

LGBTQ+ Terminology / Vocabulary Primer

Disclaimer: “The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender and sexual orientation can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with these concepts. However, the vocabulary of both continues to evolve, and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. Here are some working definitions and examples of frequently used (and misused) terms as a starting point for dialogue and understanding” (PFLAG).

AFAB and AMAB: Acronyms meaning “assigned female/male at birth” (also designated female/male at birth or female/male assigned at birth). No one, whether cis or trans, gets to choose what sex they’re assigned at birth. This term is preferred to “biological male/female”, “male/female bodied”, “natal male/female”, and “born male/female”, which are defamatory and inaccurate.

Affirmed gender: The gender by which one wishes to be known. This term is often used to replace terms like new gender or chosen gender, which imply that an individual’s gender was not always their gender or that the gender was chosen rather than simply in existence.

Agender: Refers to a person who does not identify with any gender.

Ally: A term used to describe someone who is supportive of LGBTQ individuals and the community, either personally or as an advocate. Whereas allies to the LGB community typically identify as straight, allies to the transgender community also come from the LGBTQ community. Transgender individuals who identify as straight can be allies to the LGB community as well.

Androgyne: An androgynous individual.

Androgynous: Typically used to describe a person’s appearances or clothing as having elements of both femininity and masculinity.

Aromantic: The lack of romantic attraction, and one identifying with this orientation. This may be used as an umbrella term for other emotional attractions such as demiromantic.

Asexual: Refers to an individual who does not experience romantic or sexual attraction. There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy or sexual abstinence, which are chosen behaviors, in that asexuality is a sexual orientation that does not necessarily entail either of those behaviors.

Assigned sex: The sex that is assigned to an infant at birth based on the child’s visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics.

Assigned gender: The gender that is assigned to an infant at birth which is meant to correspond to the child’s assigned sex.

Assumed gender: The gender others assume an individual to be based on the sex they are assigned at birth, as well as apparent gender markers such as physical build, voice, clothes, and hair.

Bigender: Refers to those who identify as two genders. Can also identify as multigender (identifying as two or more genders). Do not confuse this term with Two-Spirit, which is specifically associated with Native American and First Nations cultures.

Binary: Used as an adjective to describe the genders female/male or woman/man. Since the binary genders are the only ones recognized by general society as being legitimate, they enjoy an (unfairly) privileged status.

Biological sex: Refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic, or physical attributes that determine if a person is male, female, or intersex. These include genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, chromosomes, genes, and secondary sex characteristics. Sex is often confused or interchanged with gender, which involves personal identity and social factors, and is not determined by biological sex.

Bisexual: Refers to an individual who has the capacity for attraction—sexually, romantically, emotionally, or otherwise—to people with the same, and to people with a different, gender and/or gender identity as themselves. People who identify as bisexual need not have had equal experience- or equal levels of attraction- with people across genders, nor any experience at all: it is merely attraction and self-identification that determine orientation. Bisexuality, as it is frequently used today, can act as an umbrella term that encapsulates many identities such as pansexual. Sometimes referred to as bi or bi+.

Boi: A term used within the queer communities of color to refer to sexual orientation, gender, and/or aesthetic among people assigned female at birth. Boi often designates queer women who present with masculinity (although, this depends on location and usage). This term originated in women of color communities.

Bottom Surgery: Genital surgeries such as vaginoplasty, phalloplasty, or metoidioplasty.

Butch: An identity or presentation that leans towards masculinity. Butch can be an adjective (she's a butch woman), a verb (he went home to "butch up"), or a noun (they identify as a butch). Although commonly associated with masculine queer/lesbian women, it's used by many to describe a distinct gender identity and/or expression, and does not necessarily imply that one also identifies as a woman or not.

Cissexism: Systemic prejudice in the favor of cisgender people.

Cissimilation: The expectation for and act of trans people, especially trans women, assimilating to cisgender (and often heteronormative) standards of appearance and performance.

Cisgender: Refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Closeted: Describes a person who is not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Coming out: For most people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, the process of self-acceptance that continues throughout one's life, and the sharing of the information with others. Sometimes referred to as disclosing by the transgender community. Individuals often establish a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender/gender-expansive identity within themselves first, and then might choose to reveal it to others. Coming out can also apply to the family and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth or adults when they reveal to others their connection to an LGBTQ person or the community. There are many different degrees of being out: Some may be out to friends only, some may

be out publicly, and some may be out only to themselves. It's important to remember that coming out is an incredibly personal and transformative experience. Not everyone is in the same place when it comes to being out, and it is critical to respect where each person is in that process of self-identification. It is up to each person, individually, to decide if and when to come out or disclose.

