



Sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual identity are actually different, but are often conflated or used interchangeably. Terminology is also quickly changing and students are coming into our classrooms today with new definitions and more exposure to concepts than just a few years ago. Here is a quick guide to understanding some of the key terms used by gender scholars, drawing on a large body of evidence from an interdisciplinary research literature. These concepts are sometimes abbreviated as SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression).

### Understanding Sex

**Sex** refers to physical attributes; it is determined by a combination of X and Y chromosomes, hormones (estrogen/progesterone and testosterone), and internal and external genitalia.

**Sex Assigned at Birth (AFAB/AMAB)** is what we were labeled (male or female) at birth; this label is typically based on the appearance of our external genitalia. You may see the acronyms AFAB for Assigned Female at Birth, and AMAB for Assigned Male at Birth.

**Intersex** refers to individuals whose sex cannot be classified as clearly male or female; this may be due to atypical combinations of X and Y chromosomes, insensitivity to certain hormones, or atypical formation of the genitalia; in the case of chromosomal or hormonal anomalies, individuals may not be recognized as intersex until later in life when atypical sex development occurs.

### Understanding Gender & Gender Identity

**Gender** refers to a culturally and often historically specific understanding of what it means to be masculine or feminine; this understanding is used to construct and reinforce expectations about how individuals should appear and behave. Thus we say that gender is a “cultural construct” or “socially constructed.”

**Gender Binary** refers to the socially accepted belief that everyone should be either masculine or feminine, that these two genders are clearly distinct, and that these two genders are the only options. A gender binary is culturally constructed (not biologically fixed) and not universal: for example, some cultures include a “Third Gender.”

**Gender Roles** are a set of social expectations about which clothing, mannerisms, hair styles, behaviors, interests, personal characteristics, career choices, etc. are appropriate for a person based on their sex assigned at birth.

**Gender Expression (or Presentation)** refers to the many ways that we consciously and unconsciously exhibit gender through our clothing, voice, hair styles, body language, and behavior.

**Gender Identity** refers to what we label ourselves in order to acknowledge and reflect our core sense of our gender. Some scholars call the deep, internal sense of being a particular gender our gender orientation. Gender identity and orientation this may or may not correspond to our sex assigned at birth.

**Gender Attribution (or Assumption)** refers to the process by which an observer “reads” another person’s gender expression and assumes their gender, or “classifies” that person as masculine or feminine, based on a perception of how their gender expression corresponds to a culturally specific understanding of what it means to be masculine or feminine; since gender expression can be conscious or unconscious, an observer can “attribute” a gender to us that we aren’t intentionally expressing.

**Gender Pronouns** are the pronouns individuals use to refer to themselves. In the English language, cis-gender women are generally accustomed to using she/her/hers; cis-gender men are generally accustomed to using he/him/his. Some people do not identify with a gender binary and prefer to use the plural pronouns they/them/theirs, or the increasingly popular invented terms “Ze” and “Zir” (pronounced Zee/Zeer) or the variant “Ze” and “Hir” (pronounced Heer). Relatedly, some people use “Mx” (pronounced Mix) in place of “Mr” or “Ms” on signature lines.

**Transgender** or **Trans** refers to individuals whose gender expression, gender identity, or gender orientation differs significantly from what is expected based on their sex assigned at birth; this umbrella term refers to a wide range of gender identities, but people must self-identify as transgender in order for the term to be appropriately used to describe them. The correct designation is transgender (not “transgendered”). Note that a trans person does not need to change their body, or intend to change their body, chemically or surgically, in order to identify as trans.

**Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Variant, or Non-Binary** refer to individuals whose gender expression does not conform in some way to society’s traditional binary of gender role expectations; this can be a reflection of an individual’s conscious choice to dress or behave in a way that challenges gender role expectations, or it can be a reflection of others’ perceptions that the individual’s dress or behavior conflicts with gender role expectations.

**Cisgender** (pronounced “sis-gender”), or Cis, refers to individuals whose physical body and internal sense of gender orientation correspond (and have always corresponded) to their sex assigned at birth; this term does political work by acknowledging that others may not experience such a correspondence between their physical body, gender orientation, and sex assigned at birth and calling attention to what is perceived as normative in our culture.

**Agender** people, also called genderless, genderfree, non-gendered, or ungendered people are those who identify as having no gender or being without any gender identity. This category includes a very broad range of identities that do not conform to traditional gender norms.

**Androgyne** is a non-binary gender identity associated with androgyny. Androgynes have a gender that is simultaneously feminine and masculine, although not necessarily in equal amounts.

**Demigender** is a gender identity that involves feeling a partial, but not a full, connection to a particular gender identity. Demigender people often identify as non-binary. Examples of demigender identities include demigirl, and demiboy, and demiandrogyne.

**Genderqueer** or **gender fluid** people do not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identify with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders.

**Femme** is a gender identity used by people identifying as queer, or somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum, who express traditional feminine characteristics. Because the descriptor is a reclamation of the word “feminine” that purposefully subverts stereotypes, femme-

identifying people often present an exaggerated version of femininity. The term is queer-coded for many who use it, making a feminine-presenting body visible as queer, and does political work by rejecting the idea that sexual identities must present in certain ways (such as butch or dyke lesbians).

