

Defining LGBTQ+

A Guide to Gender &
Sexuality Terminology

By Sam Killermann

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PREFACE

The Politics of Language

Some summer night, when I was little, I couldn't sleep and woke my mom. Bleary-eyed, she took me out onto our back porch, as she'd do in moments like those — when I was mad about something, or scared, struggling — to hear me out, without waking my siblings.

I told her, through fitful tears, that I couldn't understand why some people were poor, like us. And poorer. Struggling to survive. While others were so rich they'd never be able to spend all of their money.

"Why don't we make it so the people who have a lot of money help the poor people?" I asked.

It seemed so obvious! So obvious that the idea that we weren't already doing it was ridiculous: *Those stupid grown-ups. Why hadn't they thought of that?*

My mom replied, "Well, honey, we tried that. It's called communism. It makes a lot of people angry."



Of course language is political.

Language doesn't just reflect reality; it shapes it.

It's with language that we define what's possible. It's with language that we advocate for the previously impossible.

Language is the flashlight that illuminates our path forward, and the breadcrumbs that help us remember where we've been.

The language of identity is, of course, no exception.

Every word in this book is political. The act of me writing them, publishing them, and sharing with the world; the act of you reading them, or sharing them with others; these are political actions.

Writing this, and reading this, is a practice in the politics of inclusion.

What words we choose to use, say, define. The definitions we decide accept, and on whose authority. And the authority we give to the evolution of language, the neologisms, slang, and modern usages.

It is also a practice in the politics of exclusion, in the words we choose to avoid, forbid, retire. The definitions we reject. The authority we refute. The histories we leave out, rewrite, or lay to rest.



Let me describe how I see my role in baking this hot potato and tossing it your way.

I believe my responsibility is to do everything in my power, with everything I've just said above in mind, to present you with something here that is descriptive, accurate, and helpful.

Something that, if our politics line up, provides us with a shared language that we can use to advocate for a path forward, together.

And something that, if our politics don't align, provides us with a shared language to talk about those differences, potentially finding common ground, or better naming where we stand apart — or, at least, to be really specific about the things about one another that piss us off.

That said, the language here, while political, and with myriad political implications, is not a project in imagining a more beautiful world we might live in. I'm not using language as a flashlight. And I'm not attempting to detail the path that got us here, the etymology, the breadcrumbs.

I'm just trying to tell you where we are now, at the intersection of gender and sexuality. All of us. Or at least as many of us as I can.

Introduction

"I'm just not comfortable with my daughter being told that she can be a 'demiexual,'" scolded the father, who just moments before had identified himself to all of us as a father. He was reading from notes, and talking directly to me as much as he was talking to the local school board, as well as the rest of the audience members at the town hall.

I replied, "Do you know what 'demiexual' means?"

"No!"

"Okay," I said, "Well, let's start there."

I had been brought in by a local queer organization to facilitate this town hall. It was a response to backlash from some of the parents in the community after the school board voted to include gender and sexual minorities (page 24) in their sex education. Before, like most schools, they had been operating under the illusion that all of their students were straight (page 29) and cisgender (page 16), so their sex ed had followed suit. But more and more students were coming out. The illusion was dissolving.

I took a look around the room, and gauged that most in attendance were as new to demisexuality as dad, so I started slow. I gave the basic definition (page 17), then elaborated on it with an example.

"So, hypothetically, if your daughter *were* demiexual, what that might mean for her is that she isn't really feeling herself drawn to sexual stuff — things like kissing, or hooking up, or intercourse," I explained. "But she might be interested in that if a strong romantic connection or relationship were in place. That might mean she holds off on physical stuff until after dating someone for awhile, or even until after marriage."

"I changed my mind," blurted the dad, who then handed the microphone back to the moderator and promptly sat down.

After the crowd finished chuckling, I said something that I had said a thousand times before, "And, just to be clear, none of this is about trying to *make* anybody anything. All of this language is just helping us better

recognize who people already are. It helps us see people we had previously made invisible.”



I’m a gender and sexuality educator. For years, I’ve traveled the world and acted as a translator of sorts, helping people find the language to connect with others in their communities, across gaps of gender, sexuality, and identity. Being straight and cisgender, while being a gender non-conforming man who is constantly misread as gay, are the vantage points from which I view the conversation, and the avenues through which I enter it.

This leads to me spending a lot of time in classrooms and on stages. I visit the occasional town hall. And I train lots of groups in as many different disciplines (from medicine to social work to education to law enforcement).

Most of the time my work is the antithesis of exciting. The majority of my time is spent sitting behind my laptop, awash in the glow of that sleep-sucking screen, replying to emails and writing things for the internet.

But sometimes it’s exciting! Like the day I sat on a park bench in New York with Katie Couric for several hours, talking about how penises and vaginas don’t equal gender for her National Geographic documentary “Gender Revolution.”

Generally, however, its quite repetitive (like most people’s work, I assume). It doesn’t matter who I’m talking to — whether it’s a group of surgery residents, or a dean’s office, or Katie Couric, or that dad — most people seem to be starting from a similar place, holding on to a similar set of concerns and fears.

When it comes to gender and sexuality, here’s most people’s starting place: “I learned something really simple at a really young age, and that’s all I know.”

What most people are concerned about: “I don’t want to hurt others, and I don’t want to screw up and look stupid, but I’m not super comfortable with the feeling that everything is changing.”



The example that I provided for the dad was half-answer and half-reassurance. New language can be intimidating, and the language of gender and sexuality is often that.

The terms themselves, often tinged with medical-sounding Latin or Greek prefixes, can feel anything but inviting to a layperson. And the sense that “everything is constantly changing,” and “nobody can possibly keep up” (something I hear at every training I facilitate), quickly escalates the overwhelm.

