

# **LGBTQIA+ REPORTING AND PORTRAYING SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY AND INTERSEX STATUS IN ABC CONTENT**

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## **The purpose of this note**

The ABC has a responsibility to provide fair and informed reporting on all aspects of Australian life, and that includes the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people and communities. One of the hallmarks of good reporting and storytelling is the accurate use of language, and we are aware of many content makers, including some who are themselves members of LGBTQIA+ communities, who are looking for guidance on the best terminology to use in their work.

This note provides information on some of the most common acronyms and terms, and links to more detailed material and resources from external organisations.

The other purpose of this note is to reinforce pertinent aspects of the ABC Editorial Policies and best editorial practice.

## **Broad editorial considerations**

It is important to remember that you should only apply labels to people when it is relevant and in the public interest. Ask yourself if a person's sexuality, gender identity or intersex status really matters to the story being told (and maybe test your assumptions by considering how likely it is that you would choose to mention that anyone was heterosexual).

Avoid salacious or overly prominent references to diverse sexuality or gender identity, especially in headlines or social media posts.

A rule of thumb is to describe people as they wish to be described, unless you have good reason to do otherwise.

Where possible, you should ask your talent about their preferences. You should also be wary of clichés and applying them to people without thinking. 'Openly gay' is a good example. It's often used to describe public figures such as politicians, especially if they're working in a previously conservative field. But many gay and lesbian people today feel it locks them into a narrative where their sexuality will forever be the most noteworthy thing about them. Others feel it shames those who wish to remain more private. Unless it really is the central point of your story, it's time to leave that one alone.

As with all other subject areas, be particularly thoughtful when your reporting or storytelling involves children and young people.

Consider whether the material in your story might distress some in the audience, and whether helpline advice should be included.

Finally, we know that there are many people in the community who hold strong views against homosexuality for religious and cultural reasons. There is also a wide spectrum of feeling about transgender issues. Where these views are newsworthy and of public interest, we will of course report on it and include it in other ways in our

content. But it is our responsibility to everyone to understand the issues thoroughly, to be clear on our editorial purpose and be careful to avoid causing unnecessary harm or offence.

## Language and terminology

Acronyms can be useful if applied thoughtfully but can also become a careless shorthand if automatically included in all stories referencing sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status. A gay man, for example, may prefer to be described as exactly that, especially if the story is confined to his unique experience. Or a person with intersex variations is not necessarily LGBT. Think about your specific story before deciding which term to use. While these acronyms bring many people together, it is still important to acknowledge differences by using plural terms such as communities (as in the LGBTQIA+ communities).

The [ABC Style Guide](#) notes that there are several terms that exist to describe a range of different sexualities, genders and identities. These include: LGBTI, which includes intersex people, and LGBTQI, which includes those who identify as queer.

The +, which is becoming more commonly used, acknowledges that gender and sexuality is a spectrum and that people might use other words to describe their identity (like non-binary, gender fluid, asexual, pansexual, etc).

If you're just talking about sexuality and gender diverse people, you don't need the 'I'.

When we talk about gender, sex characteristics or sexuality, we're **not talking about preferences or choices**. We're just talking about how people are.

Use inclusive language wherever possible. For example, in some contexts gender-neutral terms like 'partner' or 'spouse' may be more inclusive than 'husband' or 'wife'.

When discussing marriage or romantic attraction, it isn't necessary to qualify unions as "same-sex marriage", "gay marriage" or "same-sex attracted". For instance, when you write about two women who are wed, you could simply say "Sarah and Anna were married in July".

Similarly, do you really need to further qualify **adoption** or **parenthood** — e.g., "gay adoption", "adoption by the same-sex couple" or "gay parents" — when simply "adoption", "adopting parents" or "adoptive parents" would suffice?

Respect and use **people's pronouns**. Some non-binary, gender-fluid or genderqueer people use gender-neutral pronouns, using terms such as "they", "them", "theirs". This is perfectly fine and should not be changed in copy, nor should these be referred to as "preferred pronouns", which suggests their choice is less than valid or can be overlooked. Always ask a person what pronouns you should use to describe them.

## Sex and gender

In this context, sex is used to refer to a person's biological sex characteristics. This has historically been understood as either female or male. Sex and gender are associated, but not the same nor interchangeable.

A person's **gender** does not necessarily mean they have particular sex characteristics or a particular sexual orientation, or vice versa. Use the term(s) that the person uses to describe their gender.

In the past, Australian society has prioritised binary gender descriptions, which left a growing number of people outside the male/female dichotomy. That is changing, and fast, so it is wise to be respectful of **alternative gender descriptions**.

**Gender dysphoria** is a recognised medical condition in which a person's sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity or expression. This can be addressed and treated during transition, but transgender people may experience this in different ways throughout their whole lives.

