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# **TRANS- INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE**

Penn Non-Cis | Penn Association for Gender Equity

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CN: transmisogynistic and cissexist language; medical transphobia

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## Letter from the Language Guide Team

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As students, we have seen and experienced the use of transmisogynistic and cissexist language by our peers, Penn staff, and administrators. We created this guide to address misconceptions and misrepresentations of transness. It is intended to provide Penn-specific information on the use of trans-inclusive language for those affiliated with the university.

All language guides are by definition fallible and based on individual understandings of marginalizing systems. We have attempted to reflect a variety of experiences, but do not present a comprehensive representation of transness. This guide is understood through the US-dominant gender frameworks that exist on Penn's campus and can only be used as a starting point. While destabilizing the global systems of white cisheteropatriarchy is the ultimate goal of trans liberation, this is an attempt to make sure that spaces on Penn's campus intended for gender equity are able to serve that function by centering those with marginalized gender experiences.

**The use of inclusive language is not what makes a space trans-friendly or safe.**

Take concrete action to ensure the safety and wellbeing of trans students. Support campaigns on campus for gender neutral bathrooms, trans-competent medical care, and menstrual product access.

PNC leadership is available to work with Penn organizations to tailor language based on specific goals ([pennnoncis@gmail.com](mailto:pennnoncis@gmail.com)). We welcome questions and hope this guide is instructive.

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## Definitions of Terms Describing People

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- **Gender:** The confluence of individual, interpersonal, and cultural factors that contribute to an experience of categorization.
  - Do not use gender “identity” as it implies that trans people are choosing their gender and therefore opting into transphobic violence. Instead, just say gender (e.g. “all genders welcome,” “their gender is nonbinary”).
  - **Gender Euphoria:** Pleasure or a feeling of completeness accompanying congruence between one’s internal gender experience and external treatment.
  - **Gender Dysphoria:** Pain or intense discomfort accompanying the discrepancy between an individual’s internal gender experience and external treatment.
- **Women:** Any individual whose gender experience aligns with womanhood (based on self-identification of experience).
- **Designated Sex At Birth (DSAB):** This is the F (female), M (male), or significantly rarer X (intersex) marked on an infant’s birth chart based on coercive labeling of perceived sex. DSAB also designates trans status.
  - DSAB is also known as assigned sex at birth. This phrasing is outdated.
  - Common abbreviations include designated female at birth (DFAB) and designated male at birth (DMAB).
- **Cisgender:** An individual whose experience of gender corresponds with the individual, social, and political expectations of their DSAB.
- **Gender minority:** Any individual whose experience of gender deviates from cisgender manhood.
- **Transgender:** An individual who does not experience gender in ways typical to their DSAB. Includes transmasculine, transfeminine, and nonbinary individuals.

- **Transfeminine:** An individual whose gender experience aligns with womanhood who was DMAB. This includes trans women and DMAB nonbinary people who are aligned with womanhood. This does not include DFAB nonbinary people who align themselves with womanhood.
  - “Transfeminine” should be abbreviated as “transfem” NOT “transfemme.” Femme is a gender presentation and experience unique to lesbians (see more on page 13).
  - **Transmisogyny affected (TMA):** An individual who is trans and aligned with womanhood, and therefore affected by the specific violence of transmisogyny (i.e. transfeminine women are TMA).
  - **Transmisogyny exempt (TME):** Anyone who is not marginalized by transmisogyny, but most often used when speaking about a trans person’s status (specifically trans men or nonbinary people who do not experience transmisogyny).
- **Transmasculine** (abbr. transmasc): An individual whose gender experience aligns with manhood who was DFAB. This includes trans men and DFAB nonbinary people who are aligned with manhood. This does not include DMAB nonbinary people who align themselves with manhood.
- **Nonbinary:** Individuals whose gender experience is not that of either men or women, the two gender categories considered to be a binary in dominant western discourses.
  - Some nonbinary people are trans and some are not. Some nonbinary people are aligned with womanhood/manhood and some are not. Some use neutral pronouns and some do not.
- **Agender:** An individual whose gender experience is characterized by a sense of absence (i.e. no gendered experience). This is usually considered a subset of nonbinary.
- **Genderqueer:** Usually considered to be an analogous term to nonbinary, although the specific overlaps and distinctions are debated.
- **Genderfluid:** Usually considered to be a subset of nonbinary, “genderfluid” is the descriptor used by people whose gender experience changes over time. Change can happen frequently or infrequently. It is also used to mean those who have a consistent gender that falls outside of the gender binary.

