



BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVING LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

[A Learning for Justice Guide](#)

THE ACRONYM AND BEYOND: A Glossary of Terms

From the outside looking in, the ABCs of LGBTQ+ identities can feel overwhelming, academic and inaccessible. But for students deprived of representation, words matter— and can open a door toward realization. To hear yourself or see yourself described for the first time can be transformational, especially if you’ve been conditioned to see yourself as abnormal. A definition can point to a community. And a community can make a kid feel less alone.

Today’s youth, more than ever, have a large vocabulary with which they can articulate their gender expression, gender identities and sexual orientations. That vocabulary can make some feel uncomfortable. These terms often force us to confront our biases or assumptions. They ask us to consider the complexity of gender and attraction. But an understanding of these words opens a door for an educator to become an ally to LGBTQ+ students—capable of facilitating conversation, and more importantly, capable of listening.

Words to Avoid	Preferred Term
Homosexual	Gay or Lesbian
Straight	Heterosexual
Sexual Preference	Sexual Orientation
Pronoun Preference	Pronoun
Choice	Orientation and/or Identity
Transvestite/Tranny	Transgender or Transgender person

Affirmed gender (noun): The gender by which one wishes to be known.

Agender (adj.): Describes a person who does not identify with any gender identity.

Ally (noun): A person who does not identify as LGBTQ+, but stands with and advocates for LGBTQ+ people.

Androgynous (adj.), Androgyne (noun): Used to describe someone who identifies or presents as neither distinguishably masculine or feminine.

Asexual (adj.): Used to describe people who do not experience sexual attraction or do not have a desire for sex . Many experience romantic or emotional attractions across the entire spectrum

of sexual orientations. Asexuality differs from celibacy, which refers to abstaining from sex. Also ace, or ace community.

Assigned sex (noun): The sex that is assigned to an infant at birth based on the child's visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics. Often corresponds with a child's assigned gender and assumed gender.

Binary system (noun): Something that contains two opposing parts; binary systems are often assumed despite the existence of a spectrum of possibilities. Gender (man/ woman) and sex (male/female) are examples of binary systems often perpetuated by our culture.

Biological sex (noun): A medical classification that refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic or physical attributes that determine if a person is assigned male, female or intersex identity at birth. Biological sex is often confused or interchanged with the term "gender," which encompasses personal identity and social factors, and is not necessarily determined by biological sex.

Bisexual, Bi (adj.): A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Cisgender (adj.): Describes a person whose gender identity (defined below) aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Cissexism (noun): A system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people whose gender and/or gender expression falls outside of normative social constructs. This system is founded on the belief that there are, and should be, only two genders— usually tied to assigned sex.

Demisexual (adj.): Used to describe someone who feels sexual attraction only to people with whom they have an emotional bond—often considered to be on the asexual spectrum.

Gay (adj.): Used to describe people (often, but not exclusively, men) whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex or gender identity.

Gender (noun): A set of social, physical, psychological and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as feminine, masculine, androgynous or other. Words and qualities ascribed to these traits vary across cultures.

Gender dysphoria (noun): Clinically significant distress caused when a person's assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify.

****Gender expression** (noun): **External appearance** of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being masculine or feminine.

Gender-fluid (adj.): A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender and whose identification and presentation may shift, whether within or outside of the male/female binary.

****Gender identity** (noun): One's innermost **feeling** of maleness, femaleness, a blend of both or neither. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

Gender neutral (adj.): Not gendered, usually operating outside the male/female binary. Can refer to language (e.g., pronouns), spaces (e.g., bathrooms) or identities.

Gender nonconforming (adj.): A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category. Also, gender expansive.

Genderqueer (adj.): Describes a person who rejects static categories of gender (i.e. the gender binary of male/female) and whose gender expression or identity falls outside of the dominant social norms of their assigned sex. They may identify as having aspects of both male and female identities, or neither.

Gender roles (noun): The social behaviors and expression that a culture expects from people based on their assigned sex (e.g., girls wear pink; boys don't cry; women care for home and child; men are more violent), despite a spectrum of various other possibilities.

Heteronormativity (noun): Coined by social critic Michael Warner, the term refers to a societal assumption of certain norms: 1) that there are two distinct sexes; 2) that male and female functions and characteristics are distinctly different; and 3) that traits such as attraction and sexual behavior correspond to anatomy. Those who do not fit these norms—be it through same-sex attraction, a non-binary gender identity or nontraditional gender expression—are therefore seen as abnormal, and often marginalized or pressured to conform to norms as a result.

Heterosexism (noun): The assumption that sexuality between people of different sexes is normal, standard, superior or universal while other sexual orientations are substandard, inferior, abnormal, marginal or invalid.

Heterosexual (adj.): Used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex.

Heterosexual/cisgender privilege (noun): Refers to societal advantages that heterosexual people and cisgender people have solely because of their dominant identities. This can include things as simple as safely holding hands with a romantic partner in public or having safe access to public bathrooms.

