

THE RADICAL COPYEDITOR'S STYLE GUIDE FOR WRITING ABOUT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Introduction (Read This First)

A style guide for writing about transgender people is practically an oxymoron. Style guides are designed to create absolutes—bringing rules and order to a meandering and contradictory patchwork quilt of a language. Yet there are no absolutes when it comes to gender. That's why this is a radical copyeditor's style guide. [Radical copyediting](#) isn't about absolutes; it's about context and care.

There are profound reasons for why the language that trans people use to describe ourselves and our communities changes and evolves so quickly. In Western culture, non-trans people have for centuries created the language that describes us, and this language has long labeled us as deviant, criminal, pathological, unwell, and/or unreal.

As trans people have fought for survival, we have also fought for the right to describe ourselves in our own language and to reject language that criminalizes, pathologizes, or invisibilizes us. Just as there is no monolithic transgender community, there is also no one "correct" way to speak or write about trans people.

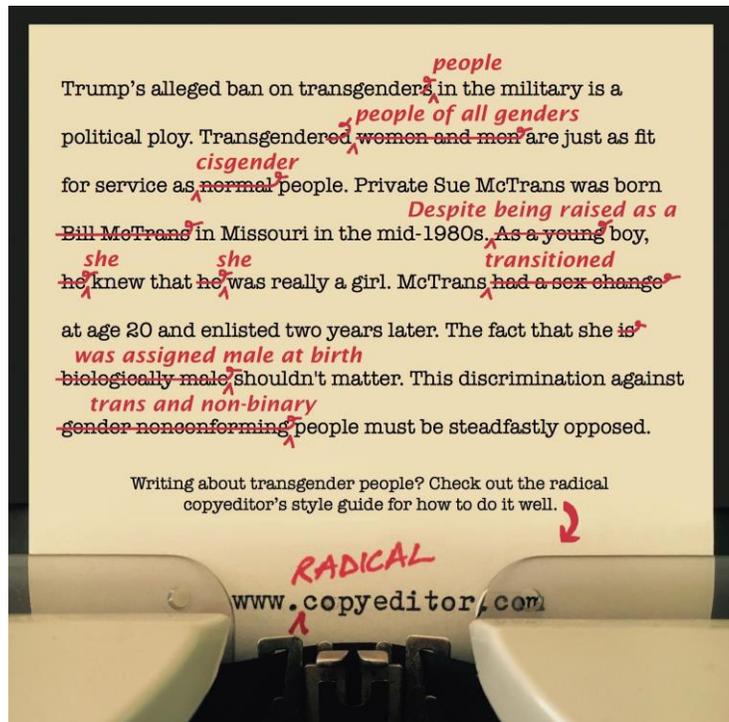
How to use this guide:

1. Treat it as general guidance, not concrete rules.
2. Focus on how to practice care toward people whose experience of gender is different from yours.
3. Consider context. Language choices depend on context: medical environments versus online dating, young children versus elders, USA versus Australia, and so on. Recognize, in particular, that the language used within trans cultural contexts can be far more nuanced than the language outsiders use to describe trans people and trans experiences.

How not to use this guide:

1. Do not use this guide to harshly police or shame others' language choices.
2. Do not use this guide to tell trans people that they are using incorrect language, regardless of whether you yourself are trans or not. A general best practice should never supersede a trans person's right to use whatever language feels best to them.
3. Do not care more about words than you do about people.

The purpose of this style guide is to help people of all gender identities and experiences practice more care toward those on the margins. Trans people must be understood as the authorities on ourselves and the language used to describe us. Not only does this mean that cisgender (non-trans) people need to practice



humility and care toward trans people, but it also means that trans people—particularly those with educational, financial, and/or racial privilege—need to practice humility and care toward other trans people—particularly those who are folks of color, low-income, less educated, and/or elders.

If you are trans, I highly recommend inoculating yourself against the temptation to police other trans people’s language by reading “[words don’t kill people, people kill words](#)” and the glossary introduction “[there is no perfect word](#),” both by Julia Serano, as well as “[I Was Recently Informed I’m Not a Transsexual](#),” by Riki Wilchins.