- **Gender non-conforming:** An individual whose presentation does not match the cultural expectations of their gender (e.g. women who are tomboys). Can be trans or cis, any sexuality, or any gender.
- **Gender presentation:** The ways in which people express their gender through their choices of external presentation. Not all presentations are gendered or related to gender, and therefore cannot be used to determine someone's gender experience.
  - For many trans people (and cis people), presentation is not solely driven by gender euphoria or dysphoria. Presentation is also influenced or constrained by safety, economic status, social pressure, and individual style. Every method of expression is personal and requires respect.

## Transphobia and Systems of Power

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- **Cissexism:** The belief that cisgender people and their experiences are normal.
  - Manifestations of cissexism include the belief that gender is determined by your DSAB, the belief that trans people's genders are less authentic than cis people's genders, or ignoring the existence of trans people completely.
- **Transphobia:** Violence against and hatred of trans people based on the ideology of cissexism.
  - **Transmisogyny:** The specific violence that trans women face as a result of being trans and being aligned with womanhood. Transmisogyny is not experienced by trans people who are not transfeminine.
    - Some manifestations of transmisogyny include hypersexualization, hypervisibility, and more frequent experiences of violence and sexual assault than other trans people or women. Coined by Julia Serano.
  - **Transmisogynoir:** The specific violence that Black trans women face as a result of being Black, trans, and women. This is based on the definition from Gradient Lair: "Explanation of Misogynoir" by Trudy.
- **Relationship between racism and gender:** In the US and around the world, colonial legacies of domination and indoctrination mean that gender-based violence and oppression are inextricable from white supremacy. For many people, experiences of racialization are fundamental to those of gender. A similar relationship exists between sexuality and race. While this guide was written for Penn communities, the majority of which ascribe to a specific US-dominant framework of gender, the violence committed against indigenous gender-variant people must be recognized as part of trans liberation.

## Gendering Others and Pronouns

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- **Pronouns:** The set or sets of personal referents used for an individual (e.g. she/her, they/them, he/him). Pronouns do not indicate gender and cannot be used to exclude individuals based on perceived gender.
  - Don't assume someone's trans status simply from the pronouns they use.
  - If someone uses one set of pronouns in a given space and a different set elsewhere, respect each at the given time and be cognizant of potential extenuating factors. If you are not attentive to pronoun changes, you can end up outing someone and putting them at risk of violence.
  - Someone's pronouns don't necessarily signify what gendered descriptors they use (e.g. boyfriend, girlfriend, son, daughter). Certain terms might be acceptable in specific relationships.
  - **If you are unsure which descriptors or terms a person would like you to use, ask them in private.**
- **Mixed sets of pronouns** (she/they, they/he): Like other pronouns, mixed sets do not necessarily indicate transness or gender in and of themselves.
  - The order of a mixed set can but does not necessarily indicate a preference. Sometimes people use multiple sets for safety reasons or for other external factors not related to gender expression. If you are unsure about a person's preference, just ask. They may ask you to use both interchangeably or different sets in different contexts.
- **Neopronouns:** Any set or sets of third person referents used for an individual that are not conjugations of she, her, or they (e.g. ne/nem/nir, zie/hir, ze/zir, xe/xem/xyr).
- **Not using pronouns:** The use of an individual's name instead of personal pronouns. This means repeating the person's name in place of pronouns in a sentence.



