fae	Faer	Faers	Faerself	Fae turned on the light. Fae turned on faer light. That light is faers.

Pronoun series outside of the binary she/her/hers and he/him/his are commonly referred to in several different ways: “Nonbinary pronouns,” “Gender-neutral pronouns,” or “Neo-pronouns”. None of these are exactly perfect. Nonbinary implies that everyone who uses these pronouns identifies as nonbinary. Gender-neutral implies that a person’s gender is “neutral” or that they do not have a gender (someone who has no gender is correctly referred to as being agender). Neo implies that these pronouns are new, despite their first consistent use being documented in the 14th century.

We at the GSCC recommend using either “nonbinary” or “gender-neutral.”

HONORIFICS

An honorific is a title before a person’s name that is sometimes gendered/

- Gendered honorifics: Mr., Mrs., Ms., Sir
- Gender-neutral honorifics: Dr., President

There is currently one non-binary honorific to replace Mr./Ms./Mrs: Mx. pronounced “mix”. If you are unsure of a person’s gender identity and cannot ask what their honorific is, use Mx. Mx. can also be used if someone does not want to be identified by their gender or wishes for their gender to remain anonymous

Do not assume honorifics based on gender identity. If someone identifies as a cisgender woman do not automatically assign them the honorific “Ms.” If someone identifies as non-binary do not automatically assume they use the honorific Mx.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Avoid using terms that are inherently gendered.

YES:

- “chairperson”
- “police officer”
- “firefighter”

NO:

- “chairman”
- “policeman”
- “fireman”

Avoid gendered language when talking to/about groups of people.

Last updated on 6/25/2021

YES:

- “folks”
- “friends”
- “y’all”
- “parents”
- “students”
- “spouses”
- “partners”
- “everyone”

NO:

- “ladies and gentlemen”
- “men and women”
- “boys and girls”
- “husband and wives”
- “mothers and fathers”
- “guys” (to refer to a group of people of different genders)

Avoid implying there are only two genders

YES:

- “all genders”

NO:

- “both genders”
- “opposite genders”

Avoid implying that all people are allosexual (experience sexual attraction) and alloromantic (experience romantic attraction). Some people are asexual and aromantic (experience little to no sexual or romantic attraction)

THE ACRONYM

When referring to sexual *and* gender identity, use the acronyms LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA, LGBTQIA+, or LGBTQIA2S+. The “I” in the acronym refers to the intersex identity/people with intersex conditions. The inclusion of intersex identity is contested by some people in the intersex community because some do not identify as part of the LGBTQ(I)A+ community and feel that being intersex is a medical condition, not an identity.

It is also acceptable to use the phrase “queer and trans” in place of these acronyms that cover gender and sexual identity.

The “+” in the acronym refers to the inclusion of all other identities that are not specified in the acronym. It identifies the limited nature of the acronym and the possibility that someone is always left out.

When referring exclusively to sexual identity, use the acronyms LGB, LBGQ, or LGBQ+.

When referring exclusively to gender identity there is not a single commonly used and recognized acronym. Instead use: transgender community; trans community; transgender and genderqueer community(ies); or TGQNB (trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary).

FLAGS

There are three common, acceptable versions of the overarching pride flag, which is used to represent all members of the LGBTQIA2S+ communities. The colors included have significance and should not be changed, removed, rearranged, or otherwise edited

The six-color gay pride flag - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple



The Philly pride flag - the original pride flag with the addition of a brown and black stripe to explicitly include queer people of color



The progress pride flag - includes brown, black, blue, pink, and white stripes to explicitly include queer people of color and the transgender community



Many identities within the LGBTQIA+ community have created flags for their specific groups. These flags should be used when referencing specific groups, but one of the above general pride flags typically encompass many, if not all,
Last updated on 6/25/2021

groups. When using any of the flags please be aware of resizing - the LxWxH ratio should be maintained and the flags should not be rotated or flipped

INTERSECTIONALITY AND CULTURALLY SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

Be aware that the experiences of queer people varies widely and often by the other identities that individuals hold. Avoid referring to the LGBTQA+ community in a way that erases these complex identities. Some terminology has been created by specific ethnic/racial/cultural groups and should not be used for and/or by those who do not hold these identities. Some of these terms are listed below. For a more complete list, please reference our [Glossary](#)

- Boi/brown boi
 - term first coined to describe masculine presenting queer black women whose gender presentation can be more fluid and/or androgynous than completely masculine. Purposely coined to be different than stud/ag because of the rigid conformity to masculinity in those communities.
- Stud
 - term used to describe black masculine presenting women. Coined from black lesbian communities to separate from the term 'butch'.
- Two-spirit
 - A Native American term for people who blend the masculine and the feminine. It is commonly used to describe individuals who historically crossed gender. It is often used by contemporary LGBTQ Native American people to describe themselves.

RESOURCES

- [The LBGTRC website](#) and [QUEST trainings](#)
- LBGTRC staff are available for one-on-one consultations and review of communications
- [The LGBTQA+ glossary](#) is a good place to find up-to-date terminology and definitions
- [GLAAD media reference guide](#)
- [The Diversity Style Guide LGBTQ Glossary](#)
- [The Radical Copyeditor's Style Guide for Writing About Transgender People](#)