Note: Like all style guides, what follows is about language usage, not definitions; for a comprehensive glossary of transgender-related terminology, check out [this one](#) from Julia Serano.

Also note: This guide was written in a U.S. context. Although the general guidance in it is broadly applicable, the specifics may differ in other countries.

Transgender Style Guide

Section 1. Correct/current usage of transgender-related language

1.1. **Transgender** is an adjective.

Use: *transgender people; a transgender person*

Avoid: *transgendersons; transgendered*

1.2. **Transgender** is not a sexual orientation.

Correct terms in a trans context: *gender; gender identity and expression*

Incorrect terms in a trans context: *sexual identity; sexuality*

Avoid: *Are you straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (pick one)?*

1.3. **Transition** is the correct word for the social and/or medical process of publicly living into one’s true gender.

Use: *Chris transitioned at age 32; the transition process*

Avoid: *Chris is transgendering; Chris had a sex change; Chris had “the surgery”; Chris became a woman*

1.4. **Transgender** does not refer only to binary-identified trans women and men. Many trans people (35%) are non-binary.*

Use: *transgender people; people of all genders*

Avoid (in reference to all trans people): *transgender women and men*

In popular culture, *transgender* is often exclusively used to refer to binary-identified trans women and men (those who were assigned male at birth and identify as female, or vice versa). Yet *transgender* refers to all those whose gender identities do not align, according to societal expectations, with their birth-assigned sex. This includes non-binary people—those who do not identify (exclusively or at all) as women or men.

Out of respect for the fact that the word *transgender* is so often used in ways that (incorrectly) do not include non-binary people, many people say *trans and non-binary people* when referring to all those whose gender identities are different than what might be expected based on their birth-assigned sex. But because this phrasing reinforces the idea that trans does not inherently include non-binary people, clarifying options include "binary and non-binary trans people"; "trans people, binary and non-binary alike"; "trans women, trans men, and non-binary people"; and "people who are trans and/or non-binary." See also 1.6 regarding *trans* as a description, not an identity.

→ Does *trans* have a different meaning from *transgender*? In brief, yes and no. In most formal writing, *trans* is considered simply an abbreviation of *transgender*, but in trans communities, *trans* has been increasingly taking on a unique meaning for many people, one that is more inclusive of all those whose gender identities differ from their birth-assigned sex. The variants *trans** and *trans+* have also been used to serve this purpose. [Trans*](#) came about in the 1990s and had a huge but relatively brief spurt of popularity in the early 2010s. *Trans+* is a more recent variant that plays on the trend of adding a plus sign to terms like LGBTQ to denote greater inclusion.

In an international context, according to UK-based [oatc](#): "*trans* is equally used as an abbreviation of *transsexual*, *transgressive*, *transexuale*, *transexuelle*, *travestie*, etc., and to encompass all those, and the thousands of other, equally valid, and often much valued, terms used across the world's cultures, where *transgender* can sometimes be a culturally imperialist term."

1.5. The terms *gender nonconforming* and *non-binary* are not synonyms.

Gender nonconforming refers to a person whose gender expression (by way of dress, mannerisms, roles, career, and/or lots of other things) does not conform to stereotypical gender expectations for someone of their gender. Examples of gender nonconforming people might include masculine women, feminine men, women pilots, male ballet dancers, and young girls with short hair.

Non-binary, or *gender non-binary*, refers to a person whose internal sense of self is not exclusively woman/female or man/male. Some non-binary people identify as both woman and man (e.g., bigender people), some identify as a different gender entirely (e.g., genderqueer people), and some do not identify with any gender (e.g., agender people).

Many people are non-binary in terms of identity and also gender nonconforming in terms of expression, but plenty of other people are only one or the other. It's important not to use these terms interchangeably.

→ A note on *gender variant*, *gender expansive*, *gender creative*, *gender diverse*, *gender fabulous*, etc.: Many terms have sprung up over the years to refer to the full spectrum of those who are gender nonconforming and/or non-binary. Best practices include avoiding terms that carry a negative connotation (e.g., *gender deviant*) and avoiding using terms inaccurately (e.g., *diverse* doesn't mean "different from the norm," it just means "varied," so *gender diverse* should refer to a group of folks with varied genders, not a single person or a group of people whose gender is different from the norm).