But the definitions aren’t scary. They’re often so simple that people respond, “Oh, that. Yeah. I didn’t know there was a word for that.”

And, more importantly, the people the definitions represent aren’t scary. Learning about a word from a person who uses it to describe themselves is a wonderful experience, communicated as much by the language as the excitement in their eyes.

That’s not how a lot of people encounter the language of gender and sexuality, though. They’re introduced to these words through political attack ads, or by fear-mongering radio personalities. In those cases, they’re not thinking about people. They’re afraid of an idea.



“I’ve been gay my entire life and I didn’t know any of this stuff,” joked one of the participants in a training I was co-facilitating. It was a glib comment we’d heard a hundred times. And like most clichés, there’s a lot of truth behind it.

Unless you live in some future utopian society, it doesn’t matter who you are: most of us never get the chance to learn about the full diversity of sexualities and genders.

While queer people often have a head start over a lot of their cisgender and/or straight peers, because (among other reasons) queer people are more likely to be immersed in queer spaces and culture, or find themselves explaining gender and sexuality to others, nobody is given “a manual.” (An-

other common joke from training participants, usually followed by “but it would have made my life easier!”)

There’s a pressure, if you’re in one of the oppressed groups within any particular social identity, to fully understand the concept. To be an expert. To be a spokesperson. The assumption that follows (or leads to this) is that “all trans people must understand gender.” “Gay people just *get* sexuality.” “Queer people must have their minds wrapped around gender and sexuality.”

And if you’re in the dominant group, the opposite is true: there’s an implicit permission granted to be oblivious to the concept. To be ignorant. To never have “had the time” to learn about that aspect of identity.

Whether you find yourself in the first camp, the second, or with a foot in each, there are three things that (I think!) are absolutely true. First, you have a personal experience of both gender and sexuality. Second, your experience will inform the way you view the material in this book. And third, the language in this book *should* be able to transcend your personal experience. Indeed, that’s the point of language.

So, if you read a definition for a term and it doesn’t make any sense, it’s not because of you, your identities, your gender, your sexuality. It’s because of me: I failed to write clearly, or explain something sufficiently.

I have no expectation for you to understand something because you happen to be queer. And I’m also not giving you a pass because you’re not.



This book will help you understand the language of gender and sexuality. It’s my hope that this will allow you to better connect with yourself and others, bridge gaps, and create healthier, happier communities. But even if we fall short of that, you’ll hopefully have a solid foundation in how these words are formed, what they mean, and how to use them.

What will be doing most of the heavy lifting is the list of terms and their definitions (page 12). But as much as it would be great if you could memorize that list, learn all the definitions, and put them into action, I know that’s a non-starter for most of you. So I’ve included some extra support.

Interspersed throughout the book you’ll find a few rules. These are eas-

ier to remember than the definitions of 50+ new words, and often more useful in practice (you can always look a word up later — this is a glossary, after all). If you commit only one thing to memory while reading this book, make it Rule #3 (page 28).

You'll also find examples and tidbits included alongside some of the terms. These asides are here to help you leap over common intellectual hurdles that I've encountered during trainings with folks, as well as to solidify the definitions with examples or context.

After the list of terms, there are a few more such solidifiers. One is an explanation of how these words are formed ("Create Your Own Identity Term" page 32), and the other is an easy-to-follow "Say This, Not That" list (page 35). Both of these should help tie off any loose ends you have dangling after reading the list.

Finally, I've included links throughout the book, as well as a few prompts and suggested searches, that you can follow to continue learning. This book is a foundation. It's the beginning. Don't let it be the end.

About the List

This list is the byproduct of years of writing online, and doing trainings in person, about gender and sexuality. It was written by a community of strangers — myself being but one of those strangers — via comments, Facebook messages, and emails. It has grown into a collaboration with Meg Bolger, my co-creator at TheSafeZoneProject.com and co-author of *Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation*.

Our process has been to take piles and piles of input about a particular term, and to find a single thread that runs through it all. That's the output: the thread that connects a patchwork of varied definitions for a particular term, the signal amidst the noise.

Our goal is to maintain a list that is a useful starting place for people to begin learning a new language of gender and sexuality. The list isn't perfect, and it's not immutable. Those are goals that we've long since abandoned. Instead, we focus on the fidelity of the signal.

Someone once commented on my blog that a good ally "is like a high end sound system, amplifying the voices of marginalized people without distorting them." That's our hope with this list. That it will amplify the voices of each individual person who uses these terms to define and describe themselves.

Never should the volume of this list be turned to high as to drown out the voice of someone in your life. Follow the overarching rules that are peppered throughout more closely than you adhere to the correctness of a particular definition. We never want you to hear someone define themselves, point to this book, and say "Nuh uh. You're wrong. It says here that you're..."

And know that this list is always changing, sometimes in small ways, sometimes dramatically, to reflect the changing culture it represents.

Non-Comprehensive

I made a mistake when I first published the list of terms back in 2013. I entitled it “A Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Vocabulary Definitions.” Now, the title wasn’t the only mistake — over the years, the list has evolved considerably — but it was different, because it was a mistake of intentions, rather than outcomes.

I learned quickly that this list would never be comprehensive. That to make such a list is a fool’s errand, for more reasons than I want to invest the space here to recount. But the short list includes the scale of that project, the volatility of the definitions and terms, and the decisions of what “counts” and what doesn’t.

So, know that this list of terms is absolutely not comprehensive. Nor is it an endeavor toward that goal. There are far, far (far) more terms left out than included.

What is included are terms that meet one of (or ideally many of) the following criteria:

- ✚ **Gender & sexuality terms you’ll hear and use** in an introductory LGBTQ+/gender/sexuality training.
- ✚ **Foundational terms that are necessary to understand** before other, more specific (or complicated) terms will make sense.
- ✚ **Overarching community labels and identities**, within which many sub-communities exist.
- ✚ **Words you’ll need to use** to push for respect, equity, safety, and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in your community, and the world.

