

Gender Inclusive Style Guide

Introduction

The way we use language reveals underlying societal norms and assumptions that can be exclusionary, often without us realizing what we're communicating. Gendered language in particular is often used in written communications in ways that present unexpected and invisible challenges to transgender and non-binary people. This resource provides insights into how to improve the level of transgender and non-binary inclusion in written materials, including how to avoid the most common writing missteps that occur in the workplace.

Language is not cut and dry. The resource is not meant to be a set of rules to follow. So, even if a word or phrase is listed here, transgender people may still use them to talk about themselves. It is important to respect people's personal choices.

General Issues

In general, communications are shifting towards greater gender neutrality. Table 1 provides key examples of these trends for greater inclusion of gender diversity, including what to avoid, reasons for avoiding, and ways to rewrite words or phrases.

Table 1. Recommendations for Gender Inclusion in Written Communications

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
M1. "Men and women"	These phrases are often used with the intention of including all people; however, it unintentionally excludes those who experience gender beyond the binary of men and women.	A1. General (e.g., "person" or "individual") or role-specific (e.g., "customer," "co-worker," or "vendor")
M2. "Ladies and gentlemen" used in written announcements		A2. "Welcome, friends" or "Welcome, esteemed guests"
M3. "Dear Sir or Madam" used in email or letter correspondence		A3. "Dear First Name" or Role (e.g., "Dear Valued Customer," "Esteemed Guest," "Vendor")
M4. "Husband and wife"	Assumes a particular partner configuration (i.e., between man and woman) and status (i.e., marriage as opposed to common law). It also does not encompass non-binary people.	A4. "Partner" or "spouse"
M5. "Mother and father"	Assumes a particular parent configuration and excludes non-binary people.	A5. "Parents or guardians"
M6. "Manpower"	Outdated terms rooted in history of when mostly/only men worked outside the home. This is no longer the case, and language can evolve to encompass everyone.	A6. "Workforce" or "personnel"

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
M7. "Mother tongue"	Outdated term that assumes mostly or only mothers are primary caretakers of children with more time and closer connections to allow for the transfer of languages and cultural customs. However, there are now caretakers of other genders involved in children's lives.	A7. "First language(s)" or "native tongue"
M8. "Opposite sex or gender"	Has the connotation that there are only two sexes (which excludes people who are intersex) and only two genders (which excludes people who are non-binary).	A8. Instead use the phrase "different gender(s)." Prioritize reference to gender identity (e.g., women, men, and/or non-binary people). Avoid references to sex in workplace materials, unless it is directly related to medical or anatomical issues.
M9. "Co-ed" or "unisex," especially in washrooms, dorms, and sports.	"Co-ed" connotes only two genders. Relatedly, "unisex" is often used to denote use by any gender; however, it refers to one sex, which is a misnomer.	A9. Instead use the phrase "all-gender." For example: "She is looking for an all-gender, multi-stall washroom."

Issues specific to Corporate Operations

In order to address the common issues faced by trans and non-binary people in communications that support organizational operations, TransFocus suggests the approach to communications listed in Table 2. With these changes, human resources personnel will be given the tools they need to respectfully address gender identity in professional and consistent ways.

Table 2. Examples of Gender Inclusion in Written Communications in Corporate Operations

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
M10. "Maternity Leave" and "Paternity Leave"	Differentiating "maternity leave" and "paternity leave" does not work for trans women or men, because these categories typically rest on assumptions of which gender is pregnant or not. For example, trans men can get pregnant. Also, only having two categories of leave excludes non-binary parents.	A10. Instead use "parental leave." If benefits differ between the categories, label them by what is happening: "Pregnancy leave" for any person who is pregnant "Parental leave" for anyone that becomes a parent (including through adoption)
M11. Use of gender-specific titles (such as "Dear Ms, Mrs., Mr. combined with last name") in correspondence	While use of titles has the intention of being respectful and formal, there are often two key challenges with this approach for transgender and gender diverse people, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Titles are sometimes incorrectly assumed based on how someone appears; and 2. There are insufficient title options for people with genders beyond the binary. 	A11. Remove use of titles and replace with "Dear first name" or expand the list of titles to include gender-neutral options (e.g., Mx) that people can self-select.
M12. Use of gender-specific categories for competitions. For example, prizes for "top female sales rep" and "top male sales rep."	While there is a place for fun and healthy competition among co-workers, these sometimes occur along gendered lines that can unintentionally exclude gender diverse people by virtue of them not having a category to participate in and assumed to be part of one of the binary categories.	A12. Set-up competitions along non-identity-based characteristics (e.g., location-specific - north vs south wing or department-specific competitions).
M13. Use of "he/she" with the intention of being all-encompassing, especially prevalent in contract, policy, and bylaw language.	These two pronouns do not encompass all people with the unintended consequence of excluding gender diverse people.	A13. Replace "he/she" with "they" pronouns to fully encompass all people across the gender spectrum. This has become more prevalent in corporate communications.

