

Glossary

Language is an extremely powerful tool. It allows us to generate ideas, share stories, and learn and grow from others. Whether spoken, signed, or written, all languages are constantly evolving, and, despite their imperfections, can help us better understand our world and communicate our perspective with others.

The Internet has played a tremendous role in the evolution of language by offering people the chance to connect with peers around the globe. This has been especially true for the LGBTQ community. Many young people today discover who they are online, and find positive words there to describe how they feel and identify. That can be a wonderful and empowering experience. Consider this quote from Lucian Clark in *Through Labels We Exist*, an article published on <https://genderterror.com/> in 2013:

“Labels are important. They allow us to not only understand the world around us, but ourselves. Many of us struggle with what labels to apply to ourselves. We cycle through them, try them on like shirts, and discard the ones that do not fit. Some of us try on many more labels, while others may be perfectly fine with those assigned to them through others. I mean, some of us do take longer to get ready, no?”

Throughout this guide, we hear from individuals whose stories are told using labels they’ve come to embrace and love. These can be found below. They are words that help listeners like you and me understand who someone is and how they wish to identify. Some of these terms are used universally by LGBTQ people, while others relate to the following concepts specifically:

Gender Expression (GE). The external manifestations of gender, expressed through such things as names,

pronouns, clothing, haircuts, behavior, voice, body characteristics, and more.

Gender Identity (GI). One’s internal, deeply held sense of gender. Some people identify completely with the gender they were assigned at birth (usually male or female), while others may identify with only a part of that gender, or not at all. Some people identify with another gender entirely. Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not visible to others.

Sex (S). At birth, infants are commonly assigned a sex. This is usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy, and is often confused with gender. However, a person’s sex is actually a combination of bodily characteristics including chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics. As a result, there are many more sexes than just the binary male and female, just as there are many more genders than just male and female.

Sexual Orientation (SO). The desire one has for emotional, romantic, and/or sexual relationships with others based on their gender expression, gender identity, and/or sex. Many people choose to label their sexual orientation, while others do not.

Please note that the following list is by no means comprehensive. These are simply the words referenced in this guide’s lesson plans and *It Gets Better* videos specifically. There are many more words out there that represent the vast diversity of the LGBTQ community. For many, it’s a living and evolving language. To learn more, check out such great resources as the GLAAD Media Reference Guide (10th Edition), or the Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER) website.



Ally (GE, GI, S, SO)

Noun. Someone who supports equal civil rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ social movements; advocates on behalf of others; and challenges fear and discrimination in all its forms.

Asexual, or ace (SO)

Adjective. Someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction, or who experiences attraction but doesn't feel the need to act out that attraction sexually. Many people who are asexual still identify with a specific sexual orientation.

Binary (GE, GI, S, SO)

Noun. The belief that such things as gender identity have only two distinct, opposite, and disconnected forms. In other words, they believe in the gender binary, that only male and female genders exist. As a rejection of this belief, many people embrace a non-binary gender identity (see Gender Nonconforming).

Bisexual, or bi (SO)

Adjective. Someone who is attracted to those of their same gender as well as to those of a different gender (for example, a woman who is attracted to both women and men). Some people use the word bisexual as an umbrella term to describe individuals that are attracted to more than one gender. In this way, the term is closely related to pansexual, or omniseual, meaning someone who is attracted to people of any gender identity.

Butch, or masc (GE)

Adjective. Someone whose gender expression is masculine. Butch is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but it can also be claimed as an affirmative identity label. In many communities of color in the United States, words like “stud” and “aggressive” are commonly used instead. Other gender expressions include androgynous (or androgyne, someone who presents as neither male or female, mixed, or neutral), femme (or fem, someone whose gender expression is feminine), and stemme (or stem, someone whose gender expression is both masculine and feminine).

Cisgender, or cis (GI)

Adjective. A person whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth.

Coming Out (GE, GI, S, SO)

Verb, noun. The process through which a person accepts their sexual orientation and/or gender identity as part of their overall identity. For many, this involves sharing that identity with others, which makes it more of a lifetime process rather than just a one-time experience.

Crossdresser (GE)

Noun. Someone who wears clothes associated with a different gender. This activity is a form of gender expression, and is not always done for entertainment purposes. Many crossdressers may not wish to present as a different gender all of the time. (NOTE: Avoid using the term “transvestite.”)

Drag (GE)

Noun, adjective. The act of presenting as a different gender, usually for the purpose of entertainment (i.e. drag kings and queens). Many people who do drag may not wish to present as a different gender all of the time.

