

Language of Difference: Writing about Gender and Sexuality

When writing about groups of people, it can be difficult to know what language to use. We humans categorize each other as a way to describe and assign differences, including differences of race, ethnicity, social class, disability, gender, and sexual orientation. How do we discuss these categories respectfully? How do we avoid perpetuating stereotypes? A complicating factor is the constant evolution of language; what was acceptable a few years ago may not be acceptable today. In addition, people disagree about what language is appropriate. Other complicating factors include the speaker's purposes, variations across subject fields, individual professors' preferences, and a paper's audience and level of formality. Language is fluid. As a writer, understand and take responsibility for the language choices you make.

This handout is an effort to help guide writers in the choice of acceptable language to use when writing about groups of people. General advice:

- Assume a wide audience, and think about the effect of the terms you use on your audience. Do the terms imply a judgment? Are the terms likely to offend? If so, rephrase.
- Take responsibility for your language choices. The first time using a term that might be misinterpreted/considered inappropriate, include a rationale for your choice, such as by adding a footnote that specifically defines the term for your purposes and context.
- Use only the language that is necessary to the context: use “female firefighters” only if you are specifically discussing that gender in that profession. Differences should be noted only when relevant.
- Avoid terms that evaluate, that might imply inferiority/superiority, such as “low class.”
- Use the appropriate degree of specificity: “Dominicans” rather than “Hispanics.”
- Focus on people rather than on a method of categorization: “people with mental illness” rather than “the mentally ill.”
- When discussing some subjects, you may need to use dated terminology in discussing the subject in historical context, but use contemporary language in your analysis.

If unsure of what language to use, consult with your professor, classmates, and current academic readings in the discipline, which probably will use terms appropriate to the discipline.

GENDER:

Terminology

Sex: classification of a person as male or female based on biological characteristics (sex chromosomes, hormones, reproductive systems).

Gender: classification of a person as male or female based on social or cultural characteristics.

Transgender: an adjective describing those whose gender identity or expression does not match the biological sex they were assigned at birth. A transgender person may or may not undergo hormone treatment or sex reassignment surgery, and medical intervention is considered just one part of a larger transition process. May be shortened to “trans” or “trans*” in certain instances. The asterisk emphasizes that many different identities fall under the larger transgender umbrella term.

Cisgender: an adjective describing a non-transgender person - someone whose assigned sex at birth matches their identified sex.

Transgender woman: a person assigned male at birth but who lives and identifies as a woman. The abbreviation MTF (male-to-female) may be used, but some caution against it because it privileges assigned sex over identified sex.

Transgender man: a person assigned female at birth but who lives and identifies as a man. The abbreviation FTM (female-to-male) may be used, but some caution against it because it privileges assigned sex over identified sex.

Non-binary person: a person who identifies outside of the female/male binary, i.e., does not exclusively identify as a woman or as a man. An alternate term is “genderqueer.”

Preferred Language of Gender

- When writing about a transgender person, use nouns and pronouns consistent with the individual’s gender identity, regardless of sex at birth. When possible, use the pronoun preferred by that individual (ex: a person who was born male but identifies as female would use the pronoun “she.”)
- “Transgender” is an adjective, so do not use “transgender” as a noun. Use of the term “transsexual” is generally discouraged.
- Avoid the term “opposite sex,” which implies strong differences between sexes. Use “other sex.”
- Avoid using “man” or “mankind” to refer to all of humanity. Alternatives: humans, humankind, persons, people.
- Specify the sex of a professional (ex: woman doctor, male nurse).only if necessary to the discussion.

- Use gender-neutral terms for occupations when possible (ex: postal worker instead of mailman, firefighter instead of fireman, homemaker instead of housewife).
- Using the phrase “he or she” or alternating gender pronouns is acceptable, but reduces clarity. Because ‘they’ is plural, do not use ‘they’ in place of the gendered singular pronouns, ‘he, she.’ Ideally, rephrase the sentence to avoid gender pronouns.
- Some trans individuals, and specific disciplines such as Queer Studies, use other gender neutral pronouns such as “ze” (replaces “he/she”) and “hirsself” (replaces “himself/herself”). Sometimes “they/them/their” is used to refer to an individual. Use them in the appropriate contexts, and always choose the pronoun that people use to describe themselves.

Strategies to Avoid Gender Pronouns from the *APA General Guidelines for Reducing Bias*, with examples from the *APA Guidelines for Unbiased Language*:

Sample problematic sentence: The client is usually the best judge of the value of his counseling.

1. Rephrase the sentence to eliminate gender pronoun.

Preferred: The best judge of the value of counseling is usually the client.

2. Use plural nouns with plural pronouns.

Preferred: Clients are usually the best judges of the value of their counseling.

3. Replace a possessive pronoun with an article.

Preferred: Clients are usually the best judges of the value of a counseling session.

4. Omit the pronoun.

Preferred: Clients are usually the best judges of the value of counseling.

References, language of gender:

- [APA Guidelines for Unbiased Language](#)
- [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#)
- [National Center for Transgender Equality](#)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION:

As opposed to an individual’s gender, sexual orientation (NOT “sexual preference”) relates to the gender one is attracted to (physically, romantically, emotionally). Refer to the following terms as identities, NOT as “lifestyles.”

Gay: adj. to describe someone attracted to people of the same gender. Use “gay men,” or, to include men and women, “gay people.” AVOID “homosexual,” as it has been used derogatively in the past.

Lesbian: adj. to describe women who are attracted to other women. “Lesbian” can be used as a noun; some women also identify as “gay women.” To be clear you are including both men and women, you might use “gay men and women” or “gay men and lesbians” instead of “gay people.”

Bisexual: adj. to describe someone who can be attracted to people of their own gender or another. Plural form is “bisexual people.”

Same-sex: can be used as an adj. to modify words like “couple” or “marriage.” It is often more accurate and inclusive than “gay” or “lesbian” as it can refer to either gender and includes bisexual people in same-sex relationships.

Heterosexual: adj. to describe someone who is attracted to people of other genders. “Straight” is acceptable but relatively informal.

LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. This acronym is often used to refer to all of these people as a group. Use an acronym only if you cannot be more specific. Note that it includes transgender people, who can have any sexual orientation. If you want to refer only to people who are not heterosexual, do not include the “T.” Also be aware that there is not a single, all-encompassing LGBT experience or worldview; you might acknowledge this by using a phrase like “some members of the LGBT community.”

Other letters that you might see on the end of this acronym are Q (“queer” or “questioning”), I (“intersex”), or A (“asexual” or sometimes “allies”).

Sexual minorities: could be used to refer to non-heterosexual people. This term is not in widespread use, so define how you’re using it the first time it appears.

Queer: adj. that has been adopted by some LGBT individuals, but is not universally accepted because it has been used derogatively in the past. Avoid this term unless you know the person you’re writing about self-identifies as “queer.”

References

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. 2010. Print.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. New York: Seal Press, 2007. Print

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As we have said, language is complex and evolving. If you have suggestions for revisions to this handout, please contact the Writing Center.

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