Cross-dressing (also crossdressing): The act of dressing and presenting as a different gender. One who considers this an integral part of their identity may identify as a cross-dresser. "Transvestite" is often considered a pejorative term with the same meaning. Drag performers are cross-dressing performers who take on stylized, exaggerated gender presentations (although not all drag performers identify as cross-dressers). Cross-dressing and drag are forms of gender expression and are not necessarily tied to erotic activity, nor are they indicative of one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Do NOT use these terms to describe someone who has transitioned or intends to do so in the future.

Disclosure: A word that some people use to describe the act or process of revealing one's transgender or gender-expansive identity to another person in a specific instance. Some find the term offensive, implying the need to disclose something shameful, and prefer to use the term coming out, whereas others find coming out offensive, and prefer to use disclosure.

Femme: An identity or presentation that leans towards femininity. Femme can be an adjective (he's a femme boy), a verb (she feels better when she "femmes up"), or a noun (they're a femme). Although commonly associated with feminine lesbian/queer women, it's used by many to describe a distinct gender identity and/or expression, and does not necessarily imply that one also identifies as a woman or not.

Gay: The adjective used to describe people who are emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to people of the same gender (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, lesbian is often a preferred term for women, though many women use the term gay to describe themselves. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction and self-identification that determine orientation.

Gender: A set of social, psychological, and/or emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as man, woman, a mixture of both, or neither.

Gender-affirming surgery (GAS): Surgical procedures that can help people adjust their bodies to more closely match their innate or internal gender identity. Not every transgender person will desire or have resources for surgery. This term should be used in place of the older and often offensive term sex change. Also sometimes referred to as sexual reassignment surgery (or SRS), genital reconstruction surgery, or medical transition.

Gender Affirming Surgery; Genital Reassignment/Reconstruction Surgery; Vaginoplasty; Phalloplasty; Metoidioplasty: Refers to surgical alteration, and is only one part of some trans people's transition (see "Transition"). Only the minority of transgender people choose to and can afford to have genital surgery. The following terms are inaccurate, offensive, or outdated: sex change operation, gender reassignment/realignment surgery (gender is not changed due to surgery), gender confirmation/confirming surgery (genitalia do not confirm gender), and sex reassignment/realignment surgery (as it insinuates a single surgery is required to transition along with sex being an ambiguous term).

Gender binary: The concept that there are only two genders, man and woman, and that everyone must be one or the other. Also implies the assumption that gender is biologically determined.

Gender Dysphoria: Anxiety and/or discomfort regarding one's sex assigned at birth.

Gender Fluid: A changing or "fluid" gender identity.

Gender expansive: An umbrella term sometimes used to describe children and youth that expand notions of gender expression and identity beyond what is perceived as the expected gender norms for their society or context. Some gender-expansive individuals identify with being either a boy or a girl, some identify as neither, and others identify as a mix of both. Gender-expansive people feel that they exist psychologically between genders, as on a spectrum, or beyond the notion of the man/woman binary paradigm, and sometimes prefer using gender-neutral pronouns (see Preferred Gender Pronouns). They may or may not be comfortable with their bodies as they are, regardless of how they express their gender.

Gender expression: The manner in which a person communicates about gender to others through external means such as clothing, appearance, or mannerisms. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity or sexual orientation. While most people's understandings of gender expressions relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless combinations that may incorporate both masculine and feminine expressions—or neither—through androgynous expressions. The important thing to recognize is that an individual's gender expression does not automatically imply one's gender identity.

Gender identity: One's deeply held core sense of being a girl/woman, boy/man, some of both, or neither. One's gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex. Awareness of gender identity is usually experienced as early as 18 months old.

Gender Identity Disorder / GID: A controversial DSM-III and DSM-IV diagnosis given to transgender and other gender-nonconforming people. Because it labels people as "disordered," Gender Identity Disorder is often considered offensive. The diagnosis is frequently given to children who don't conform to expected gender norms in terms of dress, play or behavior. Such children are often subjected to intense psychotherapy, behavior modification and/or institutionalization. This term was replaced by the term "gender dysphoria" in the DSM-5.

Gender neutral: Not gendered. Can refer to language (including pronouns), spaces (like bathrooms), or identities (being genderqueer, for example).

Gender nonconforming: A term (considered by some to be outdated) used to describe those who view their gender identity as one of many possible genders beyond strictly man or woman. More current terms include gender expansive, differently gendered, gender creative, gender variant, genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, gender fluid, gender neutral, bigender, androgynous, or gender diverse. PFLAG National uses the term gender expansive.