Issues specific to Government

Overall, the majority of issues regarding gender references within written communications in government operations, such as minutes, reports, and bylaws, stem from use of gendered pronouns and salutations. Oddly enough, the people whose gender is mostly known (e.g., councillors and city staff) have role-specific terms used with their surname in a gender-neutral approach, while the members of the public whose gender is not known, the use of gendered salutations is prevalent. These challenges are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Challenging Language for Government Communications

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
<p>M14. "His Worship" Comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "weorthscipe" meaning to attribute worth to an object. It then evolved into the English term "worship" to connote admiration and respect for a city's first and leading citizen.</p>	<p>This type of terms is meant to convey particular value and focus on one role; however, this is often at odds with the egalitarian principles of democratic societies. Furthermore, if a woman were the mayor, the salutation would need to switch to "Her Workshop" and similarly if a non-binary person were the mayor "Their Worship." This presents a lot of unnecessary change. Ideally, there would be one term that would not change and applies to any person who is mayor, irrespective of gender.</p>	<p>A14. "Mayor, President, Prime Minister" (combined with last name) to reference the top official of the government.</p>
<p>M15. "Ms, Mrs., Mr., Madam" Use of gender-specific titles in meeting minutes.</p>	<p>There are three key challenges with salutations in the public record. This mainly stems from speakers not being directly asked for their salutation when they sign up to speak, thus, leaving it up to the people to guess:</p> <p>Salutations are often assumed based on the name of the speaker (e.g., Nick is assumed to use the salutation of "Mr"), or by how the speaker looks (e.g., someone feminine looking is assumed to be a woman and, therefore, using the salutation Mrs or Ms).</p> <p>Where there is doubt about someone's gender and salutation, people often avoid using any salutation (e.g., gender-neutral name or names from abroad), creating inconsistencies in the public record.</p> <p>With people who are assumed to be women, there is often a distinction in salutations between married (Mrs) and not married (Ms). Because speakers are not asked directly, this is often assumed based on the age someone appears to be. Also, this additional information about a woman's marital status is private information that is often not pertinent to the discussion at hand. That is, it does not materially change the opinions or information someone is sharing.</p> <p>While formality and decorum are important in civic discourse, the use of gendered salutations is unnecessary and challenging to trans and non-binary people (as well as some cisgender women).</p>	<p>A15. "Councillor (combined with last name)": Used to refer to people elected to City Council.</p> <p>"Chair (combined with last name)": Used to refer to the person designated to lead the meeting.</p> <p>"Speaker (combined with last name)": Used to refer to a member of the public that signs up to speak at a public hearing or special meeting.</p> <p>"Author/Writer (combined with last name)": Used to refer to a member of the public that writes and submits a letter or city staff that write a report at a public hearing or special meeting.</p>
<p>M16. "He or She" or occasionally only "He" when speaking in the abstract / referring to a role rather than a specific person</p>	<p>Where there are references only to "he or she," it does not include non-binary people.</p> <p>The sole use of "he" in reference to roles of leadership is likely a legacy from a time when only men were assumed to be mayors.</p>	<p>A16. Replace with the gender-neutral pronouns "they" or "them," or specify the role (e.g., "the member", "the chair", "the mayor"). Some written materials, such as invites, lend themselves well to using "you" as the primary pronoun, which has a more personal and direct tone along with being gender-neutral. Make sure references to gender are also removed from nouns ("chair" v. "chairman") or adjectives.</p>

Note 1: While some governments attempt to update the title field options by providing fill-in-the-blank (rather than dropdown list), this information in the public record may be potentially “outing,” especially to non-binary people providing the gender-neutral salutation of “Mx.” This field should always be voluntary in case providing this information is uncomfortable or unsafe to provide in a public context.