- **Introducing Pronouns**

- **During introductions:** Suggest people offer their pronouns and model it yourself. If people choose not to give theirs, don't push for an answer, but default to they/them. This allows people who might not be out or comfortable sharing to have access to a "neutral" option as opposed to relying on appearance, which reinforces cissexism.
    - Once you do know someone's pronouns, it is misgendering to use another set to refer to them regardless of what that set may be. For example, referring to someone who uses she/her as they/them can be a form of disrespect or an overt threat to her safety.
  - **On zoom:** It is convenient to add pronouns to your display name, but don't expect everyone to do this. Changing pronouns can be a matter of safety over convenience, so pay attention to what people say during intros as well.
  - **In writing:** Introduce the pronouns that a person uses in print the first time that their name is mentioned. Pronouns usually go in parentheses after someone's name. This is especially useful for people who use mixed sets of pronouns so it is clear to whom certain pronouns are referring.
    - Examples include publications like *The Daily Pennsylvanian* or *34th Street*, advertisements for speakers or panels, and other written communication like emails, texts, resumes, or social media when introducing new people or introducing yourself.
- **Don't say "preferred pronouns" when discussing someone's pronoun usage.** The adjective "preferred" implies that it is a choice for someone to use the correct pronouns for another, and also insinuates that there is a difference between someone's "preferred" pronouns and their real pronouns. Instead, just say pronouns.
  - **Simply using someone's pronouns does not indicate respect for someone or their gender.** A fundamental aspect of transmisogyny and cissexism is failing to see someone as the gender they are, and treating them incorrectly as a result. **Do not just memorize someone's pronouns and name, but do the work to internalize their gender.**

- **Misgendering:** The violent act of identifying someone as the wrong gender. Misgendering someone reinforces a cissexist hierarchy in which cis people deny trans people the right to self-knowledge and materially harms trans people by denying them access to resources or support.
  - Examples of misgendering include referring to someone as a different gender, requiring someone to use the wrong bathroom or changing room, using the wrong pronouns to refer to an individual, or claiming trans women have “male privilege” or trans men have “female socialization.”
  - **Misnaming:** referring to someone as a name attached to the cultural and social assumptions of their DSAB.
    - **Deadnaming:** using a name someone has changed after coming out.
  
- **What to do if you misgender/misname:** If you are corrected after misgendering or misnaming someone, briefly thank them for the correction, apologize, and don't do it again.
  - Most of the time, excessive apology is manipulative because it puts pressure on trans people to forgive you.
  
- **Correcting someone for misgendering/misnaming:** Correcting someone for misgendering another individual is complicated because you don't want to inadvertently out someone and put them at risk of violence. The best approach is to ask the person in what circumstances they are out. This ensures the situation does not rely on judgment calls. Be cognizant of power differences between the speaker and the person being misgendered, such as a student-teacher or boss-employee relationship.
  - Do not correct an individual for the pronouns they use to refer to themselves. A person's use of pronouns can change for multiple reasons (e.g. safety, exploration, accidentally). If you are unsure whether the pronouns you are using are correct, just ask.

## Things to Consider When Advertising

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**NOTE:** Just using inclusive language does not make a space trans friendly or inclusive.

- **Questions to ask when planning an event:**
  - Who is the space for? What do you want out of a particular space?
  - How can we allow people to self-select into relevant events?
  - What groups do you want to serve and how should you communicate that?
  
- **Be as specific as possible.**
  - A safe bet is to not include a target audience but just provide a description of what the event is about. This lets people choose if the event is relevant to their experience.
  - Don't use vague language and be intentional about who your space is meant to support.
  - If you advertise a space for a certain group but don't put the effort into making sure it is really safe, then you have failed to make it accessible (e.g. advertising for non-men but addressing the group as "women," not considering access to bathrooms in event-planning).
  
