

LGBTIQ INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE

LGBTIQ stands for
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Trans and gender diverse,
Intersex, Queer and
questioning.





INTRODUCTION: LGBTIQ INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN THE VPS

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

The LGBTIQ inclusive language guide is for Victorian Public Sector (VPS) employees. It explains how to use language respectfully and inclusively when working with and referring to LGBTIQ people. By using inclusive language, we demonstrate respect in both our workplaces and in developing and delivering policies, programs and services for all Victorians.

WHY IS LGBTIQ INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IMPORTANT FOR VPS EMPLOYEES?

LGBTIQ people have always been part of Victoria and the VPS, although they have not always been acknowledged or treated with respect. Every government policy affects LGBTIQ Victorians, and every government service has LGBTIQ clients. As public sector employees, we have a responsibility to make Victoria a safer and more inclusive place for people from diverse backgrounds. Our policies, programs and services should be relevant, inclusive and accessible for all Victorians. Our workplaces and behaviour should reflect the VPS values including respect and human rights.

When we use LGBTIQ inclusive language, we demonstrate that we respect LGBTIQ people, we build trust between the public sector and LGBTIQ communities, and we start to address the prejudice and discrimination LGBTIQ people face.

WHAT IS LGBTIQ INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

Inclusive language is a way of acknowledging and respecting the diversity of bodies, genders and relationships. People express their gender and sexuality in different ways. People can have different biological sex characteristics.

Inclusive language ensures we don't leave people out of our conversations or our work. This includes both when we are communicating directly with someone, and when describing someone who isn't present. Inclusive language acknowledges the diversity of people we work with and serve.

HOW WILL THIS GUIDE HELP ME TO USE LGBTIQ INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

This guide seeks to give you an understanding of some of the key concepts and common terms for LGBTIQ people. It also gives you practical guidance to making inclusive language part of your work in the public sector.

HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

While this guide provides an overview of LGBTIQ inclusive language, there are some VPS workplaces and services where a deeper understanding is required. For example, you might engage closely with particular communities where a deeper knowledge is needed (e.g. young trans and gender diverse people).

If you want or need to understand more about LGBTIQ communities, we encourage you to seek further information and training on inclusive language and practice. For more resources, you can contact the Equality Branch in the Department of Premier and Cabinet at equality@dpc.vic.gov.au.



WHAT ARE THE BASICS?

DON'T ASSUME A PERSON IS HETEROSEXUAL.

Don't assume that everyone is heterosexual (straight), or that this is the norm. Avoid using language such as 'wife' or 'husband' that assumes all relationships are heterosexual, as this excludes non-heterosexual people and devalues their relationships. Words and phrases such as 'partner', 'parents', 'relationship', 'in a relationship' are examples of LGBTIQ inclusive language.

GENDER, SEX AND SEXUALITY ARE ALL SEPARATE CONCEPTS.

Gender is part of how you understand who you are and how you interact with other people. Many people understand their gender as being female or male. Some people understand their gender as a combination of these or neither. Gender can be expressed in different ways, such as through behaviour or physical appearance.

Sex refers to a person's biological sex characteristics. This has historically been understood as either female or male. However, we now know that some people are born with natural variations to sex characteristics.

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

A person's gender does not necessarily mean they have particular sex characteristics or a particular sexuality, or vice versa.

LGBTIQ TERMINOLOGY IS DIVERSE AND CONSTANTLY EVOLVING.

Language used to describe different LGBTIQ people and by different parts of LGBTIQ communities changes over time and can differ across cultures and generations. There will also be differences in how people individually use or define particular terms. You may also encounter outdated or even offensive terms in medical, psychological or legal contexts.

For example, from June 2018 the World Health Organization (WHO) declassified being transgender as a mental illness. The term 'gender dysphoria' has been replaced with 'gender incongruence' and has been placed under the broader platform of sexual health.

This guide gives general advice based on current thinking, however, it's always best to ask someone how they describe themselves, and use these terms.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT, SO KEEP TRYING.

No one will get the language right 100 percent of the time for 100 per cent of people. The important thing is to keep trying and if you make a mistake, quickly apologise and continue the conversation.





Avoid asking people what terms they 'prefer'. Having a 'preference' can sound as if it's a choice and most people do not feel as if they have a choice in these matters. If you need to, you can simply ask people what terms they use.

DON'T ASK IF YOU DON'T HAVE TO.

We all have a right to privacy. We should only have to bring as much of our private selves to work as we want to and feel safe doing. Allow yourself to be led by how someone talks about themselves, their family and their relationships. Ask or be guided by them about who to share this information with.