Note 2: It is ok to document pronouns as part of the public record if it relates to a gender-specific issue where stories from lived experiences are critical to helping the city evolve socially. It is important to avoid assumptions about what pronouns someone uses (typically based on how they look) and obtain consent before publishing pronouns in the public record.

Issues specific to Healthcare

Table 4 provides a set of five common words and phrases used in health care contexts that exclude transgender and non-binary identities and experiences. These are particularly relevant to charting and report writing within a medical setting, particularly because patients have access to their files.

Table 4. Examples of Gender Inclusion in Written Communications in Healthcare

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
M17. “Born man/woman”	People are not born men and women. They are born children. At birth people are ascribed a gender label based on societal expectations or averages.	A17. Instead use “assigned male/female at birth.” By using “assigned,” the location of the issue is properly placed with institutions and society with respect to misunderstanding and misgendering transgender and non-binary people.
M18. “Sex change operation(s)” or “sex reassignment surgery”	Overly focussed on the medical aspects of changing one’s sex rather than individualized choices to affirm gender, usually with the built-in assumption that transgender and non-binary people want to undertake all possible medical procedures.	A18. “Gender-affirming procedures” refers to a process by which a person affirms their gender identity and expression with themselves and others. This process may include medical procedures, such as hormone therapy and one or more surgeries. “Pre-/post-operative” or “non-operative” may still be used in medical literature, but should not be applied to a specific person without their consent.
M19. “Pregnant woman”	While most people who get pregnant are cisgender women, pregnancy is not exclusive to them. There are also men and non-binary people who can and do become pregnant and give birth.	A19. “Pregnant person” Not only is this term more inclusive, it also is more accurate in ways that allow for broader delivery of care.
M20. “Women of childbearing potential”	People of all genders may have childbearing potential.	A20. “People of childbearing age”
M21. Men with reproductive potential	People of all genders may have reproductive potential.	A21. “People of reproductive age”

Issues Specific to Transgender People + Issues

There may be circumstances when corporate meetings, events, or written communications are about trans and non-binary issues. People who are cisgender often struggle to write respectfully and accurately about trans and non-binary people. There is often a lot of trepidation or uncertainty. Table 5 is intended to cover common mistakes along with how to avoid them or what to write instead.

Table 5. Common Linguistic Missteps regarding Trans People and How to Avoid Them

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
<p>M22. Misuse of the term “transgenderers” as a noun or as another gender identity. There is occasional reference to “transgendered,” which is grammatically incorrect.</p>	<p>Transgender is an adjective (i.e., a descriptive term), not a noun. By extension the word “transgender” is not itself a gender identity, so it should not be part of a list of gender identities separately from “man” and “woman.”</p>	<p>A22. Here are two sentences that properly reference transgender people: “Two transgender women are entering the board room.” “Our company hires people of all genders, including women, men, and non-binary people.”</p>
<p>M23. Many communications use problematic language when referring to transgender people. For example: “Tom used to be a woman and is now a man,” or “Herold was born in Manitoba and now goes by Hélène.”</p>	<p>When writing stories about transgender people, it is important to avoid centering what they were named before or how they were gendered in the past based on an incorrect assumption of their gender. The phrase “and now identifies as” may be a misnomer for some transgender people. They do not feel that their gender has changed, only people’s understanding of it. For example, Tom always felt he is a boy/man, but people misunderstood based on how he was assigned at birth.</p>	<p>A23. Prioritize gender identity and only if relevant and agreed upon by the person, follow-up with trans status: “Hélène identifies as a woman and is transgender.” Note: Avoid referencing someone’s sex assigned and name at birth as these are private and confidential pieces of information.</p>
<p>M24. Avoid writing: “He/she is transgender” (when you’re not sure what pronouns the person uses).</p>	<p>This is an approach taken by some cis people when they meet a trans person whose pronouns they do not know, so they decide to use the two sets of “he and she” pronouns, or, in some rare cases of disrespect, they use “it.”</p>	<p>A24. Use gender-neutral language until the pronouns of the transgender person are known: “This person is transgender” or “They are transgender.”</p>
<p>M25. Sometimes communications conflate gender identity and sexual orientation and, thus, unintentionally spread misinformation: “Trans people are attracted to people of the same gender.”</p>	<p>This conflation may arise from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community being seen by the general public as one whole with the same issues, when there are important distinctions, including experiences and issues.</p>	<p>A25. Clarify what the focus of the written piece is and use only the terms that are relevant. If the communication piece is about gender identity, focus on terms such as transgender and cisgender. If the communication piece is about sexual orientation, focus on terms such as gay, straight, asexual, and bisexual. Avoid making sweeping statements about all transgender people, especially about their sexual orientation. Like cisgender people, transgender people have all different types of sexual orientations.</p>
<p>M26. Some communications problematize being transgender: “This person has gender identity disorder (or gender disordered).”</p>	<p>These are outdated, medicalized terms. Being transgender is not a condition or a disorder.</p>	<p>A26. Instead use: “This person is transgender, which means their gender is different than the one that was assigned to them at birth.”</p>

