

national lesbian & gay journalists association

style

*stylebook supplement on lesbian, gay,
bisexual & transgender terminology*

book



The National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA) is an organization of journalists, media professionals, educators and students who work within the news industry to foster fair and accurate coverage of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. NLGJA opposes all forms of workplace bias and provides professional development to its members.

Since its founding in 1990, NLGJA has grown to a 600-member, 17-chapter organization in the United States.

NLGJA's Stylebook Supplement on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Terminology is intended to complement the prose stylebooks of individual publications, as well as the Associated Press stylebook, the leading stylebook in U.S. newsrooms.

It reflects the association's mission of inclusive coverage of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, includes entries on words and phrases that have become common, and features greater detail for earlier entries.

The Stylebook will be continually updated and the latest version will always be available at www.nlgja.org.



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ACT UP: The acronym for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, an activist organization with independent chapters in various cities. ACT UP is acceptable in first reference with the full name in a subsequent reference. See **AIDS**.

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a medical condition that compromises the human immune system, leaving the body defenseless against opportunistic infections. Some medical treatments can slow the rate at which the immune system is weakened. Do not use the term “full-blown AIDS.” Individuals may be HIV-positive but not have AIDS. Avoid terms such as “AIDS sufferer” and “AIDS victim” because they imply powerlessness. Use “people with AIDS” or, if the context is medical, “AIDS patients.” See **HIV**.

biphobia: Fear, hatred or dislike of bisexuality or bisexuals. May be harbored by lesbians, gays and transgender people in addition to heterosexuals. See **bisexual**.

bisexual: As a noun, an individual attracted to both sexes. As an adjective, of or relating to sexual and affectional attraction to both sexes. Does not presume nonmonogamy. See **biphobia**.

civil union: A civil union provides same-sex couples some rights available to married couples in areas such as state taxes, medical decisions and estate planning. Recognized by several states but not the U.S. government. See **commitment ceremony**, **domestic partner**, **marriage**, **relationships**.

closeted, in the closet: Refers to a person who wishes to keep secret his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. See **coming out**.

coming out: Short for “coming out of the closet.” Accepting and letting others know of one’s previously hidden sexual orientation or gender identity. See **closeted**, **outing**.

commitment ceremony: A formal, marriage-like gathering that recognizes the declaration of members of the same sex to each other. It may be recognized by a religion but is not legally binding. See **civil unions**, **domestic partner**, **relationships**, **marriage**.

cross-dresser: Preferred term for person who wears clothing most often associated with members of the opposite sex. Not necessarily connected to sexual orientation. Not synonymous with transgender or drag queen. See **transvestite**, **transsexual**, **transgender**.

cruising: Visiting places where opportunities exist to meet potential sex partners. Not exclusively a gay phenomenon.



domestic partner: Unmarried partners who live together. Domestic partners may be of opposite sexes or the same sex. They may register in some municipalities and states and receive some of the benefits accorded to married couples.

“Domestic partner” and “domestic partnership” are terms typically used in connection with legal and insurance matters.

See **partner, relationships**.

Don’t ask, don’t tell: Shorthand for “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue, Don’t Harass,” the military’s former policy on gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. Under the policy, instituted in 1993 and lifted in 2011, the military was not to ask service members about their sexual orientation, service members were not to tell others about their orientation, and the military was not to pursue rumors about members’ sexual orientation.

down low: Usually refers to black men who secretly have sex with men, often while in relationships with women, but do not identify as gay or bisexual. Sometimes abbreviated as DL. Use with caution, as people generally do not identify themselves with this term.

See **MSM**.

drag: Attire typically associated with the opposite sex.

drag performers: Entertainers who dress and act in styles typically associated with the opposite sex (drag queen for men, drag king for women). Not synonymous with transgender or cross-dressing.

dyke: Originally a pejorative term for a lesbian, it is now being reclaimed by some lesbians. Offensive when used as an epithet. Use only if there is a compelling reason.

“ex-gay” (adj.): Describes the movement, mostly rooted in conservative religions, that aims to change the sexual attraction of individuals from same-sex to opposite-sex. Generally discredited as therapy in scientific circles.

fag, faggot: Originally a pejorative term for a gay male, it is now being reclaimed by some gay men. Still extremely offensive when used as an epithet.

families: Proper term for identifying families led by LGBT parents. Identify parents’ sexual orientation only when germane. Do not use “gay families.” Mention genetic relationships or conception techniques only when germane. See **parent**.

gay: An adjective that has largely replaced “homosexual” in referring to men who are sexually and affectionally attracted to other men. Avoid using as a singular noun. For women, “lesbian” is generally used, but when possible ask the subject which term she prefers. To include both, use “gay men and lesbians.” In headlines where space is an issue, “gays” is acceptable to describe both.