Often LGBTIQ people from different cultures or faith traditions have different family or workplace traditions around disclosure or 'coming out'. Do not assume every person who may be comfortable being 'out' in the workplace is 'out' in other settings – people have the right to disclose about their sexuality or gender identity in their own time and on their own terms.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

Discrimination is not just wrong, it is against the law. In Victoria you must not discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or lawful sexual activity.

The Equal Opportunity Act also has a 'positive duty' to make sure that organisations prevent discrimination happening in the first place, rather than responding after a complaint has been made. The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities also says that public authorities (e.g. state and local government funded services) must act in ways that are compatible with human rights, such as taking relevant human rights into account when they are making decisions.

BEING LGBTIQ ISN'T A PREFERENCE OR A LIFESTYLE CHOICE.

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.

Recognise that LGBTIQ people have suffered and continue to experience discrimination.





WHAT TERMS ARE COMMONLY USED?

SEXUALITY

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 often used to describe men who are attracted to other men, but some women and gender diverse people may describe themselves as gay.

A **bisexual** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of their own gender and other genders.

An **asexual** person does not experience sexual attraction, but may experience romantic attraction towards others.

A **pansexual** person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of all genders, binary or non-binary.

A **heterosexual** or '**straight**' person is someone who is attracted to people of the opposite gender to themselves.

A person who is **non-binary** is someone who's gender is not exclusively female or male; while a person who is **agender** has no gender.

An **ally** is a person who considers themselves a friend and active supporter of the LGBTIQ community. This term can be used for non-LGBTIQ allies as well as those within the LGBTIQ community who support each other, e.g. a gay man who is an **ally** to the trans and gender diverse community.

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 LGBTIQ people, 'queer' has negative connotations, because in the past it was used as a derogatory term.

Questioning The 'Q' in LGBTIQ is used here as 'Queer and questioning'. Rather than be locked in to a certainty, some people are still exploring or questioning their gender or sexual orientation. People may not wish to have one of the other labels applied to them yet, for a variety of reasons, but may still wish to be clear, for example, that they are non-binary or non-heterosexual. It is important these individuals feel welcome and included in the acronym and community spaces.

The use of queer can differ between different groups and generations. For some people, especially older LGBTIQ people, 'queer' has negative connotations because of its historical use as a derogatory term. The term has been reclaimed in recent years and is increasingly used, particularly by younger LGBTIQ people, in an empowering way or to describe themselves.¹

GENDER

A **trans** (short for **transgender**) person is someone whose gender does not exclusively align with the one they were assigned at birth.

Trans can be used as an umbrella term, but not everyone uses it to describe themselves. For example, a man who was assigned female at birth might refer to himself as 'a trans man', 'a man with a trans history' or just 'a man'. It's important to use the terms someone uses to describe themselves.





Gender diverse generally refers to a range of genders expressed in different ways. There are many terms used by gender diverse people to describe themselves. Language in this space is dynamic, particularly among young people, who are more likely to describe themselves as non-binary.²

Gender incongruence – is the preferred sexual health classification of transgender and gender diverse people by the World Health Organisation (WHO). WHO describes gender incongruence as ‘characterised by a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual’s experienced gender and the assigned sex’. It replaces the stigmatising term ‘gender dysphoria’ which was used previously.

The terms **sistergirls** and **brotherboys** are general terms used in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to describe transgender people and their relationships as a way of validating and strengthening their gender identities and relationships.

The terms **sistergirls** and **brotherboys** may also be used by non trans, but non-conforming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - for example, both **lesbian and heterosexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women** may refer to themselves as ‘sistergirls’, ‘sisters’ or ‘tiddas’, which is a shortened version in Aboriginal English of the word ‘sisters’. Gay Aboriginal men may also refer to themselves as **sisters**.

A cis (pronounced ‘sis’, short for cisgender) person is someone whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth – someone who isn’t trans or gender diverse.

Transition or affirmation refers to the process where a trans or gender diverse person takes steps to socially and/or physically feel more aligned with their gender. There is a wide range of ways this process differs between people. Some people may change how they interact with others, and others may change their appearance or seek medical assistance to better express their gender.

SEX CHARACTERISTICS

An intersex person is born with atypical natural variations to physical or biological sex characteristics such as variations in chromosomes, hormones or anatomy. Intersex traits are a natural part of human bodily diversity. Not all intersex people use the term intersex.³

Intersex people have a diversity of bodies, genders and sexualities. 1.7 per cent of children born in Australia are estimated to be born with an intersex variation.⁴ There are many different intersex variations, which may or may not be evident at birth, and which have their own terms.