Even adhering to those bullets, there are undoubtedly terms that you will think should have been included, but weren’t. This might be an oversight (in which case I apologize) or intentional (which I’ll explain in the

next paragraph), but in every case this is why I've uncopyrighted this list: you are welcome to improve upon it, add to it, fix it.

There are a lot of terms that, despite being related to gender and/or sexuality, are intentionally *not* included in this list. Generally speaking, they are terms that don't meet the above criteria. More specifically, they're often terms that are either adjacent to, or subordinate to, that list above.

I could fill an entire book with terms that aren't included in this one (how avant-garde), but instead I'll do something that might actually be helpful. Here are a few big buckets that, in the delivery of this book, are either empty or filled with but a drop:

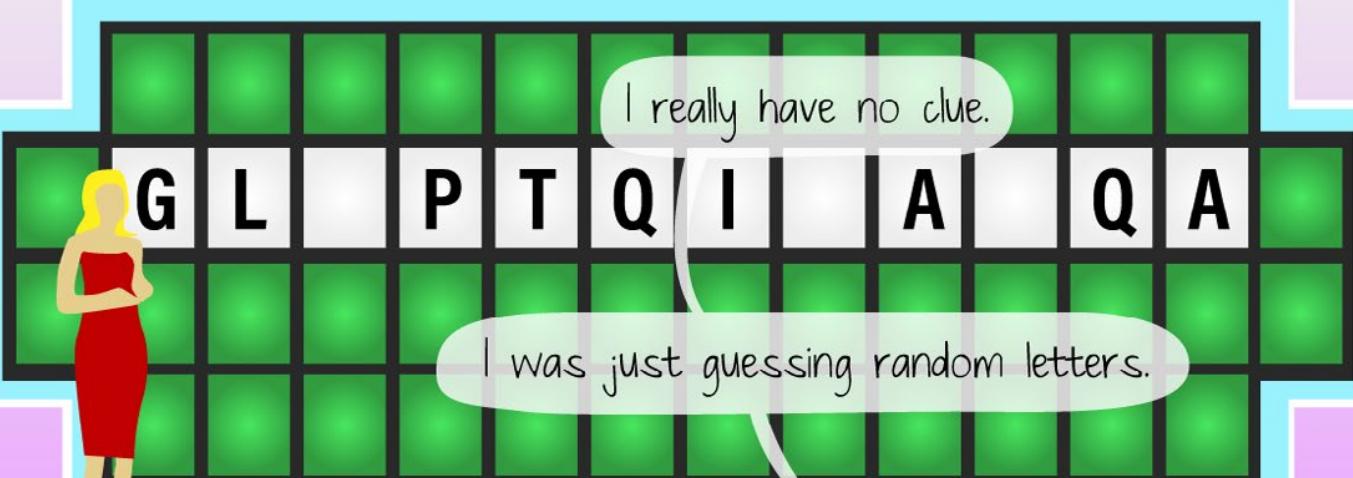
- + **In-group slang:** you won't find definitions for bears nor otters, twinks nor twunks.
- + **Sexual behaviors or activities:** you won't find definitions for pegging nor power-bottom-ing, scissoring nor snowballing.
- + **BDSM / Kink:** you won't find definitions for submissives nor single-tails, dungeons nor FinDoms.
- + **Polyamory / ENM:** you won't find definitions for compersion nor cuckholding, metamours nor monogamish.

Please don't see my delivery of empty buckets as a statement that those buckets don't need filling. Instead, I hope you consider the above a bucket list of terminology subcategories that you can explore in other resources, beyond this book.

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Curated by Sam Killermann, with the help of Meg Bolger and several thousand strangers.

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A GROUP OF PEOPLE

advocate

1 noun: a person who actively works to end intolerance, educate others, and support social equity for a marginalized group. **2 verb:** to actively support or plea in favor of a particular cause, the action of working to end intolerance or educate others.

agender

adj.: a person with no (or very little) connection to the traditional system of gender, no personal alignment with the concepts of either man or woman, and/or someone who sees themselves as existing without gender. Sometimes called gender neutrois, gender neutral, or genderless.

ally

/“al-lie”/- noun: a (typically straight and/or cisgender) person who supports and respects members of the LGBTQ community. We consider people to be active allies who take meaningful actions to show this support and respect.

androgyny

/“an-jrah-jun-ee”/ (*androgynous*) – **1 noun** : a gender expression that has elements of both masculinity and femininity; **2 adj.** : occasionally used in place of “intersex” to describe a person with both female and male anatomy, generally in the form “androgyne.”

androsexual / androphilic

adj. : being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to men, males, and/or masculinity.

aromantic

/“ay-ro-man-tic”/ – **adj.** : experiencing little or no romantic attraction to others and/or has a lack of interest in romantic relationships/behavior. Aromanticism exists on a continuum from people who experience no romantic attraction or have any desire for romantic activities, to those who experience low levels, or romantic attraction only under specific conditions. Many of these different places on the continuum have their own identity labels (*see demiromantic*). Sometimes abbreviated to “aro” (pronounced like “arrow”).

Asexuality is different from celibacy in that it is a sexual orientation whereas celibacy is an abstaining from a certain action.