1.6. Transgender is a descriptive term, not (usually) a gender and not always an identity.

Use: *transgender people; transgender history or identity*

Avoid: *people who identify as transgender; man, woman, or transgender (pick one)*

Transgender means having a gender identity that does not align, according to societal expectations, with one's birth-assigned sex. *Cisgender* means having a gender identity that does align with one's birth-assigned sex. Just as *cisgender* is a descriptive term, not a gender itself, so too is *transgender* a descriptive term. Some genders include woman, man, genderqueer, two spirit, agender, and bigender, for example. *Transgender* is not, for the vast majority of people, a gender, and while some people identify as trans, or as trans women or trans men, others do not consider being trans a part of their identity, and identify solely as genderqueer, or women, or men, for example. Some people describe themselves as a "woman of transsexual experience" or a "man with a history of gender transition," as additional examples.

Section 2. Bias-free and respectful language in reference to transgender people

2.1. Avoid language that reduces people to their birth-assigned sex or their (assumed) biology.

Use: *assigned female at birth; assigned male at birth*

Avoid: *born a woman; born a man; biologically female; biologically male; genetically female; genetically male; pre-op; post-op*

2.2. Avoid treating transgender people as though we have "a condition."

Use: *Monique is transgender; being transgender is not a crime*

Use: *gender dysphoria*

Avoid: *Monique has transgenderism; transsexualism/transsexuality is a sin*

Avoid: *gender disordered; gender identity disorder (outdated)*

Note that throughout history, in order to gain access to medical interventions such as gender-affirming hormones and surgery, many trans people have been forced to prove they have a psychiatric and/or medical condition that requires treatment, which has often meant using the language of the medical field regardless of whether that language feels authentic. Language around diagnoses, pathologization, and access to health care is [complex and differs](#) from country to country.

2.3. Avoid language that puts more value on being or appearing cisgender (not trans), or that carries judgments or biases around how public a person is about being trans.

Use: *openly transgender; not openly transgender*

Avoid: *passes; stealth; you'd never be able to tell*

Although some trans people use the terms *stealth* and *passing*, it's not appropriate for non-trans people to use this language unless they are explicitly asked to by a trans person. As Janet Mock has [eloquently spoken to](#), terms like these imply that trans people who are perceived as cisgender (or not trans) are engaging in deception simply by being themselves. See also 2.10.

→ A note on *out* and *closeted*: *Coming out* is the process of becoming aware of your authentic identity and/or sharing that identity with others. A trans man who has transitioned is fully *out* as a man; whether or not he chooses to share his gender history with others is irrelevant. Being *closeted* means denying one's identity to oneself and/or others, but if one's identity is *man* and one is living life fully as a man, one is *out*. When a person shares that they have a history of gender transition, that is a *disclosure*, not an act of coming out.

2.4. Names, pronouns, and prefixes

2.4.1. Always use a person's correct name, pronouns (or lack thereof), and prefix (if any).

Always.

Use: Avery dyed zir hair; Lynn loves their grandson; Monica is her own best advocate; Marcus drove gher car with care; Xander tied hir shoes; Sam ate Sam's lunch at Sam's apartment

The first and foremost way to respect and honor a trans person's personhood is to respect the language they use to refer to themselves. Trans people have been forced to forge new paths in language in order to carve out space for our very existence. Because there are more than two, three, four, or five genders in the world, there are more than two, three, four, or five pronouns, and all are equally valid—including some people's choice to be referred to using no pronouns at all.

2.4.2. Using a trans person's birth name or former pronouns without permission (even when talking about them in the past) is a form of violence.

Use: Bridget knew from the age of 3 that she was a girl.

Avoid: At the age of 3, Bob announced that he was a girl. After transitioning, Bob—now Bridget—threw out her old clothes.

Some trans people do use a different name and/or pronouns to talk about themselves prior to transition, but this is rare. Unless you are told differently, only use a person's true/current name and pronouns, even when writing about them in the past.

2.4.3. Pronouns are simply pronouns. They aren't "preferred" and they aren't inherently tied to gender identity or biology.