Gay (SO)

Adjective. Someone who is attracted to those of their same gender. This is often used as an umbrella term, but is used more specifically to describe men who are attracted to men. (NOTE: Avoid using the term “homosexual.” Because of the clinical history of the word, many feel that the term suggests that gay people are somehow diseased or psychologically/emotionally disordered.)

Gender Affirmation Surgery (GE)

Noun. Medical procedures that some individuals elect to undergo to change their physical appearance to more closely resemble how they view their gender identity. (NOTE: Avoid saying inaccurate phrases such as “sex change,” “gender reassignment surgery,” or “pre- or post-operative,” and, in general, avoid overemphasizing surgery when discussing transgender people or the process of transition.)

Gender Nonconforming (GE, GI)

Adjective. Someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not conform to the cultural or social expectations of gender, particularly in relation to male or female. This can be an umbrella term for many identities including, but not limited to:

Agender (or neutrois, gender neutral, or genderless) — someone who has little or no personal connection with gender.

Bigender — someone who identifies with both male and female genders, or even a third gender.

Genderfluid — someone whose gender identity and/or expression varies over time.

Genderqueer (or third gender) — someone whose gender identity and/or expression falls between or outside of male and female.

Intergender — someone whose identity is between genders and/or a combination of gender identities and expressions.

Pangender — someone whose identity is comprised of all or many gender identities and expressions.

Intersectionality (GE, GI, S, SO)

Noun. The idea that multiple identities intersect to create a whole that is different from its distinct parts. To understand someone, it is important to acknowledge that each of their identities is important and inextricably linked with all of the others. These can include identities related to gender, race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, age, mental and/or physical ability, and more.



Intersex (S)

Adjective. Someone who, due to a variety of factors, has reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions for the female or male sex. Some people who are intersex may identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, while many others do not.

Lesbian (SO)

Adjective, noun. A woman who is attracted to other women. Some lesbians prefer to identify as gay women.

LGBT+ (GE, GI, S, SO)

Adjective. The acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender” (sometimes seen as “GLBT”). The plus sign represents the fact that many communities choose to expand the acronym to include other identities. For example, while it is common in the United States to see “LGBT” or “LGBTQ” (for queer), it is more common to see “LGBTI” (for intersex) in Europe.

Pride (GE, GI, S, SO)

Noun. The celebration of LGBTQ identities, and of the global LGBTQ community’s resistance against discrimination and violence. Pride events are celebrated in many countries around the world, usually during the month of June to commemorate the Stonewall Riots that began in New York City in June 1969, a pivotal moment in the modern LGBTQ movement.

Queer (GE, GI, S, SO)

Adjective. In a very basic sense, anyone who is not heterosexual and/or cisgender. In the past, queer was a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, and thus it is sometimes disliked. But the term is increasingly being used to describe all identities and politics that go against normative beliefs. As such, the term is valued by many LGBTQ people for its defiance and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities.

Questioning (GI, GE, SO)

Noun, verb. A time in many people’s lives when they question or experiment with their gender expression, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation. This experience is unique to everyone; for some, it can last a lifetime or be repeated many times over the course of a lifetime.

Straight, or heterosexual (SO)

Adjective. A word to describe women who are attracted to men and men who are attracted to women. This is not exclusive to those who are cisgender. For example, some transgender men identify as straight because they are attracted to women.

They/Them/Their (GE)

Pronouns. One of many sets of gender-neutral singular pronouns in English that can be used as an alternative to he/him/his or she/her/hers. Usage of this particular set is becoming more and more prevalent, particularly within the LGBTQ community.

Transgender, or trans (GI)

Adjective. Someone whose gender identity differs from the one that was assigned to them at birth. Many transgender people identify as either male or female, while others may see transgender as an umbrella term and identify as gender nonconforming or queer. How transgender people choose to express their gender is individualistic, as is their transition. (NOTE: Avoid using transgender as a noun, as in “a transgender,” or with an extraneous -ed on the end, as in “transgendered.”)

Transsexual (GI)

Adjective. Someone who has undergone, or wishes to undergo, gender affirmation surgery. (NOTE: This is an older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual, although the term is preferred by some.)

Transition (GE)

Noun. The process through which some transgender people change their gender expression to more closely resemble how they view their gender identity. This can include personal, medical, and legal steps, such as using a different name and pronouns; dressing differently; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; or gender affirmation surgery. Some transgender people may not choose to make these changes or may only make a few. The experience is an individual one; there is no right or wrong way to transition.