DESCRIBING LGBTIQ COMMUNITIES

The VPS is moving towards using **LGBTIQ, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and questioning** as an inclusive umbrella abbreviation to encompass a range of diverse sexualities, genders and sex characteristics. It has a growing level of recognition and understanding in Victoria. When writing about LGBTIQ people it is best to use the term ‘communities’, as these are many separate and distinct communities within this umbrella term.





People may fit more than one of these terms. Heterosexual and cisgender people can be part of LGBTIQ communities. For example, there are straight trans and intersex people.

While LGBTIQ communities often work together, for example to advocate for equal rights, they are different communities with their own distinct experiences, needs and priorities.

You may encounter other abbreviations. LGBTI is used a lot still within government systems, LGBTIQ is more broadly understood and accepted across communities. Sometimes you will see LGBTIQ+, where the + sign is generally used to represent genders and sexualities outside of the letters LGBTIQ, including people who are questioning their gender or sexuality. You may also encounter more specific umbrella terms, such as QTPOC (Queer, Trans, Intersex, Person of Colour), or broader terms such as Queer Community or Rainbow Community.

Each year on 17 May, many departments observe **IDAHOBIT**: the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Discrimination against people with an Intersex variation and Transphobia. Some departments have used the incorrect term 'intersexism' when spelling out this acronym.

INTERSECTIONALITY Intersectionality describes how different parts of a person's identity or circumstances – such as age, race, culture, disability, gender, location or religion – intersect and combine to shape people's life experiences, including of discrimination.⁵

Being LGBTIQ is only one part of any person or community. Intersectionality recognises that the different parts of someone's identity and circumstances cannot be disentangled or considered in isolation. Intersectionality is a way of seeing the whole person.

In the public sector, an understanding of intersectionality is key to designing and implementing effective policies, programs and services.

RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILIES

There are many kinds of relationships among LGBTIQ people. Some people may live together or separately. Some people may choose to recognise their relationships formally through marriage. Relationships can involve people of the same gender or different genders.

If you need to write or talk about it, ask people how they describe their relationships and use their terminology.

There are also many kinds of families. There are complexities in diverse rainbow family forms. This can include single parents, foster parents, blended families, shared parenting and a diverse range of carers. It's best to ask someone how they describe their family arrangement and use their terms. When talking about families, it's important to remember that some trans men and gender diverse people can carry pregnancies.





HOW CAN I USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

This guide contains a lot of information, and you might not be sure how to translate that information into your workplace and your work. The key is to practice, ask for and be open to feedback and to keep trying. We've answered some common questions about using inclusive language below.

If you have a question you'd like answered or you'd like to add to this list, we'd love to hear from you. You can email us at equality@dpc.vic.gov.au.

WHAT ARE THE BASICS OF USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

Using inclusive language makes a real difference to LGBTIQ people. Our top three tips are:

- 1 If someone discloses to you that they're from one of the LGBTIQ communities, respectfully ask what terms they use to describe themselves, then use those terms.
- 2 Don't question or make assumptions about someone's gender, sexuality or relationship. Accept and respect how people define their gender and sexuality.
- 3 Use language that acknowledges that we have diverse relationships and families. This can mean using words like "partner" or "parents", particularly when describing groups of people.

HOW SHOULD I USE PRONOUNS?

Pronouns are one way people refer to each other and themselves. Most but not all men (including trans men) use the pronoun 'he'. Likewise, most but not all women (including trans women) use the pronoun 'she'. Some people use a gender-neutral pronoun such as 'they' (e.g., "Pip drives their car to work. They don't like walking because it takes them too long").

If you're unsure what someone's pronoun is, you can ask them respectfully, and preferably privately. Use a question like "Can I ask what pronoun you use?". Do not ask "What pronoun do you prefer?". A person's pronoun and identity are not a preference. Instead, just ask what pronoun they use.

Some people's pronouns may be context-specific. For example, someone might not use their pronoun in a particular environment or around particular people because they do not feel safe or comfortable to do so.





WHAT IF I MAKE A MISTAKE?

People may worry that they will offend or be embarrassed if they use the wrong term, name or pronoun, particularly for trans and gender diverse people.

It's important to try to use respectful language and some mistakes are understandable, particularly when you are learning. If you make a mistake, apologise promptly and move on. Don't dwell on it, and don't give up – keep trying to get it right.

Repeated mistakes indicate a lack of respect, and can be very distressing. If it continues or is deliberate, it could constitute bullying or discrimination which is unlawful.

HOW SHOULD I WELCOME PEOPLE TO MEETINGS OR EVENTS?

You can easily include everyone and every gender by saying things like "Welcome, everyone" or "Good morning, folks". These broader terms can also be useful when sending emails to large groups or departments

I WRITE A LOT OF FORMAL LETTERS. WHAT TITLES SHOULD I USE?