**Latinx** is an increasingly common term used instead of the gendered Spanish terms Latina and Latino. Pronounced “lateen-ex,” it is meant to be gender inclusive and signal a rejection of the gender binary.

### Understanding Sexual Identity

**Sexual Behavior** refers to the sexual acts we engage in and with whom we engage in those acts.

**Sexual Identity** refers to what we label ourselves as in order to acknowledge and reflect our core sense of our sexual orientation. Some scholars use orientation to refer to the deep, internal sense of who we are attracted to or “oriented” to in terms of our emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions.

**Gay** refers to men who are emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to other men. “Gay” used to be an umbrella term that referred to all people, regardless of sex, who are attracted to people of the same sex. However, the more inclusive term used now is LGBTQ (see below).

**Lesbian** refers to women who are emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to women.

**Bisexual** refers to individuals who are emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to both men and women. Because the term reinforces a gender binary, it is less common today, though is still in use.

**Pansexual** refers to individuals whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are not oriented towards individuals of any particular sex, gender expression, or gender identity; in other words, pansexuals can be attracted to individuals of any sex or gender.

**Asexual** refers to individuals who do not experience sexual attraction but who may or may not experience emotional and/or romantic attraction.

**Queer** is a term that can be used in many ways: 1) it is often used to refer to individuals who have a fluid sense of their sexual identity and do not wish to be confined by more narrow labels such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual”; 2) it can be used by individuals as a way of labeling themselves as non-heterosexual without having to state whom they are attracted to; 3) it is often used as an umbrella term to refer to individuals whose sexual behavior, sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender orientation does not conform to social expectations; 4) it can be used to describe a political stance that anyone can adopt as a way of calling attention to their rejection of heteronormativity and the gender binary; 5) “queer” was historically used as a derogatory adjective for gays and lesbians, but in the 1980s activists began re-appropriating the word as a term of self-identification; though the term is becoming widely used, some people—both those who are and those who are not members of the LGBTQ community—still find the term offensive regardless of who uses it or how they use it.

**Questioning** refers to individuals who are uncertain of their sexual orientation; it can also refer to individuals who are uncertain of their gender orientation.

**LGBTQ / LGBTQIA+** is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual or Agender; it is used inclusively to refer to all people whose sexual behavior, sexual orientation, sexual identity, gender expression, gender orientation, or gender identity does not conform to social expectations. This acronym is represented in a variety of ways and many individuals, groups, and organizations also include other letters in the acronym in an attempt to be more inclusive; thus, you might see another Q for Questioning, another A for Ally, a P for Pansexual, etc. Note that that acronym combines both gender and sexual identities.

**Homosexual** refers to individuals who are emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to others of the same sex; this term is often avoided by people who self-identify as LGBTQ because of its historical use within the field of psychology as a diagnosis of mental disorder.

## Gender Identity in the Classroom and Beyond

Here are some quick tips for educators seeking to create a welcoming and inclusive climate in their classrooms, across campus, and beyond for people of all gender and sexual identities.

**1. Allow people to self-identify:** The #1 rule is to use the terms that people choose for themselves and don't assume that you know a person's gender identity or sexual identity.

- Rather than calling roll from a roster, go around the room and let students tell you their name and gender pronouns; or call roll using last names, and ask students to tell you their chosen name and pronouns.
- Allow guest speakers to self-identify and use their chosen names and pronouns.
- Take time at campus events to have participants introduce themselves using their gender pronouns.

**2. Commit to learning:** Many of these terms are fairly new and definitions are constantly changing (we learn new things all the time and update this sheet every year). Rather than worrying about "getting it right," focus on a commitment to continuous learning; try your best to use these terms, and be OK with apologizing when you make a mistake. (Pro tip: when you acknowledge your error, avoid "over-apologizing" which can force

the other person to comfort you, and shifts the dialogue to your emotional needs, away from the person who was mis-identified.) By emphasizing that we are all lifelong learners, you create a welcoming and open educational climate where people are allowed to make mistakes, and learn from them.

**3. Model inclusion:** If you are comfortable, use your gender pronouns in your email signature file and on your syllabi; include them on your name-tag and conference badges.

**4. Rethink the form:** Increasingly, students identify outside the gender binary, but do not have the ability to indicate their identity on institutional documents. As a result, they may not feel welcomed or included, and institutions remain unaware of the presence and needs of all of their students. First ask yourself if you really need to know a student's gender before creating a form or survey. If you do ask for "gender," consider using a prompt such as "Gender identity" followed by an open text field or line allowing students to self-identify using the term(s) they prefer. If you must legally ask "sex: female or male," you might also include a second question about "gender identity". (Listing "other" as a third option forces people to literally identify themselves as an "other" and can contribute to an unwelcoming culture.)

*These terms and tips were updated and adapted by Jessie B. Ramey, Ph.D. from: SafePlace, Michigan Technical University, and CampusPride.org*