THE RADICAL COPYEDITOR'S STYLE GUIDE FOR WRITING ABOUT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Introduction (Read This First)

A style guide for writing about transgender people is practically an oxymoron. Style guides are designed to create absolutes—bringing rules and order to a meandering and contradictory patchwork quilt of a language. Yet there are no absolutes when it comes to gender. That's why this is a radical copyeditor's style guide. Radical copyediting isn't about absolutes; it's about context and care.

There are profound reasons for why the language that trans people use to describe ourselves and our communities changes and evolves so quickly. In Western culture, non-trans people have for centuries created the language that describes us, and this language has long labeled us as deviant, criminal, pathological, unwell, and/or unreal.

As trans people have fought for survival, we have also fought for the right to describe ourselves in our own language and to reject language that criminalizes, pathologizes, or invisibilizes us. Just as there is no monolithic transgender community, there is also no one "correct" way to speak or write about trans people.


Writing about transgender people? Check out the radical copyeditor's style guide for how to do it well.

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How to use this guide:

1. Treat it as general guidance, not concrete rules.
2. Focus on how to practice care toward people whose experience of gender is different from yours.
3. Consider context. Language choices depend on context: medical environments versus online dating, young children versus elders, USA versus Australia, and so on. Recognize, in particular, that the language used within trans cultural contexts can be far more nuanced than the language outsiders use to describe trans people and trans experiences.

How not to use this guide:

1. Do not use this guide to harshly police or shame others' language choices.
2. Do not use this guide to tell trans people that they are using incorrect language, regardless of whether you yourself are trans or not. A general best practice should never supersede a trans person's right to use whatever language feels best to them.
3. Do not care more about words than you do about people.

The purpose of this style guide is to help people of all gender identities and experiences practice more care toward those on the margins. Trans people must be understood as the authorities on ourselves and the language used to describe us. Not only does this mean that cisgender (non-trans) people need to practice
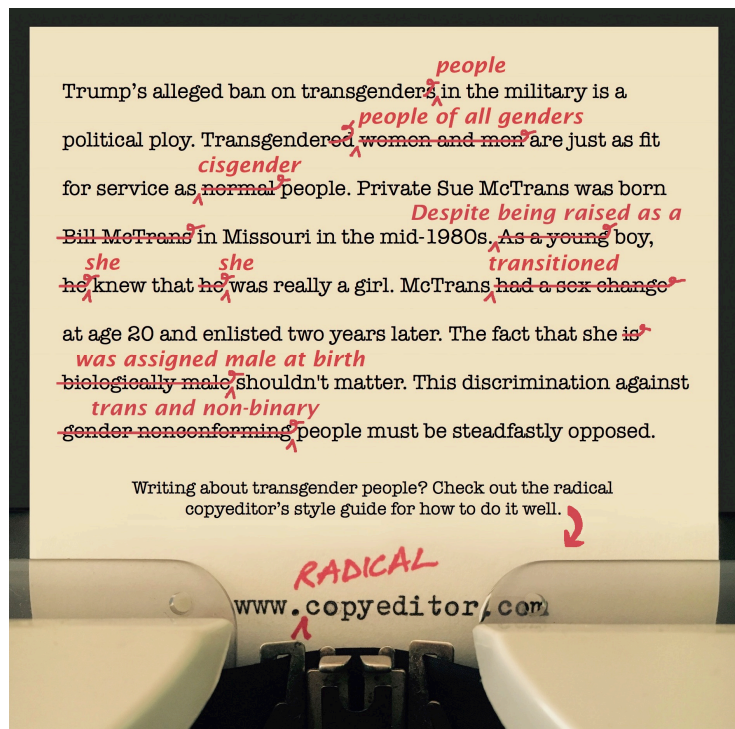
humility and care toward trans people, but it also means that trans people—particularly those with educational, financial, and/or racial privilege—need to practice humility and care toward other trans people—particularly those who are folks of color, low-income, less educated, and/or elders.

If you are trans, I highly recommend inoculating yourself against the temptation to police other trans people's language by reading "words don't kill people, people kill words" and the glossary introduction "there is no perfect word," both by Julia Serano, as well as "I Was Recently Informed I'm Not a Transsexual," by Riki Wilchins.

Note: Like all style guides, what follows is about language usage, not definitions; for a comprehensive glossary of transgender-related terminology, check out this one from Julia Serano.

Also note: This guide was written in a U.S. context. Although the general guidance in it is broadly applicable, the specifics may differ in other countries.

Transgender Style Guide

Section 1. Correct/current usage of transgender-related language

1.1. *Transgender* is an adjective.

> Use: *transgender people; a transgender person*

> Avoid: *transgenders; transgendered*

1.2. *Transgender* is not a sexual orientation.

> Correct terms in a transgender context: *gender; gender identity and expression*

> Incorrect terms in a transgender context: *sexual identity; sexuality*
> Avoid: *Are you straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (pick one)?*

1.3. *Transition* is the correct word for the social and/or medical process of publicly living into one's true gender.

