

Gender and Sexual Orientation Terminology

The terms below are defined as they are usually used in U.S. English. The definitions are guidelines; they are not meant to be authoritative or immutable. Different people use them in different ways. Use them thoughtfully.

Gender and Sexual Orientation Concepts

Biological Sex and Sex Assigned at Birth: “Sex” refers to one’s body - the physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness and femaleness with which a person is born or that develop with physical maturity. **Biological sex markers** include internal and external reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics such as facial hair and breasts. **Sex assigned at birth** is the sex category (almost always male or female) assigned to each of us on ID documents, beginning with the birth certificate.

Gender expression refers to appearance and behaviors that convey something about one’s gender identity, or that others interpret as conveying something about one’s gender identity, including clothing, mannerisms, communication patterns, etc.

Gender identity refers to people’s own understandings of themselves in terms of gendered categories like man and woman, boy and girl, transgender, genderqueer, and many others. Gender identity cannot be observed; the only way you can know someone’s gender identity is if they tell you. Some people’s gender identity is consistent for their whole lives; other people experiences shifts in their gender identity over time.

Gender-neutral usually means inclusive of all genders; not gender-specific. A “gender neutral” restroom is one that everybody can use. It is not only for “gender-neutral” people.

Passing means being seen as belonging unquestionably to a particular group, e.g. being seen as a woman or as a man. Often, it refers to a trans* person being seen as the gender they are; occasionally it refers to being seen as the gender as which one wants to be seen at the moment, for safety or other reasons. Some people use “passing” specifically to mean being seen as cisgender (e.g. a trans* woman who is assumed by others to be a cisgender woman is “passing”), while for others it is not that specific. Passing is a very complex and problematic concept, not only with regard to trans* issues but also in terms of race, class, and other systems of categorization and power. Useful thoughts on some of the problems with “passing” can be found in Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl* (Chapter 8).

Sexual orientation describes an individual’s patterns of romantic and/or sexual attraction, in terms of gender. For example someone may be attracted to people of the same gender as themselves, to people of a particular other gender, or to people of all genders. Sexual orientation is not the same as gender expression or gender identity. People of any gender may have any sexual orientation.

Transition can refer to any of the medical, social, legal, spiritual and personal processes that a trans* person may go through in order to live their life in a way that works for their gender.

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Identity Categories

Terms of self-identity are complicated. When talking about a particular individual, it's best to use whichever terms that individual uses for themselves. Even so, keep in mind they may not use the term exactly as it's defined here. When talking about a community or group of people, the definitions below should serve you.

Many of these words are sometimes used as nouns as well as adjectives, e.g. "transsexuals" as well as "transsexual people." If you do not identify with a particular category, it's best to stick to adjectives, and talk about "transsexual people," "gay people," etc. rather than "transsexuals" and "gays."

Bisexual (adj.): Describes people who are attracted to both men and women.

Cisgender (adj.): Non-trans*. From a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side," as opposed to trans- which means "across." Describes people whose gender identity matches what is expected of them in their culture based on their sex assigned at birth – e.g. people assigned male at birth who identify as men and people assigned female at birth who identify as women.

Cross Dresser (n.): A person who enjoys dressing in clothes typically associated with the other of the two socially sanctioned genders. Most cross dressers are heterosexual men who enjoy wearing women's clothes occasionally.

Drag Kings and Drag Queens (n.): Drag is the practice of dressing and acting in an exaggerated masculine or feminine way, usually playfully and for theatrical performance. **Drag Queens** are usually men whose performances highlight femininity; **Drag Kings** are usually women whose performances highlight masculinity. People with nonbinary gender identities can also do drag; e.g. a genderqueer person whose drag performance highlights masculinity can be a drag king.

Gay (adj.): Describes men and women whose primary romantic and erotic attraction is to people of their same gender, i.e. men who are attracted to men and women who are attracted to women. Sometimes used to refer only to men.

Genderqueer (adj.): One of many identity labels used by trans* people whose gender identity does not fit into either of the two culturally accepted gender categories (men and women). Genderqueer means different things to different people, and genderqueer people look, act and describe themselves in a wide variety of ways. However, genderqueer is not an umbrella term; you should only refer to someone as genderqueer if you know that they want to be described that way.

GLBT / LGBT: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender. Also sometimes includes Q (queer, questioning), and I (intersex).

Intersex (adj.): Describes someone whose anatomy or physiology is not easily categorized as simply male or female. This may be noticed at birth, or may not be apparent until puberty. Some intersex people are also trans*, and many others are not. For more information regarding intersexuality, see <http://www.accordalliance.org>

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Lesbian (adj.) (n.): Describes women whose primary romantic and erotic attraction is to women.

Queer (adj.): An umbrella term describing a wide range of people who do not conform to heterosexual and/or gender norms; a reclaimed derogatory slur taken as a political term to unite people who are marginalized because of their nonconformance to dominant gender identities and/or heterosexuality. Sometimes used as a shortcut for LGBT. Other times used to distinguish politically queer people from more mainstream LGBT people. *Because of its origin as a derogatory slur, this term should be used thoughtfully. If you're not queer, or for public communications, LGBT is often more appropriate.*

Trans* (adj.): Anyone whose **gender identity** and/or **gender expression** differs significantly from what is expected of them in their culture based on their **sex assigned at birth**. This broad category includes transgender, transsexual and genderqueer people, cross dressers, drag queens and kings, masculine women and feminine men, and more. The asterisk is there to remind us that trans* includes everyone who could be described this way, not only a particular subset of trans* people. We use the term so broadly because it enables us to talk about issues facing the whole range of trans* people – but it's important to remember that not everyone who could be described as trans* in this definition self-identifies as a trans* person.

Trans (adj.): Can be used as broadly as trans*, or can be short for transgender as defined below.

Transgender (adj.): Can be used as broadly as trans*, but more often refers specifically to trans* people who have an experience of transitioning (socially, legally and/or medically) from living as one gender to living as another gender. **Tip:** Transgender should almost always be used as an adjective. As a noun (e.g. “she’s a transgender”) it sounds disrespectful to many people, and as a past-tense verb (“transgendered”) it does not make any sense.

Transsexual (adj.): Usually, a person who experiences an intense, persistent, and long-term feeling that their body and assigned sex are at odds with their gender identity. Such individuals often (but not always) desire to change their bodies to bring them into alignment with their gender identities. This term originated as a medical diagnosis, and many people do not identify with it for that reason.

Trans man (or transgender man, or transsexual man) (n.): An FtM trans* person. Someone assigned female at birth who now identifies and lives as a man. **FTM/ F2M/ FtM (adj.):** Female-to-Male, or Female-toward-Male, trans* person.

Trans woman (or transgender woman, or transsexual woman) (n.): An MtF trans person. Someone assigned male at birth who now identifies and lives as a woman. **MTF/ M2F/ MtF (adj.):** Male-to-Female, or Male-toward-Female, trans* person.