**Gender expression** is how a person presents themselves to the outside world, and how that links to the way they experience their own gender.

**Gender fluid** describes a person who has shifting or changing gender. It is one of the terms under the umbrella term non-binary.

**Non-binary** is an adjective used by people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the binary gender categories of "man" and "woman". Many non-binary people also call themselves transgender and consider themselves part of the transgender community. Others do not. Check how the person sees themselves.

**Gender nonconforming** is broader than non-binary. It means a person's gender expression doesn't correspond to their biological sex. They may still identify as a woman, but may dress only in men's clothes, for example, or they may present in a way that doesn't align with society's idea of male or female.

When someone is **cisgender**, their experienced gender aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth (based on their sex organs and chromosomes).

## **Intersex**

Intersex is an umbrella term referring to anatomical, chromosomal and hormonal characteristics that differ from conventional understandings of male and female.

The act of **misgendering** is when someone, deliberately or accidentally, refers to a person by the wrong gender (e.g., calling someone by the gender they were assigned at birth and not the one they currently identify as).

**Transgender** people are those whose assigned sex at birth does not match their gender identity. They may choose to live their lives with or without modifying their body, dress or legal status, and with or without medical treatment and surgery. Transgender people may use a variety of terms to describe themselves including (but not limited to): man, woman, trans woman, trans man, non-binary, agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, trans guy, trans masculine/masc, trans feminine/femme. Which is why it is important to ask and to respect their choice.

The ABC Style Guide advises that the terms brotherboy and sistergirl are used in a range of contexts by Indigenous people, but most often to refer to transgender Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

For a transgender person, **transition or gender affirmation** is a process, and it differs from person to person. It may start and end with "coming out" as a new gender or it could mean a life of gender-affirming hormone replacement therapy and surgery. Remember that "coming out" is a unique process for every LGBTQIA+ person and there are no specific steps to follow to have transitioned.

**Transphobia/transphobic** — negative beliefs, words, stereotypes, fears, bullying, abuse, prejudice, discrimination or violence toward transgender people. Similarly: homophobia, biphobia.

## **Other terms to understand**

The Style Guide also provides this advice on **‘transitioning’** which is worth including here: Gender transition The process of transitioning gender is different for each individual. It may involve medical, social, or legal procedures (such as surgery, coming out to family, a name change), or it may not. Not all medical treatment for gender transition involves surgery. Consultation and hormone therapy are part of gender transition treatment.

The Style Guide recommends that you avoid placing undue emphasis on the role of surgery in the gender transition process, but if it is relevant to your story, the terms sex reassignment surgery, and gender confirmation surgery are preferable to sex change or sex change operation.

**‘Deadnaming’**, which is the use of a person’s previous name. Some transgender people are comfortable with this; many are not. You may need to decide in some situations whether this is editorially necessary or not.

An **ally** is someone who supports the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community.

## **Sexual orientation**

Sexuality or sexual orientation describes a person’s romantic and/or sexual attraction to others.

A **heterosexual** person is attracted to people of the opposite sex or gender.

A **homosexual** person is attracted to people of the same sex or gender.

A **lesbian** woman is romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women. A gay person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of the same sex and/or gender as themselves. This term is most often used to describe men who are attracted to other men, but some women and gender diverse people may also describe themselves as gay.

**Gay** should be used as an adjective but not as a noun (as in a ‘gay man’ should never be described as ‘a gay’. This rule generally applies to most of the terms in this section).

A **bisexual** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people both of their own and of the opposite sex or gender.

A **pansexual** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people regardless of their sex or gender identity.

**Asexuality** sits on a spectrum, with some never experiencing sexual attraction, others only after many months or years of knowing someone. Some willingly engage in sexual activity, even if it doesn't interest them, others may not.

**Queer** is often used as an umbrella term for diverse genders or sexualities. Some people use queer to describe their own gender and/or sexuality if other terms do not fit. For some people, especially older LGBT people, 'queer' has negative connotations, because in the past it was used as a highly derogatory term.

## **Resources**

*This very comprehensive glossary of terms has been compiled by the Australian Institute of Family Studies: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/lgbtiq-communities>*

*The Australian Press Council released these reporting guidelines in late 2019: <https://www.presscouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/APC-Advisory-Guideline-2019-final.pdf>*

*This style guide is from the US: <https://www.glaad.org/reference>*

*This one is from the Victorian government: <https://www.vic.gov.au/inclusive-languageguide>*

LGBTQIA glossary: Common gender and sexuality terms explained  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-07/sexuality-gender-glossary-definitions/7287572>

A language guide from ACON.  
[https://www.acon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/TGD\\_Language-Guide.pdf](https://www.acon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/TGD_Language-Guide.pdf)

Minus18 guide  
<https://www.minus18.org.au/articles/your-guide-to-words-and-definitions-in-the-lgbtqia+-community>