Use: pronouns; personal pronouns; she/her/hers; he/him/his; they/them/theirs; ze/zir/zirs; Sam/Sam/Sam (and any other pronoun or combination)

Avoid: preferred pronouns; masculine pronouns; feminine pronouns; male pronouns; female pronouns

As J. Mase III once [succinctly put it](#), "my pronouns aren't preferred; they're required." A person's correct pronouns are not a preference; neither are pronouns inherently masculine, feminine, male, or female: for example, a masculine person could use she/her/hers pronouns and a female person could use they/them/theirs pronouns.

2.4.4. Respect singular *they* as a personal pronoun and use it appropriately.

Use: *Elizabeth loves their cat; they are a big cat lover; they did something nice for themselves yesterday*

They/them/theirs has shot up in popularity in recent years as a personal pronoun for non-binary people. Despite what your third-grade English teacher might have told you, there is nothing incorrect about using *they* singularly. In fact, *they* is taking off in a way that *ze* or *per* or *co* or any of the hundreds of other invented pronouns never did precisely because of its existing “off-label” use as a singular pronoun (see 3.1).

All major U.S. style guides and many dictionaries have now endorsed or mandated this use. Such dictionaries include [Merriam-Webster](#), the [Oxford English Dictionary](#), and the [American Heritage Dictionary](#); the American Dialect Society voted singular *they* [2015 word of the year](#); and Merriam-Webster crowned it its top [2019 word of the year](#). In spring 2017 both [AP Style](#) and [Chicago Style](#) got on board, and, in the most exciting development yet, [APA Style](#) announced in October 2019 that the 7th edition of its manual more than allows singular *they*—it requires it, in both personal and generic contexts (see 3.1).

When using singular *they*, verb conjugations follow the same rules as those for singular *you*: *they did, they are, themselves | you did, you are, yourself*.

Note that although many non-binary people go by *they/them/theirs*, many others go by different pronouns (see 2.4.1). If a non-binary person goes by *ze/zir/zirs*, for example, referring to *zir* using *they/them/theirs* is still an act of mispronouncing. Note that binary people’s potential discomfort with new word usage must not take priority over the pain and trauma non-binary people experience when we are mispronounced and/or misgendered. See [Grammarly](#) for more.

2.5. Respect the diversity of language that people use to describe themselves.

It is a human tendency to try to make sense of the world by categorizing things, including people—but gender, in its true diversity, defies categorization. Biology is incredibly varied, and the meaning we draw from it is even more so. As noted in the introduction to this guide, trans people must be understood as the ultimate authorities on ourselves and the language used to describe us, even when doing so goes against things like style guides (this one or any other). Something as seemingly small as the difference between *trans man* and *transman* can have enormous significance to a person.

2.6. Practice particular sensitivity around culture-specific language related to gender identity and expression.

Gender is culturally constructed, which means that there isn’t a set, finite number of gendered experiences that transcend language; rather, cultural context is everything when it comes to gender. For example, *Two Spirit* is a beautifully complex term that doesn’t entirely translate outside of North American Indigenous cultures; just as terms like *hijra*, *māhū*, *fa’afafine*, and many others aren’t fully translatable outside their cultural contexts. Similarly, terms like *stud* and *aggressive* are terms that are specific to [Black](#) culture.

Historical context is also important. For example, it's undeniable that Joan of Arc did not conform to the gender norms of her day, but describing her as *transgender* isn't accurate, because today's cultural understanding of what *transgender* means can't be applied to people from a different era without knowing how they understood themselves in their own context.

2.7. Practice particular sensitivity around bodies and anatomy.

Avoid: *female-bodied*; *male-bodied*

Some trans people refer to themselves as being female-bodied or male-bodied, but this is never appropriate language for cisgender people to use. Trans folks employ all sorts of wonderfully creative language to refer to our body parts, and it is important that others—particularly our loved ones and medical providers—respect and mirror the language we use to describe our anatomy.

This isn't just about respect. For people with gender dysphoria, referring to our anatomy—particularly reproductive anatomy—using language that we don't associate ourselves with can be deeply triggering and traumatic.