In general, where possible, use the title that person uses. For example, copy the title they use in their correspondence. In some cases, you may be able to ask what title they use. If they don't use a title, do not add one. It is fine to simply address them by their first and last names.

Gender neutral titles like Dr can always be used, but gendered titles such as Ms, Miss, Mrs or Mr may not apply to and may offend some people.

I DO A LOT OF MY WORK BY PHONE. WHAT SHOULD I KEEP IN MIND?

Remember, the sound of a person's voice isn't a reliable indicator of their gender particularly on the phone. Do not address someone on the phone by gendered terms such as 'madam' or 'sir' if you don't know their gender. Ask and call them by their name.

HOW DO I ASK FOR PRONOUNS WHEN INVITING PEOPLE FOR A JOB INTERVIEW?

You can use a friendly tone in your email invitation. Here's an example:

"For the comfort of everyone in the interview, please feel free to let me know ahead of your interview details of:

- › what pronoun you use (e.g. he/him, she/her, they/them); and
- › what name you would like us to refer to you by."

I NEED TO EXHIBIT AUTHORITY IN A FORMAL SETTING. WHAT TITLES SHOULD I USE?

In some settings, such as courts, or complaint-handling bodies, titles are used to indicate formality or to intervene when a situation escalates. In these situations, judges, for example, might refer to someone by traditionally gendered titles, such as "Mr. Brown! Please take your seat!" As above, if someone has offered a title, it is fine to use that. Some judges have suggested a more gender neutral 'catch-all' title, such as 'citizen'. Others have suggested, in complaint handling agencies, that people are referred to by their official role in the proceeding. Here's some examples:

- › "Plaintiff Smith! Please refrain from raising your voice in my chambers!"; and
- › "Would the complainant now state their side of the matter?"

WHAT TERMS SHOULD I AVOID?

You should always avoid LGBTIQ terminology being used in a derogatory way, e.g. the word 'gay' when used in a negative way to refer to a situation or event unrelated to sexuality. You should not use words you've heard being used to put down or attack LGBTIQ people.





WHAT CAN I ASK AN LGBTIQ PERSON?

Many LGBTIQ people get asked a lot of questions about LGBTIQ experiences, issues or terminology. While it's good to check in with a person's individual terms, they shouldn't be expected to speak for diverse communities.

One guiding principle is not to ask someone a question if you would feel uncomfortable answering it yourself. Considering that LGBTIQ people experience significant discrimination, consider that they might wish to keep personal information even more private. Questions about body parts, medical history, relationship history and sexual activity are generally intrusive, rude and inappropriate in the workplace.

HOW CAN I COLLECT DATA ON LGBTIQ PEOPLE?

Firstly – consider do you really need the information? Sometimes, for example, information on gender is collected but is not really required. In some contexts, like in health services, you may need to know more personal information. If it's critical to collect information about **gender**, you should follow the VPS's standard model for collecting gender information from staff:

What is your gender?

Woman

Man

Self-described (please specify):

.....

The best way to collect information about **sex characteristics or sexuality** will vary depending on the particular context. You can contact Equality Branch at equality@dpc.vic.gov.au for advice on this.

HOW ELSE CAN I BE INCLUSIVE IN MY WORK?

When you start to consider the different genders, sexualities and sex characteristics across our community, you can start to identify things beyond language that can demonstrate respect and support inclusion. Examples include considering:

- › how we reflect the diversity in our communities in photographs and illustrations
- › how requirements like dress codes can be restrictive
- › how we design, develop and refer to infrastructure, e.g. gender-neutral toilets and change rooms
- › how we draft, publish and update forms, surveys and legislation that are inclusive of non-binary and gender diverse people.

You can support inclusive policies and practices by getting LGBTIQ awareness or inclusion training for your workplace, supporting your department's Pride Network as an ally or hosting LGBTIQ events such as IDAHOBIT or Wear it Purple Day as well as ensuring LGBTIQ people know that your workplace and services welcome them.





ENDNOTES

- 1 For example, Julie Mooney-Somers et al, *Women in contact with the gay and lesbian community in Sydney: Report of the Sydney women and sexual health (SWASH) survey 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016* (ACON & Sydney Health Ethics, University of Sydney, 2017) 12.
- 2 Penelope Strauss et al, *Trans pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people – Summary of results* (Telethon Kids Institute, 2017) 20.
- 3 Intersex Human Rights Australia, *Demographics* (28 July 2016) <<https://ihra.org.au/demographics/>>.
- 4 Intersex Human Rights Australia, *Intersex for Allies* (21 November 2012) <<https://ihra.org.au/allies/>>.
- 5 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex' (1989) *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139.