Not all asexual people are aromantic, and not all aromantic people are asexual. Some are both. A lot are neither.

asexual

adj. : experiencing little or no sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in sexual relationships/behavior. Asexuality exists on a continuum from people who experience no sexual attraction or have any desire for sex, to those who experience low levels, or sexual attraction only under specific conditions. Many of these different places on the continuum have their own identity labels (*see demisexual*). Sometimes abbreviated to “ace.”

bicurious

adj. : a curiosity toward experiencing attraction to people of the same gender/sex (*similar to questioning*).

bigender

adj. : a person who fluctuates between traditionally “woman” and “man” gender-based behavior and identities, identifying with two genders (or sometimes identifying with either man or woman, as well as a third, different gender).

binder / binding

noun: an undergarment used to alter or reduce the appearance of one's breasts (worn similarly to how one wears a sports bra). *binding – verb* : the (sometimes daily) process of wearing a binder. Binding is often used to change the way others read/perceive one's anatomical sex characteristics, and/or as a form of gender expression.

biological sex

noun: a medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal and anatomical characteristics that are used to classify an individual as female or male or intersex. Often referred to as simply "sex," "physical sex," "anatomical sex," or specifically as "sex assigned at birth."

Biological Sex is often seen as a binary, but there are many combinations of chromosomes, hormones, and primary/secondary sex characteristics, and varying degrees within each, that one might embody, so it's often more accurate and helpful to view it on scales.

It is also commonly conflated with gender.

biphobia

noun: a range of negative attitudes (e.g., fear, anger, intolerance, invisibility, resentment, erasure, or discomfort) that one may have or express toward bisexual individuals. Biphobia can come from and be seen within the LGBTQ community as well as straight society. *biphobic – adj.* : a word

used to describe actions, behaviors, or individuals who demonstrate elements of this range of negative attitudes toward bisexual people.

An example of **biphobic invisibility and erasure** would be the assumption that any man in a relationship with a woman is straight, or anyone dating someone of the same gender means they are gay. In neither case did we assume the person is bisexual.

bisexual

1 noun & adj. : a person who experiences attraction to some men and women. **2 adj.** : a person who experiences attraction to some people of their gender and another gender. Bisexual attraction does not have to be equally split, or indicate a level of interest that is the same across the genders an individual may be attracted to.

Can be shortened to "bi" (pronounced "bye"). Often used interchangeably with "pansexual".

butch

noun & adj. : a person who identifies themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally, or emotionally. ‘Butch’ is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but is also claimed as an affirmative identity label.

cisgender

/“siss-jendur”/ – *adj.* : a gender description for when someone’s sex assigned at birth and gender identity correspond in the expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth, and identifies as a man). A simple way to think about it is if a person is not transgender, they are cisgender. The word cisgender can also be shortened to “cis.”

The “cis” part of cis-gender comes from the latin prefix that means “on the same side [as]” or “on this side [of].”



cisnormativity

noun : the assumption, in individuals and in institutions, that everyone is cisgender, and that cisgender identities are superior to trans* identities and people. Leads to invisibility of non-cisgender identities.

Imagine a set of checkboxes for gender identity and sex assigned at birth. If you’re cisgender, you’d likely check both boxes on the same side.

cissexism

noun : behavior that grants preferential treatment to cisgender people, reinforces the idea that being cisgender is somehow better or more “right” than being transgender, and/or makes other genders invisible.

closeted

adj. : an individual who is not open to themselves or others about their (queer) sexuality or gender identity. This may be by choice and/or for other reasons such as fear for one’s safety, peer or family rejection, or disapproval and/or loss of housing, job, etc. Also known as being “in the closet.” When someone chooses to break this silence they “come out” of the closet. (*see coming out*)

coming out

1 noun : the process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one's own sexuality or gender identity (to "come out" to oneself). **2 verb :** the process by which one shares one's sexuality or gender identity with others.

A popular misconception is that **coming out** happens once. Coming out is, however, a continuous, lifelong process. Everyday, one has to evaluate and reevaluate who they are comfortable coming out to, if it is safe, and what the consequences might be.



constellation

noun : a way to describe the arrangement or structure of a polyamorous relationship.

cross-dresser

noun : someone who wears clothes of another gender/sex.

demiromantic

adj. : little or no capacity to experience romantic attraction until a strong sexual connection is formed with someone, often within a sexual relationship.

demisexual

adj. : little or no capacity to experience sexual attraction until a strong romantic connection is formed with someone, often within a romantic relationship.

down low

adj. : typically referring to men who identify as straight but who secretly have sex with men. Down low (or DL) originated in, and is most commonly used by, communities of color.

drag king

noun : someone who performs (hyper-) masculinity theatrically.

drag queen

noun : someone who performs (hyper-) femininity theatrically.

dyke

noun : referring to a masculine presenting lesbian. While often used derogatorily, it is also reclaimed affirmatively by some lesbians and gay women as a positive self identity term.

RULE #1

The Parts of Speech Rule

Notice the part of speech before a term's definition (e.g., the little "adj." or "noun"). It will help you as much as the definition itself.

In conversation, using the wrong part of speech will often land worse than using the wrong word, or mixing up definitions. The severity of this mistake increases from adjective to noun to verb. Adjectives are almost always safe, if sometimes cumbersome. Noun forms of identity terms are often happily used in-group, but only there; out-group usages can feel stigmatizing and othering. And verb forms are offensively ridiculous.

If you're ever unsure of which part of speech for an identity term, go with adjective (particularly when asking questions, or trying to learn more). Adjectives add to who someone is, modifying their personhood, while nouns sometimes replace their personhood altogether. For example, consider the difference between "my friend *is blonde*" and "my friend **is a blonde**."

