WRITING ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUALITY

As our language evolves alongside our understanding of gender and sexuality, it is important for writers to make informed choices about their language and to take responsibility for those choices. Accurate terminology and phrasing are important in writing about people respectfully and in crafting effective arguments that your audience can trust. This handout includes writing practices and language tips to help writers discuss various identities respectfully and without perpetuating stereotypes.

The following resources explain important terms you might use when discussing gender and/or sexuality:

- GLAAD Media Reference Guide: GLAAD Media Reference Guide - 10th Edition
- National Center for Transgender Equality: Understanding Transgender People: The Basics
- Grammarly: 33 LGBTQIA+ Terms You Should Know
- APA Style: Gender - APA Style

Best Practices

Know the difference between "sex" and "gender"

"Sex" and "gender" are not synonyms! "Sex" refers to the classification of a person as male, female, or intersex based on biological characteristics. "Gender" refers to a range of social and cultural identities characterized by varying expressions of masculinity and femininity. These differences impact the language you should use. For example, use "women" instead of "females" when referring to the social group, as the word "females" does not include all women.

Use gender-neutral terms to reference general categories of people

Some terms, like "fireman" or "stewardess," are unnecessarily gendered, exclusive, and stereotypical. Additionally, terms that assume masculinity as the default, such as "mankind," reinforce problematic hierarchies of gender. Replace terms like these with non-gendered alternatives, such as "humankind" instead of "mankind," "firefighter" instead of "fireman," and "flight attendant" instead of "stewardess."[1]

Only note gender or sexuality when necessary and relevant

Mentioning someone's gender or sexuality when it is not relevant is reductive and distracting. Make sure you indicate gender or sexuality only when discussing that particular identity. For example, only use "women firefighters" if you are specifically discussing women in that profession.

Don't use adjectives as nouns

Using adjectives as nouns is not only grammatically incorrect, it is often demeaning to the people you are describing. For example, use "transgender people" or "gay people," not "transgenders" or "gays."

Avoid language that implies a gender binary

Discussing gender as a binary of men and women is both inaccurate and exclusive. Replace this with inclusive language. For example:

- Say "all genders" instead of "both genders" when applicable.
- Use "another gender" or "another sex" instead of "opposite sex."
- Use gender-neutral pronouns instead of "he or she" or variations such as "s/he."

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[1] Hamilton, Mykol, Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne. "Womanspeak and Manspeak: Sex Differences and Sexism in Communication, Verbal and Nonverbal." *Beyond Sex Roles* edition 2, Alice G. Sargent (ed.) New York: West Publishing Company, 1984. Pages 168-185.

Using Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Singular pronouns: When to use "they/them/theirs"
To reference a specific individual, always use their identified pronouns. Formal styles of academic writing widely support the use of "they/them/theirs" to refer to non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals.

To reference a generic or hypothetical person, "they" is widely used informally but is not encouraged in formal writing. For example, using the sentence **"The participant followed their instructions."** to refer to a generic participant can be confusing, as your reader might think you are referring to a specific individual. To maintain inclusivity and gender neutrality without using "they/them/theirs" as generic singular pronouns, try the following strategies from the APA[2]:

- Rephrase to eliminate gender pronouns: "The participant followed <u>the provided</u> instructions."
- Use plural nouns with plural pronouns: "<u>Participants</u> followed <u>their</u> instructions."
- Replace a possessive pronoun with an article: "The participant followed <u>the</u> instructions."
- Omit the pronoun: "The participant <u>followed instructions</u>."

For further reading on the grammar of the "singular they," see the following resources:

- APA Style: <u>The Use of Singular "They" in APA Style</u>
- Grammarly: <u>Singular They: Why to Use They as a Singular Pronoun</u>

Pronoun use to avoid
Although the following options for generic singular pronouns were used in the past, they are currently not encouraged in formal writing, as they can be confusing, misleading, and inaccurate:

- Use of "he/him/his" as the default generic pronoun
- Alternating use of "he/him/his" and "she/her/hers" pronouns
- Use of "s/he," "(s)he," or other variations

Writing about Transgender People
When writing about transgender people, use the following tips to guide you:

- Use the individual's current name and pronouns at all times, even when referring to their past, when they may have gone by a different name or pronoun. For example, if you are writing about a transgender woman named Jane, you might write "Before her transition, Jane felt…".
- Use the phrase "transgender woman" or "transgender man" if you must indicate that they are transgender. Do not use language that refers to the individual as anything other than their identified gender.
- Use "transgender" instead of "transsexual" unless the individual identifies with that term, as "transgender" is more inclusive.

Writing about LGBTQ+ People
Be careful of the language you use to discuss LGBTQ+ people, as it may be linked to misleading, harmful, and homophobic rhetoric. Use the following tips to guide you:

- Use "sexual orientation," not "sexual preference."
- Use "identified pronouns" or simply "pronouns," not "preferred pronouns."
- Use "identities," not "lifestyles."
- Use "gay" or "lesbian" instead of "homosexual," which has derogative connotations.
- Use umbrella terms like "the LGBTQ+ community" instead of "sexual minorities."

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[2] American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Gender*. American Psychological Association. https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/gender.

Umbrella Terms

Use the standard umbrella terms of LGBT, LGBTQ+, and LGBTQIA+, as well as phrases like "the LGBTQ+ community," when you cannot be more specific about the group of people you are referring to. Remember that the experiences and identities of people in the LGBTQ+ community vary widely, so work to avoid over-generalizing.

The term "queer" can apply to individuals and also can be used as an umbrella term (i.e. "the queer community"). Although many LGBTQ+ people have reclaimed it, the word has been used as a derogatory slur in the past and should be used with caution. Only use "queer" when referring to disciplines like "queer studies" and to groups or individuals who self-identify with this term, or if you identify with it yourself.

Writing with Outdated/Problematic Sources

When working with outdated sources, consider paraphrasing quotes or acknowledging that the authors' language reflects the terminology of their time. Note that this does not apply to intentionally harmful and derogatory language, no matter how commonly it was used at the time.

When analyzing or referencing a source that uses harmful language (slurs, violent rhetoric, etc.), either:
- Explain that the author or character uses harmful language without stating it verbatim. For example: "The author uses a homophobic slur when discussing [context of the quote], indicating that [analysis]."
- Acknowledge its offensive nature in your analysis if you must quote the harmful language verbatim.

Do not change the quote or omit harmful language without acknowledging it. If you must use outdated and problematic sources, it is best to acknowledge any harmful language or rhetoric and discuss how it impacts the use and meaning of the text in your analysis.

Note that if you do need to use dated terminology to discuss the subjects in a historical context, continue to use contemporary language in your own discussion and analysis.

If you are still unsure of what language to use, consult your professor, classmates, Writing Center tutors, or current academic readings in the discipline for more guidance.

As we have noted, language is complex and constantly evolving. We will update this resource to reflect changes in language use and guidelines. We also welcome suggestions for revisions to this handout. Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or suggestions.