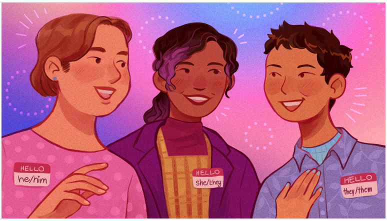
free 5G
phones
With 24 monthly bill credits when you add a qualifying line. For well-qualified customers; plus tax & $35 device connection charge req'd.
Get yours now
Contact us before cancelling entire account to continue remaining bill credits, or credits stop & balance on required finance agreement is due (e.g., $299.99 – moto g stylus 5G 3rd Gen). alifying credit & service ($60+/mo. plan w/AutoPay + taxes & s) req'd. Bill credits end if you pay off device early. See details.
Sponsor Message
Become an NPR sponsor

SPECIAL SERIES
Pride Month

A Guide To Gender Identity Terms

JUNE 2, 2021 · 6:01 AM ET

Laurel Wamsley



"Pronouns are basically how we identify ourselves apart from our name. It's how someone refers to you in conversation," says Mary Emily O'Hara, a communications officer at GLAAD. "And when you're speaking to people, it's a really simple way to affirm their identity."
Kaz Fantone for NPR

Issues of equality and acceptance of transgender and nonbinary people — along with challenges to their rights — have become a major topic in the headlines. These issues can involve words and ideas and identities that are new to some.

That's why we've put together a glossary of terms relating to gender identity. Our goal is to help people communicate accurately and respectfully with one another.

Proper use of gender identity terms, including pronouns, is a crucial way to signal courtesy and acceptance. Alex Schmider, associate director of transgender representation at GLAAD, compares using someone's correct pronouns to pronouncing their name correctly – "a way of respecting them and referring to them in a way that's consistent and true to who they are."

Sponsor Message

Glossary of gender identity terms

This guide was created with help from GLAAD. We also referenced resources from the National Center for Transgender Equality, the Trans Journalists Association, NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, Human Rights Campaign, InterAct and the American Psychological Association. This guide is not exhaustive, and is Western and U.S.-centric. Other cultures may use different labels and have other conceptions of gender.

One thing to note: Language changes. Some of the terms now in common usage are different from those used in the past to describe similar ideas, identities and experiences. Some people may continue to use terms that are less commonly used now to describe themselves, and some people may use different terms entirely. What's important is recognizing and respecting people as individuals.

Jump to a term: Sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, agender, gender-expansive, gender transition, gender dysphoria, sexual orientation, intersex

Jump to Pronouns**: questions and answers**

Sex refers to a person's biological status and is typically assigned at birth, usually on the basis of external anatomy. Sex is typically categorized as male, female or intersex.

Gender is often defined as a social construct of norms, behaviors and roles that varies between societies and over time. Gender is often categorized as male, female or nonbinary.

Gender identity is one's own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not outwardly visible to others.

For most people, gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth, the American Psychological Association notes. For transgender people, gender identity differs in varying degrees from the sex assigned at birth.

Gender expression is how a person presents gender outwardly, through behavior, clothing, voice or other perceived characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine or feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Cisgender, or simply **cis,** is an adjective that describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender, or simply **trans,** is an adjective used to describe someone whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. A transgender man, for example, is someone who was listed as female at birth but whose gender identity is male.

Cisgender and transgender have their origins in Latin-derived prefixes of "cis" and "trans" — cis, meaning "on this side of" and trans, meaning "across from" or "on the other side of." Both adjectives are used to describe experiences of someone's gender identity.

Nonbinary is a term that can be used by people who do not describe themselves or their genders as fitting into the categories of man or woman. A range of terms are used to refer to these experiences; nonbinary and genderqueer are among the terms that are sometimes used.

Agender is an adjective that can describe a person who does not identify as any gender.

Gender-expansive is an adjective that can describe someone with a more flexible gender identity than might be associated with a typical gender binary.

Gender transition is a process a person may take to bring themselves and/or their bodies into alignment with their gender identity. It's not just one step. Transitioning can include any, none or all of the following: telling one's friends, family and co-workers; changing one's name and pronouns; updating legal documents; medical interventions such as hormone therapy; or surgical intervention, often called gender confirmation surgery.

Gender dysphoria refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity. Not all trans people experience dysphoria, and those who do may experience it at varying levels of intensity.

Gender dysphoria is a diagnosis listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Some argue that such a diagnosis inappropriately pathologizes gender incongruence, while others contend that a diagnosis makes it easier for transgender people to access necessary medical treatment.

Sexual orientation refers to the enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or other genders, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and straight orientations.