So, when referring to trans people, if you are someone (like a medical provider) who needs to refer to our anatomy, use generic and broad terminology (e.g., *genitals*, *reproductive organs*, and *chest*) instead of gender-loaded words (e.g., *vagina*, *penis*, and *breasts*). See 3.4 for more on sensitivity around anatomy-related language, and if you are a medical provider, check out [these ten tips](#) and [standards of care](#) from RAD Remedy.

2.8. Affirm that trans women are women, trans men are men, and non-binary people are non-binary.

Use: *all women, including trans women*; *cis and trans men*; *cisgender people*

Use: *Maria, a woman from Nogales*; *non-binary students*; *Zed is an agender young adult*

Avoid: *women and trans women*; *normal people*; *real men*; *biological women*

Avoid: *Nogales resident Maria, who identifies as a woman*; *students who consider themselves "non-binary"*; *Zed identifies as agender*

A consistent way that trans people's identities are invalidated is when trans women and men are treated separately, linguistically, than

The Radical Copyeditor's Style Guide for Writing About Transgender People

2.8-2.11: Avoiding invalidating language traps

Invalidating language	Validating language
Women and trans women	Cis and trans women
Students who consider themselves "non-binary"	Non-binary students
Zed, who identifies as agender	Zed is agender
Her secret was exposed	Her history was publicized
Closeted	Private
Stealth	Nondisclosure
Passes	
An out trans man	Openly trans
	Public

Read the whole guide →

www.radicalcopyeditor.com

cisgender women and men and when language is used to describe trans people's genders, names, or pronouns that undermines them or calls them into question. Ashley Dejean's article "[How Journalists Fail Trans People](#)" powerfully speaks to this.

As an example, a cis woman would never be described with the language "Mary Beth identifies as a woman" (one would just say "Mary Beth is a woman"), so using this language for a trans woman marks her as different and undermines her gender. Another example of invalidating language treatment is the use of "scare quotes" to set off the words trans folks use to describe ourselves.

2.9. Don't sensationalize or nonconsensually disclose a trans person's gender history.

For the majority of modern history, mainstream forces have treated (and written about) trans and gender nonconforming people as freakish, deviant, mentally unwell, and criminal. The media has been the primary source of sensationalizing and nonconsensually disclosed information about us. This context is vitally important.

Many trans people simply want to be able to live their lives as men, women, or non-binary people. If a person's gender history isn't relevant, don't mention it (unless they want you to). And never disclose details related to a trans person's gender history (such as their birth name or the sex they were assigned at birth) without consent. Doing so is at best gossip and at worse violence, and communicates that the person isn't really who they are presenting themselves as today.

2.10. Never use language that paints trans people as deceptive for living as our authentic selves.

Avoid: her secret was discovered; he disguised himself as a woman; she fooled everyone; no one knew the truth; the lie was exposed

Not only is there a long and storied history of trans people being perceived as deceitful simply for living our lives and being ourselves, but the choice to not disclose details of one's past or anatomy has been used as justification for brutality toward and murder of trans folks (see: the infamous "[trans panic](#)" defense), so it is extra important to avoid any language that gives the impression that a trans person who chooses to keep details of their gender history private is lying, deceptive, or false, as Gwendolyn Ann Smith has [powerfully written about](#).

Instead of secret or truth, try history or past. Instead of closeted or disguised, try private or nondisclosure. See also 2.3. regarding passing and stealth, as well as the note that follows about out and closeted.

2.11. Don't perpetuate or validate trans-exclusionary hate or prejudice.

This should go without saying, but just in case it's not clear, there aren't two balanced sides to the story of whether or not trans people have the right to exist in public, in the words of [Laverne Cox](#). Anyone writing about trans people has a moral obligation to do no harm, and this includes not perpetuating or validating perspectives that are harmful to trans people. For example, in discussing anti-trans legislation, writers often repeat prejudiced language (such as "bathroom bill") or try to present "both sides" in ways that ultimately lend credence to hate, intolerance, or ignorance. Don't do this. Trans lives and dignity are not up for debate.

