

A Guide to Gender and Sexual Minority Terms

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LGBTQ+ is an acronym that has been developed to represent individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (GLAAD, 2018). The umbrella term is used to describe a wide range of sexual and gender minorities and has expanded over the years in an effort towards inclusion (Los Angeles Conservancy, n.d.). For example, the terms LGBTQIA+ and LGBTQ2+IA are sometimes used to recognize intersex people and asexual people (ACE), as well as allies for members of any of these social groups. The “+” in the acronym symbolizes the people who have various other identities that were not previously included or have yet to be recognized. This leaves room for the community to expand, for language to continue to evolve, and for individuals to describe themselves in ways that feel congruent and meaningful to them.

What are the different identities included within the LGBTQ+ acronym?

L: The “L” in LGBTQ+ comes first for a reason. Until the 1980s, the term gay was largely used to refer to non-heterosexual people of all identities. So, the acronym was widely known as GLBT. The AIDS crisis helped build solidarity between gay men and lesbian women (Andriote, 1999). Because many healthcare workers refused to be in the same room with AIDS patients, lesbians were the primary caretakers, nurses, and blood donors to gay men and other people who were suffering from AIDS. The shift to LGBT was, therefore, made as a deliberate move to honor lesbians (Faderman, 2016). The word lesbian can be used as a noun or an adjective, and it refers to women who have physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to other women. Some lesbian women may prefer to identify as gay or as gay women (The Trevor Project, 2021a).

G: Gay is an adjective used to describe people who have physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to people of the same gender. Historically, the word gay has most often been used to refer to men who are attracted to men. However, it is now common for the word to be used outside of that specific context (The Trevor Project, 2021a).

It is important to remember the distinction between gender expression and sexual orientation. Contrary to common stereotypes, not all lesbian women present as masculine and not all gay men present as feminine. One's sexual orientation has to do with who one is attracted to, whereas one's gender expression reflects how one expresses their gender. Gay and lesbian individuals can present in any number of ways (The Trevor Project, 2021a).

B: Bisexuality is a sexual orientation used to describe people who have the potential to experience attraction to more than one gender (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). People who are bisexual may experience attraction to different genders in different ways and to different degrees. The attraction does not have to be experienced at the same time either. While the etymology of the word suggests that individuals who identify as bisexual are attracted to two genders, it is key to remember that many words were created at times when there was a limited understanding of gender. In its current form, the cultural definition of bisexual does not link attraction to the gender binary. Nonetheless, some people may prefer to identify as pansexual. The Greek prefix *pan* means all, and some use the term pansexual to describe their attraction to more than one gender. Bisexuality and pansexuality are sometimes used interchangeably, but it is best to listen and use the words that each individual identifies with (The Trevor Project, 2021b).

T: Many people fail to recognize the difference between sex and gender, although this distinction is supported by the World Health Organization (n.d) and APA (2015b). When each of us is born, doctors look at our external genitalia and typically assign us to be either male or

female. However, sex characteristics also include chromosomes, hormones, and gonads (Understanding Gender Identities, 2021). Individuals who are intersex can have a variety of reproductive or sexual anatomy that don't neatly fit into the boxes of male or female. Being intersex is more common than most people realize; in the U.S., they number 1-2 percent of the population (Planned Parenthood, 2021). Often individuals who are intersex are treated as though they have a medical condition, when in reality being intersex is a natural human variation.

If sex has to do with one's biology, what is gender? Gender refers to an individual's self-identification. Gender is something informed by culture, society, and one's relationship to themselves. It, therefore, encompasses a wider range of introspective and sentient experiences than one's assigned sex at birth (The Trevor Project, 2021c). The word "transgender," sometimes shortened to "trans," is an umbrella term that describes any person whose gender identity does not match the sex that they were assigned at birth (APA, 2015b). Transgender is an adjective, not a noun. A transgender man is someone who was assigned something other than male at birth, but who identifies as a man. A transgender woman is someone who was assigned something other than female at birth, but who identifies as a woman. Knowing a person's assigned sex at birth is not necessary in order to be respectful of their gender identity. Many trans people will transition in a number of ways in an effort to match their gender expression with their gender identity. A transgender person's transition is something personal and can be complex. It may take place over a long period of time and involve taking hormones, having various gender-affirming medical surgeries, social changes, and/or legal documentation changes (The Trevor Project, 2021c). Not all people who are transgender choose to medically transition and this does not make them any less transgender. It is never okay to ask direct questions about a transgender person's body, assigned sex at birth, medical history, or previous names, unless that person expresses that they feel comfortable disclosing this information.