Genderqueer: Refers to individuals who identify as a combination of man and woman, neither man or woman, or both man and woman. Is sometimes used as an umbrella term in much the same way that the term 'queer' is used, but only referring to gender, and thus should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as genderqueer.

Gender socialization: The process by which individual on is taught how they should behave as a boy or as a girl. Parents, teachers, peers, media, and books are some of the many agents of gender socialization.

Gender spectrum: The concept that gender exists beyond a simple man/woman binary model, but instead exists on a continuum. Some people fall towards more masculine or more feminine aspects, some people move fluidly along the spectrum, and some identify off the spectrum entirely.

Gender variant: A term, often used by the medical community, to describe children, youth, and some individuals who dress, behave, or express themselves in a way that does not conform to dominant gender norms. (See gender nonconforming.) People outside the medical community tend to avoid this term because they feel it suggests these identities are abnormal, preferring terms such as gender expansive and gender creative.

Heteronormative / Heteronormativity: These terms refer to the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm, which plays out in interpersonal interactions and society and furthers the marginalization of queer people.

Homophobia: An aversion to lesbian or gay people that often manifests itself in the form of prejudice and bias. Similarly, biphobia is an aversion people who are bisexual, and transphobia is an aversion to people who are transgender. Homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic are the related adjectives. Collectively, these attitudes are referred to as anti- LGBTQ bias.

Homosexual: An outdated clinical term often considered derogatory and offensive, as opposed to the generally preferred terms, gay, lesbian, or queer.

Intersex/differences of sexual development (DSD): Refers to individuals born with ambiguous genitalia or bodies that appear neither typically male nor female, often arising from chromosomal anomalies or ambiguous genitalia. Medical professionals often assign a gender to the individual and proceeded to perform surgeries to 'align' their physical appearance with typical male or female sex characteristics beginning in infancy and often continuing into adolescence, before a child is able to give informed consent. The Intersex Society of North America opposes this practice of genital mutilation on infants and children. Formerly the medical terms hermaphrodite and pseudo-hermaphrodite were used; these terms are now considered neither acceptable nor scientifically accurate.

Latinx: a gender-expansive term used to be more inclusive of all genders than the binary terms Latino or Latina permit, as these are terms of identity found in Spanish, a gendered language.

Lesbian: Refers to a woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

LGBTQ: An acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. It is sometimes stated as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). The addition of the Q is a more recently preferred version of the acronym as cultural opinions of the term queer focus increasingly on its positive, reclaimed definition, which recognizes more fluid identities; and as a move towards greater inclusivity for gender expansive people. The Q can also stand for questioning, referring to those who are still exploring their own sexuality and/or gender.

Occasionally, the acronym is also stated as LGBTA to include people who are asexual, LGBTI, with the I representing intersex, or LGBTQ+ or LGBTQIA to represent all of the above.

LGBTQ+: A collection of identities short for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, aromantic, pansexual, polysexual (sometimes abbreviated to LGBT or LGBTQ+). Sometimes this acronym is replaced with “queer.” Note that “ally” is not included in this acronym.

Lifestyle: A negative term often incorrectly used to describe the lives of people who are LGBTQ. The term is disliked because it implies that being LGBTQ is a choice.

Misgender: To refer to someone, especially a transgender or gender-expansive person, using a word, especially a pronoun or form of address, which does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify.

Monosexual / Multisexual / Non-monosexual: Umbrella terms for orientations directed towards one gender (monosexual) or multiple genders (multisexual/non-monosexual).

Nonbinary: Refers to individuals who identify as neither man nor woman, both man and woman, or a combination of man or woman. It is an identity term which some use exclusively, while others may use it interchangeably with terms like genderqueer, gender creative, gender nonconforming, gender diverse, or gender expansive. Individuals who identify as nonbinary may understand the identity as falling under the transgender umbrella, and may thus identify as transgender. Sometimes abbreviated as NB.

Out: Generally describes people who openly self-identify as LGBTQ in their private, public, and/or professional lives. Sometimes, individuals are outed by others who they may have already come out to. Outing an LGBTQ person without their consent is disrespectful and potentially dangerous for the LGBTQ individual. Some people who are transgender prefer to use the term disclose (defined above).

Packing: Wearing a penile prosthesis.

Pansexual: Refers to a person whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people of all genders and biological sexes. Capable of being attracted to many/any gender(s). Sometimes the term omnisexual is used in the same manner. “Pansexual” is being used more and more frequently as more people acknowledge that gender is not binary. Sometimes, the identity fails to recognize that one cannot know individuals with every existing gender identity. People who are pansexual need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction and self-identification that determines the orientation. Often included under the umbrella of bisexuality.