- Sometimes you want a space to center those who are not men. Options and definitions include:
  - **Marginalized genders:** Those whose gender experience is categorized by oppression or those who are not cis men. This includes trans men.
  - **People who are victims of misogyny:** Those who are specifically victimized on the grounds of being women or women-aligned. Some trans men will have experiences that align with this category.
  - **Non-men:** Those who are not men. This grouping does not include trans men and may not include others aligned with manhood. if you want to include them, make sure to not use this wording.

- **Common topics**

- **Menstruation:** You should create space for trans men without assuming it is relevant to all trans men.
- **Hormonal changes/PMS:** You need to create space for trans women on HRT (see on page 15) who might experience cyclical hormone changes without assuming that the space will be useful for all women, as cis women post-menopause, on birth control, or experiencing amenorrhea may not menstruate.
- **Sexual violence:** Make space for people of all genders. Assuming that sexual violence only applies to women is both victim-blaming and cissexist.
- Think about using language based on function or experience. For example, people who menstruate or people who have experienced sexual violence.

## Common Cissexist Language Mistakes

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- **Enby** when referencing nonbinary individuals
  - It was introduced to provide a third gender option to boy/girl, and many nonbinary people find it infantilizing when used by someone else as a descriptor. This is similar to calling an adult woman a girl.
  - Some nonbinary people use enby to describe themselves, but because of the reasons mentioned above, it should not be used to refer to groups of nonbinary people. Do not assume a nonbinary person is comfortable with the term; avoid using it unless explicitly given permission.
- **Nb** when referencing nonbinary people
  - It is an existing abbreviation for “non-Black.” Just say nonbinary.
- **Womxn, wombyn, or womyn**
  - The original intention of “womxn” was to signify a rejection of white feminist politics by feminists of color. Its linguistic legacy is connected to “wombyn” and “womyn,” which were both coined to define womanhood based on biological markers such as the womb (see page 15). Famous examples include the Michigan Wombyn’s Music Festival, which excluded those who were not (to use their definition) “biologically female.” Because of the legacy of trans-exclusive undertones to alternate spellings, the use of womxn can make people uncomfortable.
  - The use of womxn to be trans-inclusive implies that trans women are not included in the group “women,” which marginalizes them.
  - Language like women of color, BIPOC women, people of color with marginalized genders, etc. captures the same demographic without the history of transmisogyny.
- **Transman/transwoman**
  - “Trans” is an adjective and needs to be separated from the noun it modifies. Writing “woman” and “man” as part of the word reinforces the notion that trans people are “less” their gender than cis people. Instead, say trans man or trans woman.

- **[Gender] or [sex]-identified**
  - Like talking about people’s gender identity, saying things like female-identified or man-identified reinforces the notion that trans people are not “really” their gender. Cis people are not referred to in this way and it is only ever used to undermine trans people. Just say “man” or “woman.”
  
- **Feminine/female pronouns and masculine/male pronouns**
  - Pronouns don’t have an implicit gender, and masculinity and femininity as modes of presentation are also not implicitly gendered (see more on pronouns on page 6). Just say the pronouns (ie. she/her pronouns, they/them pronouns).
  
- **Folx** and other unnecessarily modified gender neutral words
  - Folks is already gender neutral. The attempt to signal trans inclusivity in words that are already gender neutral marginalizes trans people and suggests that they need to be mentioned specifically in order to be included. Folx is a continuation of the same logic of signaling the inclusion of trans women by using language like womxn.
  - This does NOT include the use of “x” in areas where a word would otherwise be gendered (Latinx, Mestizx).
  
- **Guys, Girls, Ladies**
  - These terms can all be misgendering. Consider instead: “hey everyone” or “hey y’all.”

## Group Language With Negative Connotations

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These phrases all refer to groups of people and are common in advertisements around campus. For alternatives, see the section on advertising on page 9.

- **Women and femmes**

- Femme is a gender identity/mode of gender expression exclusive to lesbians that is based on femininity performed exclusively for other women or for one's butch, accompanied by a complete rejection of men.
- Some people who are not lesbians use it to self-identify, but it should not be used as a grouping for others especially when the intention is women and nonbinary people or non-men.
- The use of "femme" for non-men seeks to turn misogyny into oppression against those who display femininity instead of oppression against women. It assumes that a straight woman who presents in a conventionally feminine manner would be more disadvantaged than a butch lesbian, which is lesbophobic. This use of femme also contributes to the policing of trans women's gender presentation.