> Use: *Chris transitioned at age 32; the transition process*

> Avoid: *Chris is transgendering; Chris had a sex change; Chris had "the surgery"; Chris became a woman*

1.4. *Transgender* does not refer only to binary-identified trans women and men. Many trans people (35%) are non-binary.*

> Use: *transgender people; people of all genders*

> Avoid (in reference to all trans people): *transgender women and men*

In popular culture, *transgender* is often exclusively used to refer to binary-identified trans women and men (those who were assigned male at birth and identify as female, or vice versa). Yet *transgender* refers to all those whose gender identities do not align, according to societal

expectations, with their birth-assigned sex. This includes non-binary people—those who do not identify (exclusively or at all) as women or men.

Out of respect for the fact that the word *transgender* is so often used in ways that (incorrectly) do not include non-binary people, it is currently considered a best practice to say *transgender and non-binary people* when referring to all those whose gender identities are different than what might be expected based on their birth-assigned sex. Yet the word *transgender* should never be assumed to only refer to binary-identified trans people.

> → A note on *trans, trans*,* and *trans+*: All three of these terms are used as abbreviations of *transgender* and/or as ways to more explicitly communicate inclusion of the full breadth of people whose gender identities are something other than was expected of them at birth. *Trans** came about in the 1990s and had a huge but relatively brief spurt of popularity in the early 2010s. *Trans+* is a more recent variant that plays on the trend of adding a plus sign to terms like LGBTQ to denote greater inclusion.
>
> In an international context, according to UK-based oatc: "*trans* is equally used as an abbreviation of *transsexual, transgressive, transexuale, transexuelle, travestie,* etc., and to encompass all those, and the thousands of other, equally valid, and often much valued, terms used used across the world's cultures, where *transgender* can sometimes be a culturally imperialist term."

1.5. **The terms *gender nonconforming* and *non-binary* are not synonyms.**

Gender nonconforming refers to a person whose gender expression (by way of dress, mannerisms, roles, career, and/or lots of other things) does not conform to stereotypical gender expectations for someone of their gender. Examples of gender nonconforming people might include masculine women, effeminate men, women pilots, male ballet dancers, and young girls with short hair.

Non-binary, or *gender non-binary,* refers to a person whose internal sense of self is not exclusively woman/female or man/male. Some non-binary people identify as both woman and man (e.g., bigender people), some identify as a different gender entirely (e.g., genderqueer people), and some do not identify with any gender (e.g., agender people).

Many people are non-binary in terms of identity and also gender nonconforming in terms of expression, but plenty of other people are only one or the other. It's important not to use these terms interchangeably.

> → A note on *gender variant, gender expansive, gender creative, gender diverse, gender fabulous,* etc.: Many terms have sprung up over the years to refer to the full spectrum of those who are both gender nonconforming and/or non-binary. Best practices include avoiding terms that carry a negative connotation (e.g., *gender deviant*), and also avoiding using terms inaccurately (e.g., *diverse* does not mean "different from the norm," it just means "varied"—therefore, *gender diverse* should refer to a group of people with varied genders, not a single person or a group of people whose gender is different from the norm).

1.6. *Transgender* is a descriptive term, not (usually) a gender and not always an identity.

> Use: *transgender people; transgender history or identity*

> Avoid: *people who identify as transgender; man, woman, or transgender (pick one)*

Transgender means having a gender identity that does not align, according to societal expectations, with one's birth-assigned sex. *Cisgender* means having a gender identity that does align with one's birth-assigned sex. Just as *cisgender* is a descriptive term, not a gender itself, so too is *transgender* a descriptive term. Some genders include woman, man, genderqueer, two spirit, agender, and bigender, for example. *Transgender* is not, for the vast majority of people, a gender, and while some people identify as trans, or as trans women or trans men, others do not consider being trans a part of their identity, and identify solely as genderqueer, or women, or men, for example. Some people describe themselves as a "woman of transsexual experience" or a "man with a history of gender transition," as additional examples.

Section 2. Bias-free and respectful language in reference to transgender people

2.1. **Avoid language that reduces people to their birth-assigned sex or their (assumed) biology.**

> Use: *assigned female at birth; assigned male at birth*

> Avoid: *born a woman; born a man; biologically female; biologically male; genetically female; genetically male; pre-op; post-op*

2.2. **Avoid treating transgender people as though we have "a condition."**

> Use: *Monique is transgender; being transgender is not a crime*
> Use: *gender dysphoria*

> Avoid: *Monique has transgenderism; transsexualism/transsexuality is a sin*
> Avoid: *gender disordered; gender identity disorder* (outdated)

Note that throughout history, in order to gain access to medical interventions such as gender-affirming hormones and surgery, many trans people have been forced to prove they have a psychiatric and/or medical condition that requires treatment, which has often meant using the language of the medical field regardless of whether that language feels authentic. Language around diagnoses, pathologization, and access to health care is <u>complex and differs</u> from country to country.