→ A note on “TERF”: *TERF* stands for “[trans-exclusionary radical feminist](#)” and refers to people (most of whom are older, white, cis women) who believe that trans women are actually men. I personally don’t like referring to such folks as radical feminists because to me the brand of gender essentialism and violence they represent is antithetical to radical feminism, but it is vital to name them as anti-trans or trans-exclusionary. They refer to themselves as “gender critical” feminists, which is a harmful euphemism that should only be used in quotes.

Section 3. Sensitive and inclusive broader language

3.1. Recognize that there are more than two genders. Use “singular they” in a generic sense and avoid the language of gender opposites.

Use: Honor each person’s truth about their identity; each student must complete their homework; everyone; people of all genders; siblings; kindred

Avoid: Honor each person’s truth about his or her identity; each student must complete his/her/their homework; men and women; the opposite sex; both genders; brothers and sisters

Using *they/them/theirs* to refer to a person whose gender is unknown has a long and fairly consistent history in the English language, and [many different people](#) have documented how using *they* in both singular and plural fashion is grammatically correct, just as *you* can be used in both singular and plural fashion. Doing so is an essential way to create linguistic space for the existence of non-binary people. (For a fascinating take on the evolution of *you* and its roots in class hierarchy, check out “[How Using ‘They’ as a Singular Pronoun Can Change the World](#)” by Davey Shlasko.)

Major dictionaries now explicitly recognize this use, including [Merriam-Webster](#), and the 7th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2020) now [mandates using they](#) when referring to a generic individual person. APA Style no longer allows the use of constructions such as “he or she” in such instances. Furthermore, the constructions “he/she/they” and “his/her/their” don’t make sense because (a) not all non-binary people use *they* as a personal pronoun (see 2.4.4) and (b) it’s completely unnecessary—just use “they” or “their” instead.

3.2. Do not use *LGBTQ* or its many variants (*LGBT*, *LGBTQIA+*, etc.) as a synonym for *gay*.

Use: LGBTQ people versus non-LGBTQ people

Avoid: LGBTQ people versus straight people

If you’re using an acronym that includes trans people, it’s important to actually include trans people in the context of what you are writing about. For example, if you’re only writing about people in same-sex relationships, or if you’re trying to refer to everyone with a marginalized sexuality, don’t use *LGBTQ*. Some trans people (15%) identify as straight.* *LGBTQ* and *straight/heterosexual* are not, therefore, opposites, and should never be treated as such.

3.3. Recognize *queer* as a valid sexual orientation.

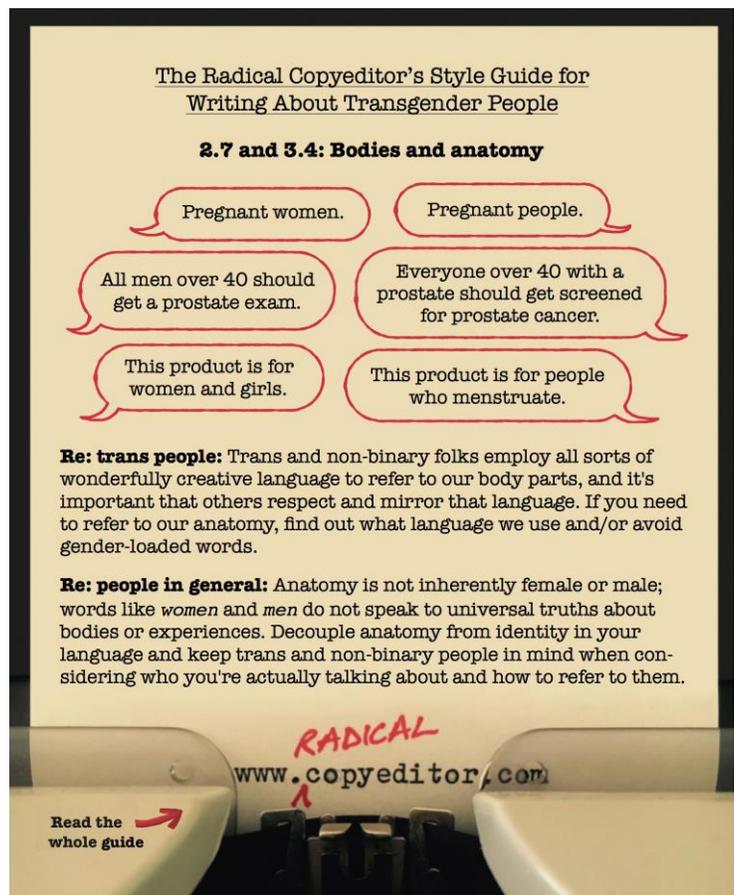
More trans people identify as queer (21%) than any other sexual orientation.* Although mainstream style guides and dictionaries have refused to recognize the evolution of this word, writing