Homophobia (noun): A fear or hostility toward lesbian, gay and/or bisexual people, often expressed as discrimination, harassment and violence.

Intersex (adj.): An umbrella term describing people born with reproductive or sexual anatomy and/or a chromosome pattern that can't be classified as typically male or female.

Lesbian (adj.): Used to describe a woman whose enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction is to other women.

LGBTQ+ (noun): An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.” Less often, the Q stands for “questioning.” Acronyms like LGBTQIA also include the intersex and asexual communities, while acronyms like LGBTQ attempt to envelop an entire community of people who hold identities that are not cisgender or heterosexual.

Misgender (verb): To refer to someone in a way that does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify, such as refusing to use a person’s pronouns or name.

Nonbinary (adj.): An umbrella term that refers to individuals who identify as neither man or woman, or as a combination of man or woman. Instead, nonbinary people exhibit a boundless range of identities that can exist beyond a spectrum between male and female.

Outing (verb): The inappropriate act of publicly declaring (sometimes based on rumor and/or speculation) or revealing another person’s sexual orientation or gender identity without that person’s consent.

Pansexual (adj.): Used to describe people who have the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Pronouns (adj.): The pronoun or set of pronouns that an individual personally uses and would like others to use when talking to or about that individual. Can include variations of he/him/his, she/ her/hers, they/their/theirs, among others.

Queer (adj.): Once a pejorative term, a term reclaimed and used by some within academic circles and the LGBTQ community to describe sexual orientations and gender identities that are not exclusively heterosexual or cisgender.

Questioning (adj.): A term used to describe people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

****Sexual orientation** (noun): An inherent or immutable emotional, romantic or sexual **attraction** to other people; oftentimes used to signify the gender identity (or identities) to which a person is most attracted.

Third gender (noun): A gender identity that is neither male nor female, existing outside the idea that gender represents a linear spectrum between the two. Sometimes a catchall term or category in societies, states or countries that legally recognize genders other than male and female.

Transgender (adj.): An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Not all trans people undergo transition. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or something else. Also, trans.

Transitioning (verb): A process during which some people strive to more closely align their gender identity with their gender expression.

Transphobia (noun): The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, transgender people. This may manifest into transphobic actions, such as violence, harassment, misrepresentation or exclusion.

Transsexual (adj.): A less frequently used term (considered by some to be outdated or offensive) which refers to people who use medical interventions such as hormone therapy, gender-affirming surgery (GAS) or sex reassignment surgery (SRS) as part of the process of expressing their gender. Some people who identify as transsexual do not identify as transgender and vice versa. Only use this term if someone who specifically identifies as such asks you to.

Two Spirit (adj.): An umbrella term in Native culture to describe people who have both a male and female spirit within them. This encompasses many tribe-specific names, roles and traditions, such as the winkte of the Lakota and nadleeh of the Navajo people. This term often describes Native people who performed roles and gender expression associated with both men and women. This term should be used only in the context of Native culture.

SPEAK UP AGAINST BULLYING, HOMOPHOBIA, TRANSPHOBIA AND HARASSMENT.

One of the most effective things you can do is respond directly to homophobic or transphobic behavior. This includes remarking on the use of slurs and other phrases, such as “That’s so gay.”

Here are four approaches you can use:

1. **Interrupt.** Speak up against biased remarks, every time, without exception.
2. **Question.** Ask simple questions to learn why the comment was made and how it can be addressed.
3. **Educate.** Explain why a word or phrase is hurtful or offensive and encourage the speaker to choose different language. Help students differentiate between intent and impact.
4. **Echo.** While one person’s voice is powerful, a collection of voices incites change.

Respond to biased or homophobic behavior as if there is an LGBTQ+ student in the room at all times. After all, educators can never fully grasp the extent to which students are listening or how deeply they are affected by harmful words.

CLASSROOM CULTURE: Creating an Inclusive Environment With Words

- BE WILLING TO LEARN ESSENTIAL TERMS
- MODEL INCLUSIVE PRONOUN USE
 - Use the singular “they.”
 - Decentralize cisgender identity by stating your own pronouns.
 - Conduct pronoun check-ins.
 - Begin the year with a student survey that asks students about pronoun use in different situations.
 - If you misgender a student
 - Apologize briefly, correct yourself and move on.
 - Do not over-apologize.
 - Correct in the moment.
 - Model the correct pronoun afterwards.
 - Address it directly
- CHALLENGE GENDER NORMS THROUGH CLASSROOM PRACTICES
 - Conduct a visual audit of your classroom to examine your wall posters and other visible materials. Do they represent individuals with diverse gender expressions?
 - Refer to a group of kids as students, scholars, class, friends, everybody or y’all. Avoid the binary term “boys and girls.”
 - Do not separate students according to gender.
 - In casual conversations with students, don’t make assumptions based on gender such as, “boys will be boys” or “girls love to gossip.”
 - Encourage all students to try different types of activities. Do not ask for a group of “strong boys” to help carry furniture or “artistic girls” to decorate a bulletin board.