People don't need to have had specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation. They need not have had any sexual experience at all. They need not be in a relationship, dating or partnered with anyone for their sexual orientation to be validated. For example, if a bisexual woman is partnered with a man, that does not mean she is not still bisexual.

Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity. As GLAAD notes, "Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. For example, a person who transitions from male to female and is attracted solely to men would typically identify as a straight woman. A person who transitions from female to male and is attracted solely to men would typically identify as a gay man."

Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe people with differences in reproductive anatomy, chromosomes or hormones that don't fit typical definitions of male and female.

Intersex can refer to a number of natural variations, some of them laid out by InterAct. Being intersex is not the same as being nonbinary or transgender, which are terms typically related to gender identity.

THE PICTURE SHOW
Nonbinary Photographer Documents Gender Dysphoria Through A Queer Lens

Pronouns: questions and answers

What is the role of pronouns in acknowledging someone's gender identity?

Everyone has pronouns that are used when referring to them – and getting those pronouns right is not exclusively a transgender issue.

"Pronouns are basically how we identify ourselves apart from our name. It's how someone refers to you in conversation," says Mary Emily O'Hara, a communications officer at GLAAD. "And when you're speaking to people, it's a really simple way to affirm their identity."

"So, for example, using the correct pronouns for trans and nonbinary youth is a way to let them know that you see them, you affirm them, you accept them and to let them know that they're loved during a time when they're really being targeted by so many discriminatory anti-trans state laws and policies," O'Hara says.

"It's really just about letting someone know that you accept their identity. And it's as simple as that."

What's the right way to find out a person's pronouns?

Start by giving your own – for example, "My pronouns are she/her."

"If I was introducing myself to someone, I would say, 'I'm Rodrigo. I use him pronouns. What about you?' " says Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, deputy executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality.

O'Hara says, "It may feel awkward at first, but eventually it just becomes another one of those get-to-know-you questions."

Getting the words right is about respect and accuracy, says Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, deputy executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality.
Kaz Fantone for NPR

Should people be asking everyone their pronouns? Or does it depend on the setting?

Knowing each other's pronouns helps you be sure you have accurate information about another person.

How a person appears in terms of gender expression "doesn't indicate anything about what their gender identity is," GLAAD's Schmider says. By sharing pronouns, "you're going to get to know someone a little better."

And while it can be awkward at first, it can quickly become routine.

Heng-Lehtinen notes that the practice of stating one's pronouns at the bottom of an email or during introductions at a meeting can also relieve some headaches for people whose first names are less common or gender ambiguous.

"Sometimes Americans look at a name and are like, 'I have no idea if I'm supposed to say he or she for this name' — not because the person's trans, but just because the name is of a culture that you don't recognize and you genuinely do not know. So having the pronouns listed saves everyone the headache," Heng-Lehtinen says. "It can be really, really quick once you make a habit of it. And I think it saves a lot of embarrassment for everybody."

Might some people be uncomfortable sharing their pronouns in a public setting?

Schmider says for cisgender people, sharing their pronouns is generally pretty easy – so long as they recognize that they have pronouns and know what they are. For others, it could be more difficult to share their pronouns in places where they don't know people.

But there are still benefits in sharing pronouns, he says. "It's an indication that they understand that gender expression does not equal gender identity, that you're not judging people just based on the way they look and making assumptions about their gender beyond what you actually know about them."

How is "they" used as a singular pronoun?

"They" is already commonly used as a singular pronoun when we are talking about someone, and we don't know who they are, O'Hara notes. Using they/them pronouns for someone you do know simply represents "just a little bit of a switch."

"You're just asking someone to not act as if they don't know you, but to remove gendered language from their vocabulary when they're talking about you," O'Hara says.

"I identify as nonbinary myself and I appear feminine. People often assume that my pronouns are she/her. So they will use those. And I'll just gently correct them and say, hey, you know what, my pronouns are they/them just FYI, for future reference or something like that," they say.

O'Hara says their family and friends still struggle with getting the pronouns right — and sometimes O'Hara struggles to remember others' pronouns, too.

"In my community, in the queer community, with a lot of trans and nonbinary people, we all frequently remind each other or remind ourselves. It's a sort of constant mindfulness where you are always catching up a little bit," they say.

"You might know someone for 10 years, and then they let you know their pronouns have changed. It's going to take you a little while to adjust, and that's fine. It's OK to make those mistakes and correct yourself, and it's OK to gently correct someone else."

What if I make a mistake and misgender someone, or use the wrong words?

Simply apologize and move on.