Passing/blending/assimilating: Being perceived by others as a particular identity/gender or cisgender regardless how the individual in question identifies, e.g. passing as straight, passing as a cis woman, passing as a youth. This term has become controversial as “passing” can imply that one is not genuinely what they are passing as.

Polysexual: Capable of being attracted to multiple gender(s).

Preferred Gender Pronouns: A preferred gender pronoun, or PGP—sometimes called proper gender pronoun—is the pronoun or set of pronouns that an individual personally uses and would like others to use when talking to or about that individual. In English, the singular pronouns that we use most frequently are gendered, so some individuals may prefer that you use gender neutral or gender-

inclusive pronouns when talking to or about them. In English, individuals use they and their as gender-neutral singular pronouns. Others use ze (sometimes spelled zie) and hir or the pronouns xe and xer.

Queer: A term used by some people—particularly youth—to describe themselves and/or their community. Reclaimed from its earlier negative use, the term is valued by some for its defiance, by some because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, queer is still sometimes disliked within the LGBTQ community. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (i.e. “My cousin identifies as queer”).

Questioning: Describes those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.

Same-Gender Loving: A term sometimes used by some members of the African-American/Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation (gay/bisexual) without relying on terms and symbols of European descent.

Sex: Refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic, or physical attributes that define if a person is male, female, or intersex. These include both primary and secondary sex characteristics, including genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, chromosomes, and genes. Sex is often conflated or interchanged with gender, which is more social than biological, though there is some overlap.

Sexual orientation: Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. While sexual behavior involves the choices one makes in acting on one’s sexual orientation, sexual orientation is part of the human condition. One’s sexual activity does not define one’s sexual orientation; typically, it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

Stealth: A term used to describe transgender or gender-expansive individuals who do not disclose their transgender or gender-expansive status in their public or private lives (or certain aspects of their public and private lives). The term is increasingly considered offensive by some as it implies an element of deception. The phrase maintaining privacy is often used instead, though some individuals use both terms interchangeably.

T: Short for testosterone.

Top Surgery: Chest surgery such as double mastectomy, breast augmentation, or periareolar (keyhole) surgeries.

Transgender: Often shortened to trans. A term describing a person’s gender identity that does not necessarily match their assigned sex at birth. Other terms commonly used are female to male (or FTM), male to female (or MTF), assigned male at birth (or AMAB), assigned female at birth (or AFAB), genderqueer, and gender expansive. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. This word is also used as a broad umbrella term to describe those who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression. Like any umbrella term, many different groups of people with different histories and experiences are often included within the greater transgender community—such groups include, but are certainly not limited to, people who identify as transsexual, genderqueer, gender variant, gender diverse, and androgynous.

Transition: A term sometimes used to refer to the process—social, legal, and/or medical—one goes through to discover and/or affirm one’s gender identity. This may, but does not always, include taking hormones; having surgeries; and changing names, pronouns, identification documents, and more. Many individuals choose not to or are unable to transition for a wide range of reasons both within and beyond their control. The validity of an individual’s gender identity does not depend on any social, legal, and/or medical transition; the self-identification itself is what validates the gender identity.

Transmisogyny: Originally coined by the author Julia Serano, this term designates the intersectionality of transphobia and misogyny and how they are often experienced as a form of oppression by trans women.

Transphobia: Systemic violence against trans people, associated with attitudes such as fear, discomfort, distrust, or disdain. This word is used similarly to homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, etc.

Trans Woman / Trans Man: Trans woman generally describes someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman. This individual may or may not actively identify as trans. It is grammatically and definitionally correct to include a space between trans and woman. The same concept applies to trans men. Often it is good just to use woman or man.

Sometimes trans women identify as male-to-female (also MTF, M2F, or trans feminine) and sometimes trans men identify as female-to-male (also FTM, F2M, or trans masculine). Please ask before identifying someone. Use the term and pronouns preferred by the individual.

Transsexual: A less frequently used—and sometimes misunderstood—term (considered by some to be outdated or possibly offensive, and others to be uniquely applicable to them) which refers to people who use (or consider using) medical interventions such as hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries (GAS), also called sex reassignment surgery (SRS) (or a combination of the two) or pursue medical interventions as part of the process of expressing their gender. Some people who identify as transsexual do not identify as transgender and vice versa.

Two Spirit: An umbrella term indexing various indigenous gender identities in North America.

Sources:

1. LGBTQ+ Definitions, <http://www.transstudent.org/definitions>.
2. PFLAG National Glossary of Terms, <https://www.pflag.org/glossary>.

*This list was compiled from the two sources listed here in order to deliver a comprehensive reference. Terms were listed twice or combined only when more expansive definitions included additional context and explanation.