See **lesbian**.



gender identity: An individual's emotional and psychological sense of being male or female. Not necessarily the same as an individual's sex at birth.

gender transition: The preferred term for the process by which transgender people change their physical, sexual characteristics from those associated with their sex at birth. May include change of name, clothing, official documentation and medical treatments based on individual needs, which may include hormone therapy, hair removal and surgery. Not synonymous with sex reassignment. Avoid the antiquated term "sex change."

See **sex reassignment, transgender**.

heterosexism: Presumption that heterosexuality is universal and/or superior to homosexuality. Also: prejudice, bias or discrimination based on such presumptions.

HIV: Human immunodeficiency virus. The virus that causes AIDS. "HIV virus" is redundant. "HIV-positive" means being infected with HIV but not necessarily having AIDS. AIDS doctors and researchers are using the term "HIV disease" more because there are other types of acquired immune deficiencies caused by toxins and rare but deadly diseases that are unrelated to what we now call AIDS. See **AIDS**.

homo: Pejorative term for homosexual. Use only if there is a compelling reason.

homophobia: Fear, hatred or dislike of homosexuality, gay men and lesbians. Restrict to germane usage, such as in quotations or opinions. Use "LGBT right opponents" or a similar phrase instead of "homophobes" when describing people who disagree with LGBT rights activism. See **biphobia, transphobia**.

homosexual: As a noun, a person who is attracted to members of the same sex. As an adjective, of or relating to sexual and affectional attraction to a member of the same sex. Use only in medical contexts or in reference to sexual activity. For other usages, see **gay, lesbian**.

husband: Acceptable term for a male, legally married partner of a man. Ask which term the subject prefers, if possible. See **lover, partner, wife**.

intersex (adj.): People born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia or an internal reproductive system that is not considered standard for either male or female. Parents and physicians usually will determine the sex of the child, resulting in surgery or hormone treatment. Many intersex adults seek an end to this practice.

lesbian: Preferred term, both as a noun and as an adjective, for women who are sexually and affectionally attracted to other women. Some women prefer to be called "gay" rather than "lesbian"; when possible, ask the subject which term she prefers.

LGBT: Acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender." Useful in headlines.



lifestyle: An inaccurate term sometimes used to describe the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Sexual orientation may be part of a broader lifestyle but is not one in itself, just as there is no “straight” lifestyle. Avoid. See **sexual orientation, sexual preference**.

lover: Term preferred by some individuals for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual person’s sexual partner. “Girlfriend,” “boyfriend” and “partner” are acceptable alternatives. See **husband, relationships, wife**.

MSM: Acronym for “men who have sex with men.” Term used usually in communities of color to describe men who secretly have sex with other men while maintaining relationships with women. Not synonymous with “bisexual.” See **down low**.

marriage: Advocates for the right to marry seek the legal rights and obligations of marriage, not a variation of it. Often, the most neutral approach is to avoid any adjective modifying the word “marriage.” For the times in which a distinction is necessary, “marriage for same-sex couples” is preferable in stories. When there is a need for shorthand description (such as in headline writing), “same-sex marriage” is preferred because it is more inclusive and more accurate than “gay.” See **civil union, commitment ceremony, domestic partner, relationships**.

obituaries: When reporting survivors, list partners of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender deceased in an order equivalent to spouses of heterosexual deceased.

openly gay/lesbian: As a modifier, “openly” is usually not relevant; its use should be restricted to instances in which the public awareness of an individual’s sexual orientation is germane. Examples: Harvey Milk was the first openly gay San Francisco supervisor. “Ellen” was the first sitcom to feature an openly lesbian lead character. “Openly” is preferred over “acknowledged,” “avowed,” “admitted,” “confessed” or “practicing” because of their negative connotations.

outing (from “out of the closet”): Publicly revealing the sexual orientation or gender identity of an individual who has chosen to keep that information private. Also a verb: The magazine outed the senator in a front-page story. See **coming out, closeted**.

parent: In general, along with “mother” and “father,” the proper term for a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person, whether single or in a relationship, raising a child or children. Because of the blended nature of many families led by LGBT parents, ask the subject which term he or she prefers, when possible. Mention a parent’s sexual orientation, genetic relationship to the child or conception technique only when germane. See **families**.



partner: The commonly accepted term for a person in a committed gay or lesbian relationship. See **husband, lover, relationships, wife**.

pink triangle: Now a gay pride symbol, it was the symbol gay men were required to wear in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Lesbians sometimes also use a black triangle.

practicing: Avoid this term to describe someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. Use "sexually active" as a modifier in circumstances when public awareness of an individual's behavior is germane.