"I think it's perfectly natural to not know the right words to use at first. We're only human. It takes any of us some time to get to know a new concept," Heng-Lehtinen says. "The important thing is to just be interested in continuing to learn. So if you mess up some language, you just say, 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' correct yourself and move forward. No need to make it any more complicated than that. Doing that really simple gesture of apologizing quickly and moving on shows the other person that you care. And that makes a really big difference."

Why are pronouns typically given in the format "she/her" or "they/them" rather than just "she" or "they"?

The different iterations reflect that pronouns change based on how they're used in a sentence. And the "he/him" format is actually shorter than the previously common "he/him/his" format.

"People used to say all three and then it got down to two," Heng-Lehtinen laughs. He says staff at his organization was recently wondering if the custom will eventually shorten to just one pronoun. "There's no real rule about it. It's absolutely just been habit," he says.

But he notes a benefit of using he/him and she/her: He and she rhyme. "If somebody just says he or she, I could very easily mishear that and then still get it wrong."

NATIONAL

Amid Wave Of Anti-Trans Bills, Trans Reporters Say 'Telling Our Own Stories' Is Vital

What does it mean if a person uses the pronouns "he/they" or "she/they"?

"That means that the person uses both pronouns, and you can alternate between those when referring to them. So either pronoun would be fine — and ideally mix it up, use both. It just means that they use both pronouns that they're listing," Heng-Lehtinen says.

Schmider says it depends on the person: "For some people, they don't mind those pronouns being interchanged for them. And for some people, they are using one specific pronoun in one context and another set of pronouns in another, dependent on maybe safety or comfortability."

The best approach, Schmider says, is to listen to how people refer to themselves.

Why might someone's name be different than what's listed on their ID?

Heng-Lehtinen notes that there's a perception when a person comes out as transgender, they change their name and that's that. But the reality is a lot more complicated and expensive when it comes to updating your name on government documents.

"It is not the same process as changing your last name when you get married. There is bizarrely a separate set of rules for when you are changing your name in marriage versus changing your name for any other reason. And it's more difficult in the latter," he says.

"When you're transgender, you might not be able to update all of your government IDs, even though you want to," he says. "I've been out for over a decade. I still have not been able to update all of my documents because the policies are so onerous. I've been able to update my driver's license, Social Security card and passport, but I cannot update my birth certificate."

"Just because a transgender person doesn't have their authentic name on their ID doesn't mean it's not the name that they really use every day," he advises. "So just be mindful to refer to people by the name they *really* use regardless of their driver's license."

NPR's Danielle Nett contributed to this report.

pronouns transgender gender identity

The news you need to start your day

Our journalists summarize the biggest stories in the Up First newsletter so you can stay informed, not overwhelmed.

Email address SUBSCRIBE

See more subscription options

By subscribing, you acknowledge and agree to NPR's Terms of Use and Privacy Policy.
NPR may share your name and email address with your NPR station. See Details.

More Stories From NPR

WORLD CAFE
World Cafe celebrates Pride Month

PRIDE MONTH
Target scales back on its LGBTQ+ merchandise ahead of Pride Month 2024

PRIDE MONTH
In a new video, Dylan Mulvaney says Bud Light never reached out to her amid backlash

PRIDE MONTH

How the Bud Light boycott shows brands at a crossroads: Use their voice, or shut up?

PRIDE MONTH

How companies can build trust with the LGBTQ+ community — during Pride and beyond

PRIDE MONTH

LGBTQ+ creatives rely on Pride Month income. This year, they're feeling the pinch

Popular on NPR.org

POLITICS

How DOGE may have improperly used Social Security data to push voter fraud narratives

BUSINESS

Why some are accusing Trump of manipulating stock markets

POLITICS

What to know about Dan Caine, the nation's newly-confirmed top military adviser

ELECTIONS

The House has passed the Trump-backed SAVE Act. Here are 8 things to know

CULTURE

Worried artists reached out to Kennedy Center president Richard Grenell. His responses didn't help

ASIA

Beijing slaps 125% tariffs on U.S. goods in latest U.S.-China trade escalation

NPR Editors' Picks

MOVIE REVIEWS

'Warfare' embeds the audience in the chaos of modern combat

LIFE KIT

How to get what you want without using cash (you read that right)

BUSINESS

Will tariffs drive more people to shop secondhand? It's a mixed bag, experts say

ASIA

Chai Jing: China's Lesley Stahl returns to spotlight on YouTube

NATIONAL

The controversial and obscure law being used against immigrant student protestors

SCIENCE

Lightning strikes usually kill trees. This one just grows stronger

© 2025 npr