What to Avoid	Reason(s) for Avoiding	Suggested Alternative(s)
<p>M27. Some communications use trans people’s previous name or name at birth, including sometimes without the person’s prior consent .</p>	<p>Using a transgender person’s name at birth can be harmful and/or outing in certain circumstances, which can put them in danger</p>	<p>A27. Note that trans people’s current name and pronouns are all that are relevant, and former names/pronouns should never be referenced, especially not in public. Trans people should also not be ‘outed’ as trans or their previous names provided without permission. This is private information that should not be shared with others, even if someone thinks it would be useful to explain their situation to others.</p>
<p>M28. Some communications talk about “preferred pronouns” when referring to transgender people.</p>	<p>Using the terms “preferred” gives the connotation of preference or being optional. Pronouns are not a preference; they simply are.</p>	<p>A28. Simply refer to the pronouns that someone uses. “Chen uses the pronouns they/them.”</p>
<p>M29. Many communications are hesitant to use pronouns (such as “they/them”) beyond the binary of “she” and “he.”</p>	<p>Some publications deem singular-use of they/ them as grammatically incorrect, or worry that their readers will see it as such.</p>	<p>A29. It is correct to use the pronouns “they/them” to refer to a single known non-binary people or to someone whose gender is not presently known. Here are some sample sentences for grammatically correct use: Afton is creative. They are a good team player. I hope someone returns their cell phone. If readers are unfamiliar with gender-neutral pronouns, consider adding a brief explanation: “Frankie Pryor, who uses both “he” and “they” pronouns, praised Lize’s approach because they needed her support.</p>
<p>M30. “Female-to-Male (FTM)” or “Male-to-Female (MTF)”</p>	<p>“FTM” and “MTF” terms overly focus on the medical aspects of transition and do not reflect all transgender experiences. Note: These terms are sometimes used among some transgender people as a convenient shorthand.</p>	<p>A30. Instead of “FTM,” use “transgender man” and instead of “MTF,” use “transgender woman”</p>

When conducting interviews with transgender people:

- Ask open-ended questions that avoid assumptions about their experiences or desired course of action (e.g., have had or want to medically transition).
- Information about anatomy or medical transition should only be discussed if raised by the interviewee or if necessary to the agreed-upon story.
- Get consent to release information, especially details about the past.
- Let the transgender person take the lead. Do not push the interviewee past their comfort zone if they decline to answer a question.
- Run questions by someone else. Or ask yourself if you would be comfortable asking your planned questions to a loved one.
- Provide copies of questions to the interviewee a week or more in advance of the interview. Be open to their feedback and adapt questions to make them feel more comfortable.
- Even if an interview is focused on transgender issues, try to reveal the multi-dimensional aspects of the person (e.g., likes hiking or has a cat, etc). Humanizing the interviewee is key and often missing in many news stories.
- Stories that bridge experiences by pulling out common themes are powerful (e.g., telling someone something that is hard but necessary or how frustrating repeated, incorrect assumptions are).

Resources

Alberta Health. 2017. Inclusive Language and Communications. Accessed November 2021:
<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/pf/div/if-pf-div-inclusive-language.pdf>

BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC). 2020. COVID-19 Language Guide. Accessed November 2021:
<http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Language-guide.pdf>

Radical Copyeditor. Style Guide for Writing about Transgender People. Accessed November 2021:
<https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2017/08/31/transgender-style-guide/>