Pride (Day and/or march):): Short for gay/lesbian pride, this term is commonly used to indicate the celebrations commemorating the Stonewall Inn riots of June 28, 1969. Pride events typically take place in June. See **Stonewall**.

queen: Originally a pejorative term for an effeminate gay man but often used acceptably as slang among LGBT people. Offensive when used as an epithet. Use only if there is a compelling reason.

queer: Originally a pejorative term for gay, now being reclaimed by some gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people as a self-affirming umbrella term. Offensive when used as an epithet. Use only if there is a compelling reason.

rainbow flag: A flag of six equal horizontal stripes (red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet) symbolizing the diversity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities.

relationships: Lesbian, gay and bisexual people use various terms to describe their commitments. Ask the individual what term he or she prefers, if possible. If not, "partner" is generally acceptable. See **husband, wife, lover, partner**.

seroconversion: Scientifically observable alteration of blood or other bodily fluids from HIV-negative to HIV-positive. The verb is "seroconvert." See **HIV**.

seronegative: Synonymous with HIV-negative. See **HIV**.

seropositive: Synonymous with HIV-positive. See **HIV**.

safe sex, safer sex: Sexual practices that minimize the possible transmission of HIV and other infectious agents. Some publications prefer "safer sex" to denote that no sexual contact is completely safe.

sex change: Avoid this antiquated term. See **gender transition, sex reassignment**.



sex reassignment: The preferred term for the medical process by which transgender people change their physical, sexual characteristics to reflect their gender identity. May include surgery, hormone therapy and/or changes of legal identity. Often used with “surgery.” Synonymous with gender reassignment. Avoid the antiquated term “sex change.”
See **gender transition**.

sexual orientation: Innate sexual attraction. Use this term instead of “sexual preference.”
See **lifestyle**.

sexual preference: Avoid.
Politically charged term implying that sexuality is the result of a conscious choice.
See **sexual orientation**.

sodomy: Collective term for various sexual acts that some states have deemed illegal. Not synonymous with homosexuality or sex between gay men. The legal definition of sodomy is different from state to state; in some states, sodomy laws have applied to sexual acts practiced by heterosexuals. The U.S. Supreme Court decided in June 2003 that state sodomy laws targeting private, consensual sex between adult same-sex or opposite-sex partners violate the U.S. Constitution’s due process clause.

special rights: Politically charged term used by opponents of civil rights for the LGBT community. Avoid. “LGBT rights,” “equal rights” or “gay and lesbian rights” are alternatives.

Stonewall: The Stonewall Inn tavern in New York City’s Greenwich Village was the site of several nights of raucous protests after a police raid on June 28, 1969. Although not the nation’s first gay civil rights demonstration, Stonewall is now regarded as the birth of the modern gay civil rights movement.

straight (adj.): Heterosexual; describes a person whose sexual and affectional attraction is to someone of the opposite sex. As a noun, use “heterosexual” or “straight person.”

tranny: Often a pejorative term for a transgender person, it is now being reclaimed by some transgender people. Offensive when used as an epithet and should be avoided except in quotes or as someone’s self-identified term.

transgender (adj): An umbrella term that refers to people whose physical, sexual characteristics may not match their gender identity. Some female and male cross-dressers, drag queens or kings, female or male impersonators, and intersex individuals may also identify as transgender. Use the name and personal pronouns that are consistent with how the individual lives publicly. When possible, ask which term the subject prefers. As a noun, use “transgender people.”
See **gender transition, intersex, sex reassignment**.

For more guidance on transgender terminology and coverage, visit the NLGJA Journalists Toolbox article at www.nlgja.org/toolbox/transgender.



transgender man: A person who was considered female at birth but identifies and lives as a man. Transgender people sometimes use the acronym FTM, or female to male. Sometimes shortened colloquially to trans man. Use in news stories only when transgender status is germane; otherwise, identify a news subject as a man.
See **transgender**.

transgender woman: A person who was considered male at birth but identifies and lives as a woman. Transgender people sometimes use the acronym MTF, or male to female. Sometimes shortened colloquially to trans woman. Use in news stories only when transgender status is germane; otherwise, identify a news subject as a woman.
See **transgender**.

transphobia: Fear, hatred or dislike of transgender people or transsexuals. May be harbored by gays, lesbians and bisexuals in addition to heterosexuals.
See **transgender, transsexual**.

transsexual (n. and adj.): Avoid this antiquated term in favor of “transgender” and “transgender people.” Some individuals prefer it, but it can carry misleading medical connotations.
See **transgender, gender transition, sex reassignment**.

transvestite: Avoid this antiquated term.
Synonymous with **cross-dresser**.

two spirit: An American Indian believed to possess a mixture of masculine and feminine spirits. Some identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Should not be used as a blanket term for LGBT American Indians.

wife: Acceptable term for a female, legally married partner of a woman. Ask which term the subject prefers, if possible.
See **husband, lover, partner, relationships**.



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