Here are a few more examples, using "transgender" as our identity term:

- ✚ Adjective (encouraged): "She is transgender." "Our services are available to transgender clients."
- ✚ Noun (avoid): "She is a transgender." "Our services are available to transgenders."
- ✚ Verb (never): "She is transitioning." (No she's not. Use "transitioning" instead, if that's what you mean, or "transgender")

emotional attraction

noun : a capacity that evokes the want to engage in emotionally intimate behavior (e.g., sharing, confiding, trusting, inter-depending), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none to intense). Often conflated with sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and/or spiritual attraction.

fag(got)

noun : derogatory term referring to a gay person, or someone perceived as queer. While often used derisorily, it is also used reclaimed by some gay people (often gay men) as a positive in-group term.

feminine-of-center; masculine-of-center

adj. : a phrase that indicates a range in terms of gender identity and expression for people who present, understand themselves, and/or relate to others in a generally more feminine/masculine way, but don't necessarily identify as women or men. Feminine-of-center individuals may also identify as "femme," "submissive," "transfeminine," etc.; masculine-of-center individuals may also often identify as "butch," "stud," "aggressive," "boi," "transmasculine," etc.

feminine-presenting; masculine-presenting

adj. : a way to describe someone who expresses gender in a more feminine/masculine way. Often confused with feminine-of-center/masculine-of-center, which generally include a focus on identity as well as expression.

femme

noun & adj. : someone who identifies themselves as feminine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. Often used to refer to a feminine-presenting queer woman or people.

fluid(ity)

adj. : generally with another term attached, like gender-fluid or fluid-sexuality, fluid(ity) describes an identity that may change or shift over time between or within the mix of the options available (e.g., man and woman, bi and straight).

FtM / F2M; MtF / M2F

abbr. : female-to-male transgender or transsexual person; male-to-female transgender or transsexual person.

gay

1 adj. : experiencing attraction solely (or primarily) to some members of the same gender. Can be used to refer to men who are attracted to other men and women who are attracted to women. **2 adj.** : an umbrella term used to refer to the queer community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who is not straight (*see LGBTQ and queer*)



Gay is a word that's had many different meanings throughout history. In the 12th century it meant "happy," in the 17th century it was more commonly used to mean "immoral" (describing a hedonistic, pleasure-seeking person), and by the 19th it meant a female prostitute (and a "gay man" was a guy who had sex with female prostitutes a lot). It wasn't until the 20th century that it started to mean what it means today.

gender binary

noun : the idea that there are only two genders and that every person is one of those two.

gender expression

noun : the external display of one's gender, through a combination of clothing, grooming, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally made sense of on scales of masculinity and femininity. Also referred to as "gender presentation."

gender fluid

adj. : a gender identity best described as a dynamic mix of boy and girl. A person who is gender fluid may always feel like a mix of the two traditional genders, but may feel more man some days, and more woman other days.

gender identity

noun : the internal perception of an one's gender, and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or don't align with what they understand their options for gender to be. Often conflated with biological sex, or sex assigned at birth.

gender neutrois

adj. : *see agender*

gender non-conforming

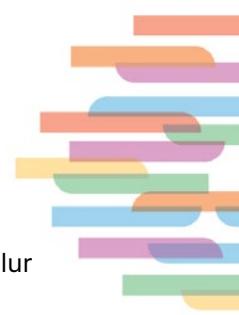
1 adj. : a gender expression descriptor that indicates a non-traditional gender presentation (masculine woman or feminine man). **2 adj.** : a gender identity label that indicates a person who identifies outside of the gender binary. Often abbreviated as “GNC.”

gender normative / gender straight

adj. : someone whose gender presentation, whether by nature or by choice, aligns with society’s gender-based expectations.

genderqueer

1 adj. : a gender identity label often used by people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman. **2 adj.** : an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or nonbinary identities (e.g., agender, bigender, genderfluid).



The “queer” part of **genderqueer** is the reclaimed, affirming, empowering usage of “queer.” This is not a slur or derogatory term.

gender variant

adj. : someone who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society (e.g. transgender, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc).

gynosexual / gynephilic

“guy-nuh-seks-shu-uhl” / – **adj.** : being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to women, females, and/or femininity.

hermaphrodite

noun : an outdated medical term previously used to refer to someone who was born with some combination of typically-male and typically-female sex characteristics. It’s considered stigmatizing and inaccurate. *See intersex*

heteronormativity

noun : the assumption, in individuals and/or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities. Leads to invisibility and stigmatizing of other sexualities: when learning a woman is married, asking her what her husband’s name is. Heteronormativity also leads us to assume that only masculine men and feminine women are straight.

heterosexism

noun : behavior that grants preferential treatment to heterosexual people, reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is somehow better or more “right” than queerness, and/or makes other sexualities invisible.

heterosexual / straight

adj. : experiencing attraction solely (or primarily) to some members of a different gender.

homophobia

noun : an umbrella term for a range of negative attitudes (e.g., fear, anger, intolerance, resentment, erasure, or discomfort) that one may have toward LGBTQ people. The term can also connote a fear, disgust, or dislike of being perceived as LGBTQ. **homophobic – adj.** : a word used to describe actions, behaviors, or individuals who demonstrate elements of this range of negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people.

homosexual

adj. & noun : a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex/gender. This [medical] term is considered stigmatizing (particularly as a noun) due to its history as a category of mental illness, and is discouraged for common use (use gay or lesbian instead).

Until 1973 “**Homosexuality**” was classified as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This is just one of the reasons that there are such heavy negative and clinical connotations associated this term.



It was long considered an emergency when a child was recognized as **intersex**, that doctors would move to “fix” immediately through “corrective” surgeries, which would often lead to health complications for the intersex person as an adult. Thanks to advocacy and activism within the intersex movement, the medical profession is slowly moving away from this harmful practice.

intersex

adj. : term for a combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals that differs from the two expected patterns of male or female. Formerly known as hermaphrodite (or hermaphroditic), but these terms are now outdated and derogatory.

lesbian

noun & adj. : women who are primarily attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other women.

RULE #2



The 51/100 Rule

When it comes to defining identity labels, many of which are emergent, perfect is impossible. Ask 10 people what the label "woman" means and you'll likely get 10 different answers, and we've all heard that word. We all know what it means.

So perfect isn't the goal with any of the definitions I write. The bar is much, much lower. When I write a definition for an identity label, the bar is that 51% of people who identify *with that label* agree with it. If you asked 100 people who identified a certain way if the definition here worked for them, we need at least 51 to say "Yep."