- **Women and nonbinary people**

- As defined above, nonbinary people are not a monolith and this categorization assumes that nonbinary people are "essentially" women or have the same experiences as women.
- There is no one experience that defines both womanhood and being nonbinary, so think about whether you want a space to be open to everyone except men, everyone except cis men, people who experience misogyny, etc.

- **Women and trans people**

- This language implies that cis women are the default women and trans women are not women. It also implies that trans men are in proximity to womanhood.

- **Transgender and gender non-conforming**
  - Gender nonconforming people are not by default trans and many do not share the experiences of trans people (see more on page 4).
  
- **Trans and nonbinary people**
  - Separating trans and nonbinary implies that these are two, mutually exclusive categories and by doing so decenters trans people who are nonbinary. While there are nonbinary people who are not trans, many nonbinary people do align themselves with transness.
  - If you mean trans people, say trans people and allow nonbinary people to self-select based on trans status.



## Physical and Medical Language

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- **Bioessentialism:** The flawed belief that socially constructed categories like gender have a biological basis. For example, designating sex at birth based on genitalia.
  
- **Transmedicalism:** The sexist and colonialist ideology that assumes trans people were “born in the wrong body,” all trans people experience gender dysphoria in the same way, and all want to medically transition in the same capacity.
  - This ideology reinforces hierarchies of power and marginalization based on one’s access to medical transition and/or “passing” status and presumes that medical transition is the goal for all trans people.
  - This argument denies resources to trans people who do not fit into cissexist notions of transness. (i.e. nonbinary people on low-dose HRT are excluded from academic studies on transition because researchers assume the only people who pursue HRT are interested in reaching cis benchmarks of hormone levels).
  - Concepts like “brain sex” are bioessentialist and and rely on white supremacist pseudo-science.
  
- **Hormone replacement therapy (HRT):** Despite its name, HRT is not the addition or removal of types of hormones. Instead, it is the process of changing the dominant composition of hormones in one’s body. Some trans people use HRT but not all.
  - Testosterone and estrogen work in broadly the same ways for both DFAB and DMAB people, regardless of the mechanism of introduction. Trans people on HRT generally have similar hormone balances as cis people and have similar physiological effects as a result (i.e. some transfeminine individuals take HRT on a schedule that mimics the menstrual cycle and experience PMS).
  - There is no completely standardized method/schedule for HRT. The specific medications, dosages, and routes of administration given differ between medical systems and between individuals.
    - Transfeminine individuals generally take estrogen (as a pill, patch, or injection) and an anti-androgen (as a pill or injection) and may take progesterone as well.

- Transmasculine individuals generally only take testosterone, which is only available as a gel or as an injection. Testosterone is classified as a schedule III drug, unlike other medications given as part of HRT.
- It is impossible to disentangle social expectations of gender from the effects of hormone therapy. Testosterone is not the hormone of aggressiveness and estrogen is not the hormone of kindness. Hormone composition is not the determiner of an individual's personality or mannerisms.
- There are cis people with hormone balances atypical to their DSAB who are still their gender. Hormones are not indicative of gender for cis or trans people (i.e. cis women with PCOS or cis men with low testosterone).
- **Surgical intervention** comes in a range of forms under a range of names. There is no “single” surgery that determines a culmination of transition or completely relieves dysphoria (which is a result of social pressure and will exist as long as cissexism does).
  - Medical intervention is not a checklist of things that need to be done. Someone's transition is not ‘incomplete’ because they do not want certain procedures.
  - **DO NOT** ask if someone has gotten or plans to get a certain surgery or treatment.
  - Do not describe surgical intervention as “gender reassignment surgery.” The two most frequent alternatives are sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) and gender affirmation surgery (GAS).
- **References to genitalia**
  - Genitalia does not provide a coherent grouping of people. Not all people with vaginas menstruate, give birth, get penetrated, are women, were born with them, or experience misogyny. Not all people with penises get hard, penetrate others, are men, were born with them, or benefit from the patriarchy. Grouping based on genitalia excludes intersex people as well.
    - A better way to address bodily functions is to use language like “people who menstruate” or “people who give birth” as it allows for people to choose what groups or information apply to them.
  - Avoid language such as biological woman, biological man, “vagina-havers,” etc.