Gender is not strictly binary and can more accurately be framed as a spectrum or something even more expansive. Some transgender people identify as men or women, but there are also those who identify outside of these binary categories. Some, but not all, nonbinary people also identify as transgender. Some, but not all, nonbinary people use they/them pronouns or other intentionally gender-neutral pronouns. Nonbinary gender identities are not new and have existed in many cultures throughout history. The idea of the gender binary was something imposed on native cultures through colonization during the 15th-19th century (Viverito, n.d.).

Although it is easy to assume someone's gender based on their appearance, we cannot tell how someone identifies just by looking at them. A person's gender expression does not always signify their gender identity. Similarly, a person's pronouns cannot be assumed just by looking at them (The Trevor Project, 2021d) It is generally best to ask what pronouns a person uses and to make a conscious effort to refer to them in that way. Especially because the classroom is the place that many young people spend the majority of their time, it is vital that transgender and nonbinary people feel safe in this environment. In 2020, the Trevor Project launched the largest study of LGBTQ youth mental health ever conducted. Out of 40,000 LGBTQ youth surveyed, 60% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported engaging in self-harm in the past 12 months. More than half of transgender and nonbinary youth reported seriously considering suicide. On the other hand, the transgender and nonbinary youth who reported having their pronouns respected by all or most people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected (Paley, 2020). Respecting transgender and nonbinary students' pronouns is suicide prevention.

Q: The "Q" in LGBTQ+ stands for individuals who identify under the umbrella term queer. The word queer has historically been used as a derogatory and offensive slur and is more generically used to describe things that are odd or abnormal (Queer, n.d.). However, since the

1990s, there has been a movement amongst LGBTQ+ individuals to reclaim the word. It is a label used by some people with pride, but it may still be offensive to some. Some people use the word as a blanket term to describe themselves as identifying in any number of ways that are not heterosexual (How the word 'queer' was adopted by the LGBTQ community, n.d.). Some people who don't identify as men or women may also describe themselves as genderqueer (Gold, 2019). The Q may also stand for those who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

A Final Note

The LGBTQ+ community is often assumed to share struggles and commonalities involved in marginalization. Although the acronym creates a sense of unity for individuals whose experiences don't reflect those of heterosexual and cisgender norms, harm can also come from neglecting to appreciate the nuances of each person's experience. A person's lived experience as a gay man is likely to be vastly different from that of a lesbian woman or that of a transgender person. So, when speaking, writing, or depicting groups of people, it is important to be as specific as possible and to choose terms that are representative of the groups to which you are referring.

Educational Resources

The following resources can be used by the instructor to further their knowledge. They can also be shown in class and/or be recommended to students:

- How to Teach LGBTQ History. *Teaching LGBTQ History* (n.d.).

<https://www.lgbtqhistory.org/how-to-teach-lgbtq-history/>.

This resource provides videos, podcasts, a glossary of terms, and a historical timeline related to LGBTQ history.

- The Identity Project. (n.d.). <http://www.identityprojectsf.com/>.

This is a photography project that celebrates the labels that people choose to identify with

when defining their gender and sexuality.

- Johnson, A. (2020, June 29). How to queer ecology: One goose at a time. *Orion Magazine*. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/how-to-queer-ecology-once-goose-at-a-time/>.

This article challenges the argument that LGBTQ+ individuals are not “natural.”

- Mehra, N. J. (2020). *Brown White Black: An American family at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and religion*. Picador.

With a wife who is White and a Black adopted son, Nishta J. Mehra discusses what it is like to navigate the world with a family that lies at the the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and religion.

- Wizenberg, M. (2020). *The Fixed Stars*. Abrams Press.

In this memoir, the author explores the nature of changing identity and complex sexuality.

- Communications, N.Y.U.W. (n.d.). *Trans inclusive practices in the classroom*. New York University. <https://www.nyu.edu/life/global-inclusion-and-diversity/learning-and-developmen t/toolkits/trans-inclusive-classrooms.html>.

This resource offers suggestions for making your classroom inclusive.

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<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-gay-lesbian-identities/>.
- The Trevor Project. (2021b) *How to support bisexual youth*.
<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/guide/how-to-support-bisexual-youth/>.

The Trevor Project (2021c). *Understanding gender identities*.

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-gender-identities/>.

The Trevor Project (2021d) *A guide to being an ally to transgender and nonbinary youth*.

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/guide/a-guide-to-being-an-ally-to-transgender-and-nonbinary-youth/>.

Viverito, C. V. (n.d.). *Nonbinary gender identities: A diverse global history*. Out & Equal.

<https://outandequal.org/nonbinary-gender-identities-a-diverse-global-history/>.

Planned Parenthood (2021). *What is intersex? Definition of intersexual*.

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity/whats-intersex>.

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