That's it. Not 100%, not even 90% for an A, or 70% for a C. Just the majority. But trust me: that's a high bar. I keep rewriting and rewriting based on community feedback until I achieve it (and keep tweaking definitions forever based on feedback even after).

If you keep the 51/100 Rule in mind as you read these terms and their definitions, there are (at least) two related thoughts that will likely surface:

- + These definitions are imperfect, so a lot of people (both in-group and out) are likely using these words to mean different things (slightly to severely)
- + Identity is a personal thing, so if you really want to understand someone, you need to get to know them (not just their labels)



LGBTQ; GSM; DSG; TGNC

abbr. : shorthand or umbrella terms for all folks who have a non-normative (or queer) gender or sexuality, there are many different initialisms people prefer. **LGBTQ** is Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer and/or Questioning (sometimes people add a + at the end in an effort to be more inclusive); **GSM** is Gender and Sexual Minorities; **DSG** is Diverse Sexualities and Genders; **TGNC** is Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (sometimes you'll see "NB" added for non-binary). Other options include the initialisms GLBT, LGBT, or TLBG, or the acronym QUILTBAG (Queer [or Questioning] Undecided Intersex Lesbian Trans* Bisexual Asexual [or Ally] and Gay [or Genderqueer]).



There is no "correct" or "official" initialism to represent everyone who is queer, or LGBTQ+. If you're unsure of which one to use, defer to your local community.

When a "P" is included it usually means pansexual; an "I" generally represents intersex.

lipstick lesbian

noun : Usually refers to a lesbian with a feminine gender expression. Can be used in a positive or a derogatory way. Is sometimes also used to refer to a lesbian who is assumed to be (or passes for) straight.

metrosexual

adj. : a man with a strong aesthetic sense who spends more time, energy, or money on his appearance and grooming than is considered gender normative.

msm / wsw

abbr. : men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women, to distinguish sexual behaviors from sexual identities: because a man is straight, it doesn't mean he's not having sex with men. Often used in the field of HIV/Aids education, prevention, and treatment.

Mx.

/ "mix" or "schwa" / - *noun* : an honorific (e.g. Mr., Ms., Mrs., etc.) that is gender neutral. It is often the option of choice for folks who do not identify within the gender binary: Mx. Smith is a great teacher.

nonbinary

adj. : a gender identity label used by some people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman. Alternatively spelled “non-binary.” Often abbreviated as “enby” or “enbie” (based on the pronunciation of N-B). (*see genderqueer*)

outing

verb : involuntary or unwanted disclosure of another person’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status.

pansexual

adj. : a person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions. Often shortened to “pan.”

passing

1 adj. & verb : trans* people being accepted as, or able to “pass for,” a member of their self-identified gender identity (regardless of sex assigned at birth) without being identified as trans*. **2 adj.** : an LGB/queer individual who is believed to be or perceived as straight.

Passing is a loaded term. It can put too much emphasis on the person observing or interacting with the individual who is “passing” placing power/authority in the observer rather than giving agency to the individual.

Some people are looking to “pass” (or just to be accepted for the identity they are), but it’s not a goal for everyone. Passing is not always a positive experience.



PGPs

abbr. : preferred gender pronouns. Often used during introductions, becoming more common as a standard practice. Many suggest removing the “preferred,” because it indicates flexibility and/or the power for the speaker to decide which pronouns to use for someone else.

Some people are looking to “pass” (or just to be accepted for the identity they are), but it’s not a goal for everyone. Passing is not always a positive experience.

polyamory / polyamorous

noun : refers to the practice of, desire for, or orientation toward having ethical, honest, and consensual non-monogamous relationships (i.e. relationships that may include multiple partners). Often shortened to “poly.”

Some individuals experience passing as invisibility, or as a loss of their own community, when they are perceived to be part of the dominant group.

queer

1 adj. : an umbrella term to describe individuals who don't identify as straight and/or cisgender. **2 noun** : a slur used to refer to someone who isn't straight and/or cisgender. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, and how it is still used as a slur many communities, it is not embraced or used by all LGBTQ people. The term "queer" can often be used interchangeably with LGBTQ (e.g., "queer people" instead of "LGBTQ people").

If a person tells you they are not comfortable with you referring to them as **queer**, don't. If someone else prefers queer over gay, honor that. Always respect individual's preferences when it comes to identity labels, particularly ones with troubled histories like this.

questioning

verb, adj. : an individual who or time when someone is unsure about or exploring their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

QPOC / QTPOC

abbr. : initialisms that stand for queer people of color and queer and/or trans people of color.

romantic attraction

noun : a capacity that evokes the want to engage in romantic intimate behavior (e.g., dating, relationships, marriage), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with sexual attraction, emotional attraction, and/or spiritual attraction.

same gender loving (SGL)

adj. : sometimes used by some members of the African-American or Black community to express a non-straight sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of European descent.

sex assigned at birth (SAAB)

abbr. : a phrase used to intentionally recognize a person's assigned sex (not gender identity). Sometimes called "designated sex at birth" (DSAB) or "sex coercively assigned at birth" (SCAB), or specifically used as "assigned male at birth" (AMAB) or "assigned female at birth" (AFAB): Jenny was assigned male at birth, but identifies as a woman.

sexual attraction

noun: a capacity that evokes the want to engage in physically intimate behavior (e.g., kissing, touching, intercourse), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with romantic attraction, emotional attraction, and/or spiritual attraction.

sexual orientation

noun: the type of sexual, romantic, emotional/spiritual attraction one has the capacity to feel for some others, generally labeled based on the gender relationship between the person and the people they are attracted to. Often confused with sexual preference.