sensitively about trans people requires honoring the language we use to describe not only our genders but also our sexualities. *Queer* is a complex word with many different definitions, and in the context of trans communities, it must be recognized as a valid identity term.

3.4. Decouple anatomy from identity.

Contrary to popular belief, anatomy is not inherently female or male. First of all, intersex people exist, and the Intersex Society of North America once estimated that as many as 1 in 100 bodies differ biologically from what is considered standard for females and males. Second, because of the existence of trans people, there are plenty of men who can get pregnant and women who need prostate exams (as two examples).

What this means is that words like *women* and *men* do not speak to universal truths about bodies or experiences. Using *women* as shorthand for all people who can menstruate or get pregnant, or *MSM* (“men who have sex with men”) as a population at risk for many sexually transmitted infections, as two examples, is neither fully accurate nor inclusive of trans people.



When language inextricably links anatomy and identity, it does harm to those whose anatomy doesn't align with norms and assumptions. In the examples above, promoting prenatal care exclusively to women keeps pregnant men and non-binary people from accessing care, and lumping trans women into the “MSM” category (and keeping trans men out of it) creates a barrier for vital trans-inclusive HIV research, prevention, and services.

Being mindful about not linking identity and anatomy doesn't mean stripping identity from our language entirely. It just means keeping trans people (binary and non-binary) in mind when considering who you are actually talking about and how to refer to them. Context is everything, and determines whether you should say *trans and cis women*, *women and trans people*, or *pregnant people*, for example.

3.5. Embrace the fact that language can evolve quickly.

The language of gender identity and expression is evolving at lightning speed. This can easily feel overwhelming to some people and results in every sort of reaction, from knuckling down and resisting language changes to throwing up one's hands in despair to becoming judgmental or dismissive of new (or old) words and the people who use them.

There's another way. Choose to celebrate this rapid evolution of language because of what it means: that people who have been marginalized for centuries are finding ways of reclaiming agency and legitimacy; that those of us who have been written out of existence are finding ways to rewrite reality to make room for our true selves. The purpose of language is to communicate, not to regulate.

A final note

A style guide can never serve as a replacement for being in relationship with the real people you are writing about. If you are writing about trans people—whether you yourself are trans or not—always do so from a place of relationship. Don't assume; ask. Always bring in additional trans perspectives on what you've written—across lines of gender, age, race, class, ability, and sexuality. Never fall for the trap of thinking that a single trans person can represent or speak for the breathtaking diversity of all of those who are encompassed by the word *transgender*. If you do nothing else, this one thing will always steer you right.

Zr. Alex Kapitan is the founder of Radical Copyeditor (www.radicalcopyeditor.com), a project to illuminate the intersections between social justice and language and help people use words in ways that align with their values. Alex is a queer and trans editor, copyeditor, consultant, educator, organizer, and anti-oppression activist who regularly serves as a workshop facilitator and speaker on topics including radical inclusion, intersectional social justice, and gender and sexuality diversity 101.

Want more resources? Check out GLAAD's [transgender media reference guide](#), written specifically for journalists. Journalists can also read "[Covering the Transgender Community](#)" by Sara Morrison to learn what it takes to do it well. And as before, if you're looking for a comprehensive glossary of transgender-related terminology, check out [this one](#) from Julia Serano.

*** Note:** Data from [The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey](#) (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016).

**** Last updated January 31, 2020.** Grateful thanks to all those who have offered edits and additions to this style guide, including Teo Drake, Danni Green, Lex Townsend, Lyndon Cudlitz, [oatc](#), and [The Heathen Urge](#). For the most up-to-date version of this guide, visit <https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2017/08/31/transgender-style-guide>.