- **Describing people as their designated sex at birth** (DFAB, DMAB; see more on page 2)
  - This is an especially common practice when talking about nonbinary people. It is rarely useful to do so because it makes it seem as though you are entitled to information about trans people’s genitals.
  - The sole exception is when transmisogyny plays into a space or situation. DSAB is intrinsically tied to the experiences of transmisogyny because only transfeminine people are affected. TME trans people do not experience transmisogyny (see more on TME on page 3).
  
- **Reproductive justice**
  - Reproductive justice is an incredibly broad and complex issue. Marginalized people, including trans individuals, are disproportionately denied access to reproductive healthcare.
    - Statements like “men shouldn’t have opinions on abortion or contraception” alienate trans people and imply that cis women are the only ones harmed by restricted access to reproductive services.
    - Many states require proof of medical transition before changing a gender marker on official ID. Since surgery and HRT can both cause sterilization, this can prevent trans people from having biological children because of the prohibitive cost of preserving reproductive material (which is often not covered by insurance).
    - Insurance companies can deny coverage to individuals based on official gender markers. Trans men are sometimes denied coverage for hysterectomies or other gynecological care based on presumed anatomy. Delayed treatment can cause infertility in addition to other long-term health problems.

## Transphobic Terms and Slurs

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**NOTE:** Some of these words are being reclaimed by the groups which they have targeted. While some trans people who have experienced cissexist violence on the basis of gender transgression may self-identify using these terms, they should not be used to identify others because of their histories and ongoing use as slurs. Most slurs based on trans status are targeted at trans women specifically.

- **Dated terms for trans people**

- Transsexual: An outdated term for those who have undergone medically affirming procedures.
  - Derivatives for this term (e.g. tranny) are used as slurs, primarily against trans women.
- Transvestite: An individual who wears clothes associated with a different DSAB.
- Male-to-Female (MTF) and Female-to-Male (FTM): These terms imply that gender is binary and that trans people were really their DSAB prior to coming out.
- Transgendered: Transgender is an adjective, not a verb, which means the 'ed' is grammatically incorrect.

- **Slurs**

- Trap: Based on the idea that trans people, specifically women, are deceiving those around them about their DSAB. This transphobic logic has serious consequences, such as the trans panic legal defense. This defense claims that a defendant is justified in murdering trans women because their capacity for self-control was diminished after being 'trapped' into sex.
- Pornographic terminology: The bodies of trans people are fetishized and othered. There are a number of terms used in porn to describe trans bodies. These terms are dehumanizing and should not be used to describe individuals. Transmisogyny means that trans feminine individuals are disproportionately sexualized.

## Educational Materials

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- “Disregard and danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the voices of trans (and cis) African feminists,” by B. Camminga in *The Sociological Review Monograph*
- “Whose feminism is it anyway? The unspoken racism of the trans inclusion debate,” by Emi Koyama in *The Sociological Review*
- *The Invention of Woman: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* by Oyeronke Oyewumi
- *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* by Jasbir K. Puar
- *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* by Julia Serano
  - Abridged version: “[Trans-misogyny primer](#),” by Julia Serano
- “A New Hope: The Psychic Life of Passing” by C. Riley Snorton in *Hypatia*
- *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* by C. Riley Snorton
- “[We Move Together: Disability Justice and Trans Liberation](#).” A videoed conversation with Patty Berne, Reina Gossett, Kiyaan Abadani, and Malcolm Shanks. Moderated by India Harville.