sexual preference

noun: the types of sexual intercourse, stimulation, and gratification one likes to receive and participate in. Generally when this term is used, it is being mistakenly interchanged with “sexual orientation,” creating an illusion that one has a choice (or “preference”) in who they are attracted to.

sex reassignment surgery (SRS)

noun: used by some medical professionals to refer to a group of surgical options that alter a person’s biological sex. “Gender confirmation surgery” is considered by many to be a more affirming term. In many cases, one or multiple surgeries are required to achieve legal recognition of gender. Some refer to different surgical procedures as “top” surgery and “bottom” surgery to discuss what type of surgery they are having without having to be more explicit.

skoliosexual

adj.: being primarily sexually, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to some genderqueer, transgender, transsexual, and/or nonbinary people.

spiritual attraction

noun: a capacity that evokes the want to engage in intimate behavior based on one’s experience with, interpretation of, or belief in the supernatural (e.g., religious teachings, messages from a deity), experienced in varying degrees (from little-to-none, to intense). Often conflated with sexual attraction, romantic attraction, and/or emotional attraction.

RULE #3



The Platinum Rule

The Platinum Rule, contrasted against the Golden Rule, is "do unto others as *they* would have you do unto them." Treat people how they want to be treated — *not* how you want to be treated. When it comes to identifying language, this distinction can't be more important.

If someone in your life uses a term to describe themselves in a way that clashes with one of the definitions here, or "best practices" you've learned, the best thing you can do is honor that usage for that person. At least if you want to treat them with respect, dignity, and kindness.

Generally speaking, mirroring language — that is, using the language you hear someone use to describe themselves or their life — is always better than vocab checking someone. For example:

- ✚ If someone calls someone in their life their "girlfriend," follow suit. If they call them "partner," ditto.
- ✚ If you meet a woman who's into women, and doesn't use the label "lesbian," instead calling herself "gay," then she's gay. If she says she's "queer," then she's queer.



stealth

adj. : a trans person who is not “out” as trans, and is perceived/known by others as cisgender.

straight

adj. : a person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to some people who are not their same sex/gender. A more colloquial term for the word heterosexual.

stud

noun : most commonly used to indicate a Black/African-American and/or Latina, masculine, lesbian/queer woman. Also known as ‘butch’ or ‘aggressive’.

third gender

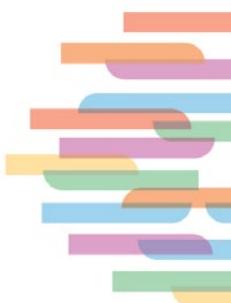
noun : for a person who does not identify with either man or woman, but identifies with another gender. This gender category is used by societies that recognise three or more genders, both contemporary and historic, and is also a conceptual term meaning different things to different people who use it, as a way to move beyond the gender binary.

top surgery

noun : this term refers to surgery for the construction of a male-type chest or breast augmentation for a female-type chest.

trans*

adj. : an umbrella term covering a range of identities that transgress socially-defined gender norms. Trans with an asterisk is often used in written forms (not spoken) to indicate that you are referring to the larger group nature of the term, and specifically including nonbinary identities, as well as transgender men (transmen) and transgender women (transwomen).



In 2018, the Oxford English Dictionary officially added **trans***, so feel free to compare our definition to theirs.



transgender

1 adj. : a gender description for someone who has transitioned (or is transitioning) from living as one gender to another. **2 adj.** : an umbrella term for anyone whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity do not correspond in the expected way (e.g., someone who was assigned male at birth, but does not identify as a man).

Transgender people can be straight, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, pansexual, or any other sexual orientation. Remember: this is a gender label, not a sexuality label.

transition / transitioning

noun, verb : referring to the process of a transgender person changing aspects of themselves (e.g., their appearance, name, pronouns, or making physical changes to their body) to be more congruent with the gender they know themselves to be (as opposed to the gender they lived as pre-transitioning).

transman; transwoman

noun : a man/woman who was not assigned that gender via sex at birth, and transitioned (socially, medically, and/or legally) from that assignment to their gender identity, signified by the second part of the term (i.e., -man, -woman). Also referred to as men and women (though some/many trans people prefer to keep the prefix “trans-” in their identity label).

transphobia

noun : the fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of trans* people, the trans* community, or gender ambiguity. Transphobia can be seen within the queer community, as well as in general society. **Transphobic – adj.** : a word used to describe an individual who harbors some elements of this range of negative attitudes, thoughts, intents, towards trans* people.

transsexual

noun & adj. a person who identifies psychologically as a gender/sex other than the one to which they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals often wish to transform their bodies hormonally and surgically to match their inner sense of gender/sex.

transvestite

noun : a person who dresses as the binary opposite gender expression (“cross-dresses”) for any one of many reasons, including relaxation, fun, and sexual gratification (often called a “cross-dresser,” and should not be confused with transsexual).

two-spirit

noun : is an umbrella term traditionally within Native American communities to recognize individuals who possess qualities or fulfill roles of both feminine and masculine genders.

ze / zir

/“zee”, “zerr” or “zeer”/- alternate pronouns that are gender neutral and preferred by some trans* people. They replace “he” and “she” and “his” and “hers” respectively. Alternatively some people who are not comfortable/do not embrace he/she use the plural pronoun “they/their” as a gender neutral singular pronoun.

Create Your Own Identity Term

“Isn’t that word just made up?” asked a crowd member after a talk I gave. It’s a common dismissal of new language (neologisms), frequently deployed against emerging gender and sexuality terminology.

The knee-jerk reaction, being an adamant defender of the sanctity of this language, is to say “No.” But I think the best response here is the honest one, “Yep, it is,” which I generally follow up with something like the following.

Every word is made up. Some of them were made up a thousand years ago, and some just yesterday. But the vintage on a word isn’t what determines whether or not it’s worth learning, using, spreading. “Credit card” is only about 70 years old. “Doubloon” is over 500. Which is more useful today?

