

Discussing Trans and Gender-Diverse People



Are you covering stories about trans and gender-diverse people?

This guide will help you do it respectfully and accurately.

Trans people are diverse, with no single representative experience. Discrimination affects trans people differently based on gender identity, gender expression, race and class—to name just a few intersections of marginalization that can factor in. For example: sexism and misogyny impact the lives of trans women differently than trans men.

In your reporting, it's important to not characterize trans people as having a mental disorder, or to assume that all trans people experience discomfort with their bodies. For instance, many trans people are assumed to want or have had some form of surgery, but not all do or will.

Additionally, while trans people can be diagnosed with “gender dysphoria,” not all trans people feel this reflects their experience.

Above all, remember that trans and gender-diverse people are the real experts on their own lives and experiences. If you're ever unsure of what language is appropriate in your writing about someone, or what language to use in referring to someone, just ask. “What does this term mean to you?” is a simple and respectful way to start a conversation.

Accurate, respectful language

When you're using the terms “trans” and “transgender,” make sure you're using them as adjectives (for example: Shondra is a trans woman).

And, there are many other terms to be aware of. Language develops at a community level, and gender-diverse people often need to find their own words to describe themselves and their experiences. Terms including nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, bigender, and gender fluid, among others, are valid—whether or not they're familiar to you. Plus, when it comes to names and pronouns, avoid characterizing them as “preferred”—they just are.

If you are unfamiliar with gender terms that people are using, you can ask respectfully what that term means for that person, along with what you can do to respect them in your interactions. Consider using open-ended questions such as: “How would you like me to refer to you?” or “What language do you feel best describes you?”

Other best practices include

- Be conscientious about reflecting the language that someone uses to identify themselves, including using the right name and pronouns at all times. This applies to reporting on any time period in a person's life, past or present.
- Use and respect gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them and titles (Sir, Ms., Mx., etc.) if these are what someone uses. In case you were wondering, it is grammatically correct to use “they” as a singular pronoun.
- Don't make assumptions. For instance, people who crossdress and/or do drag don't necessarily identify as trans.
- Remember that gender identity and sexual orientation are separate. One doesn't tell us anything about the other.
- Use the term cisgender or cis to refer to people who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, someone who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman is a cis woman, or a cisgender woman. Everyone has a gender identity, and the term “cis” allows us to differentiate between experiences, without holding one over the other.
- Define terms that your readership may not understand (see [The 519's Glossary of Terms](#)).



“Language develops at a community level, and gender-diverse people often need to find their own words to describe themselves and their experiences. ...”

Offensive, inaccurate language

Part of respecting someone's identity is taking care to never say or imply that someone's birth or legal name is their "real" name. Similarly, it's inappropriate to use photos of someone from before they transitioned unless you have their consent.

Every transition process is unique, which means you should avoid talking about transitioning in a linear way that has a start and end point, as well as avoid qualifying transitions with adjectives like a "full" transition. Plus, unless someone uses one of these expressions to describe their own experience, stay away from phrases like "born in the wrong body," or "was born a man/woman."

A good guideline is to not ask trans people questions you wouldn't feel comfortable asking cis people. For instance, never ask questions about someone's body, genitals or medical history. (If they want to disclose, they will.)

“Essentially, don't ask trans people questions you wouldn't feel comfortable asking cis people.”



Don't use the terms on the left. Do use the terms on the right.

No	Yes
sex change	transition-related surgeries, gender-affirming surgeries or gender-confirming surgeries (use plural where possible)
transgenderist	a trans person
transgenderism	a trans person
transgendered	a trans person
transvestite	a trans person or a person who cross dresses (depends on how the person identifies)
“a transgender” or “a trans” as a noun	use “trans” as an adjective, to describe something about someone
“is transgenering”	use “a person is transitioning”
tranny	never use this word
pre-op/post-op	do not use these terms unless someone uses these terms to describe their own experience
she-male	never use this word
MTF	trans woman
FTM	trans man
biologically male or female	if this information is specifically relevant to the story, use “sex assigned at birth”
SRS (sex-reassignment surgery) or “sex-change surgery”	use “transition-related surgeries” or gender-affirming or gender-confirming surgeries.

For punctuation, be careful about misuse of quotation marks, italicization, parentheses or other qualifying punctuation—they could undermine the identity of the people involved. For example, it's correct to say: Lisa Smith, but incorrect to say: “Lisa” Smith or to say that a trans woman is a “woman.”

You might not have known that some language is considered both offensive and inaccurate, but now you do. Remember to always refer back to Guiding Principle #1: reflect the language that people use to talk about their own lived experiences.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the work and contributions of the many trans and gender-diverse community members who contributed their time and knowledge by participating in focus groups and editing the guide.

We welcome any feedback you may have on this guide: info@rainbowhealthontario.ca



References

1. GLAAD. (August 2014). GLAAD media reference guide. http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD%20MRG_9th.pdf
2. Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2014) Policy on preventing discrimination because of gender identity and gender expression. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-because-gender-identity-and-gender-expression>
3. The 519 - Glossary of Terms. <http://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary>
4. Trans Pride Canada. Media Reference Guide - Best Practices. <http://www.citr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/Trans-Style-Guide.pdf>

2nd edition, February 1, 2018

Language changes frequently—this is a working document. For a full glossary of terms and the most up to date version of this guide, please visit The 519 or Rainbow Health Ontario's websites.



For more resources:

The519.org/education-training

RainbowHealthOntario.ca/resources