The language of gender and sexuality is emergent, and much of it is brand new, but the experiences the language defines — the non-conformity, nuances, ebbs and flows, frictions and pain points, being “othered” — are anything but new.

Across cultures, across time, across individual people, there has never been “only two genders,” nor has “heterosexuality” been the only sexuality (that term wasn’t even defined until about a 100 years ago, and it meant an “abnormal or perverted appetite toward the opposite sex” (Read the BBC’s [“Invention of ‘Heterosexuality’”](#)).

A new word or identity label isn’t the creation of a new experience. It’s simply naming, or putting language to, a shared experience that might be as old as time.

But how does one go about constructing such a label? Well, there’s certainly no rule book. There are, however, a few word parts and patterns that some of the more popular neologisms have employed to great effect.

Some patterns that help with communicating a shared understanding:

- ✚ **Gender terms generally describe who you are** (who you know yourself to be in light of the social construction of gender).
- ✚ Gender terms **often end in “-gender”** (but there are many other potential suffixes, see below).
- ✚ **Sexuality terms generally describe your relationship (or non-relationship) to others** (who, how, how often, how many).
- ✚ Sexuality terms **often end in “-sexual”** (but there are many other potential suffixes, see below).

Some word roots and prefixes that come in handy, and how they're generally used in sexuality and gender language:

- ✚ **a-**: “a lack of,” “little of,” or “not”
- ✚ **bi-**: “two,” or “more than one”
- ✚ **cis-**: “on the same side as” (relating to gender identity + SAAB)
- ✚ **demi-**: “half,” “some,” or “less than”
- ✚ **pan-**: “all,” “any,” or “everyone”
- ✚ **poly-**: “many,” “more than one”
- ✚ **trans-**: “across from,” or “beyond” (relating to gender identity + SAAB)

Some word suffixes that come in handy, and how they're generally used:

- ✚ **-amory**: denoting one's relationship configurations
- ✚ **-boy / -man**: relating to the social construction of man-ness
- ✚ **-girl / -woman**: relating to the social construction of woman-ness
- ✚ **-gender**: denoting one's gender identity, valence determined by the beginning of the word
- ✚ **-romantic**: denoting one's experience of romantic attraction, romantic identity, or interest/participation in romantic behavior

- ✚ **-sexual:** denoting one's experience of sexual attraction, sexual identity, or interest/participation in sexual behavior

The way these word parts and patterns are often combined is relatively straightforward. As you read through the list of terms, you saw it in action dozens of times.

You take a word root (e.g., “demi”) and combine it with a suffix (e.g., “gender”). The meaning of the resulting word (i.e., “demigender”) is a byproduct of the pattern used and the definitions of those word parts.

For example, we could define “demigender” as “a person with **some** connection to the traditional system of **gender**, but **less than** the norm.”

In that example, “demi-” modifies or explains “gender.” If you swap out the suffix, you get a completely different meaning. That’s what I mean when I say the valence is determined by the beginning of the word.

For example, “demigirl” would be connecting “demi-“ to “-girl,” and that term might be adopted by someone who “identifies with **some** aspects of **girl-ness**.”

I’ll stop with the examples there. I leave you to apply these word parts and patterns to ease your understanding of gender and sexuality neologisms with one final rule: use this to better understand yourself, or to find the language to communicate something about yourself to others; don’t use it to assess or diagnose someone else.

The word parts and patterns here, like everything else in this book, are descriptive, not prescriptive. We’re trying our best to see how things are. Not to tell people how they should be.

Say This, Not That

If the list left you lost, the rules didn't help, and the recipes for identity term creation confounded more than they clarified, worry not. Following is, in the simplest, most absolute, dichotomous, black & white way, a short list of Do's and Don'ts. This is adapted from a handout that is part of our Safe Zone Project Foundational Curriculum (which you can find at TheSafeZoneProject.com/resources/handouts-edugraphics/).

Say "intersex," not "hermaphrodite." Hermaphrodite is a stigmatizing, inaccurate word with a negative medical history. For example, "What are the best practices for the medical care of intersex infants?"

Say "gay," not "homosexual." "Homosexual" often connotes a medical diagnosis, or a discomfort with gay/lesbian people. For example, "We want to do a better job of being inclusive of our gay employees."

Say "assigned female at birth," not "born female" or "female-bodied" (or "assigned male at birth," not "born male" or "male-bodied"). "Assigned" language accurately depicts the situation of what happens at birth. "-Bodied" language is often interpreted as pressure to medically transition, or invalidation of one's gender identity. For example, "Max was assigned female at birth, then he transitioned in high school."

Say "a transgender person" or "a gay person," not "a transgender" or "a gay." Gay and transgender are adjectives that describe a person/group. For example, "We had a transgender athlete in our league this year."

Say "transgender people and cisgender people," not "transgender people and normal people." Saying "normal" implies "abnormal," which is a stigmatizing way to refer to a person. For example, "This group is open to both transgender and cisgender people."

Say "all genders," not "both genders" or "opposite sexes." "Both" implies there are only two; "opposite" reinforces antagonism amongst genders. For example, "Video games aren't just a boy thing -- kids of all genders play them."

Say “everyone,” “folks,” “honored guests,” etc., not “ladies and gentlemen.” Moving away from binary language is more inclusive of people of all genders. For example, “Good morning everyone, next stop Picadilly Station.”

Say “Mail clerk,” “Firefighter,” “Police officer,” etc., not “Mailman,” “fireman,” “policeman,” etc. People of all genders do these jobs. For example, “I actually saw a firefighter rescue a cat from a tree one time.”

Say “they,” not “it” when referring to someone (e.g., when pronouns are unknown). “It” is for referring to things, not people. For example, “You know, I am not sure how they identify.”

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