2.3. **Avoid language that puts more value on being or appearing cisgender (not trans), or that carries judgments or biases around how public a person is about being trans.**

> Use: *openly transgender; not openly transgender*

> Avoid: *passes; stealth; you'd never be able to tell*

Although some transgender people use the terms *stealth* and *passing*, it's not appropriate for non-trans people to use this language unless they are explicitly asked to by a trans person. As Janet

Mock has [eloquently spoken to](#), terms like these imply that trans people who are perceived as cisgender (or not trans) are engaging in deception simply by being themselves.

> → A note on *out* and *closeted*: *Coming out* is the process of becoming aware of your authentic identity and/or sharing that identity with others. A trans man who has transitioned is fully *out* as a man; whether or not he chooses to share his gender history with others is irrelevant. Being *closeted* means denying one's identity to oneself and/or others, but if one's identity is *man* and one is living life fully as a man, one is *out*. When a person shares that they have a history of gender transition, that is a *disclosure*, not an act of coming out.

2.4. Names, pronouns, and prefixes

2.4.1. Always use a person's correct name, pronouns (or lack thereof), and prefix (if any). Always.

> Use: *Avery dyed zir hair; Lynn loves their grandson; Monica is her own best advocate; Marcus drove gher car with care; Xander tied hir shoes; Sam ate Sam's lunch at Sam's apartment*

The first and foremost way to respect and honor a transgender person's personhood is to respect the language they use to refer to themself. Transgender people have been forced to forge new paths in language in order to carve out space for our very existence. Because there are more than two, three, four, or five genders in the world, there are more than two, three, four, or five pronouns, and all are equally valid—including some people's choice to be referred to using no pronouns at all.

2.4.2. Using a transgender person's birth name or former pronouns without permission (even when talking about them in the past) is a form of violence.

> Use: *Bridget knew from the age of 3 that she was a girl.*

> Avoid: *At the age of 3, Bob announced that he was a girl. After transitioning, Bob—now Bridget—threw out her old clothes.*

Some transgender people do use a different name and/or pronouns to talk about themselves prior to transition, but this is rare. Unless you are told differently, only use a person's true/current name and pronouns, even when writing about them in the past.

2.4.3. Pronouns are simply pronouns. They aren't "preferred" and they aren't inherently tied to gender identity or biology.

> Use: *pronouns; personal pronouns; she/her/hers; he/him/his; they/them/theirs; ze/zir/zirs; Sam/Sam/Sam* (and any other pronoun or combination)

> Avoid: *preferred pronouns; masculine pronouns; feminine pronouns; male pronouns; female pronouns*

As J. Mase III once succinctly put it, "my pronouns aren't preferred; they're required." A person's correct pronouns are not a preference; neither are pronouns inherently masculine, feminine, male, or female: for example, a masculine person could use she/her/hers pronouns and a female person could use they/them/theirs pronouns.

2.4.4. **Respect singular *they* as a personal pronoun and use it appropriately.**

Use: *Elizabeth loves their cat; they are a big cat lover; they did something nice for themself yesterday*

They/them/theirs has shot up in popularity in recent years as a personal pronoun for non-binary people. Despite what your third-grade English teacher might have told you, there is nothing incorrect about using *they* singularly. In fact, *they* is taking off in a way that *ze* or *per* or *co* or any of the hundreds of other invented pronouns never did precisely because of its existing "off-label" use as a singular pronoun (see 3.1). Note that binary people's potential discomfort with new word usage must not take priority over the pain and trauma non-binary people experience when we are mispronouned and/or misgendered.

Many dictionaries have addressed and/or endorsed this use already, including Merriam-Webster, the Oxford English Dictionary, and the American Heritage Dictionary; the American Dialect Society voted singular they 2015 Word of the Year; and in March 2017 AP style got on board as well.

When using singular they, verb conjugations follow the same rules as those for singular you: *they did, they are, themself | you did, you are, yourself.*

Note that although many non-binary people go by *they/them/theirs*, many others go by different pronouns (see 2.4.1). If a non-binary person goes by *ze/zir/zirs*, for example, referring to them using *they/them/theirs* is still an act of mispronouning. See Grammarly for more.

2.5. **Respect the diversity of language that people use to describe themselves.**

It is a human tendency to try to make sense of the world by categorizing things, including people—but gender, in its true diversity, defies categorization. Biology is incredibly varied, and the meaning we draw from it is even more so. As noted in the introduction to this guide, transgender people must be understood as the ultimate authorities on ourselves and the language used to describe us, even when doings so goes against things like style guides (this one or any other). Something as seemingly small as the difference between *trans man* and *transman* can have enormous significance to a person.

2.6. **Practice particular sensitivity around culture-specific language related to gender identity and expression.**

Gender is culturally constructed, which means that there isn't a set, finite number of gendered experiences that transcend language; rather, cultural context is everything when it comes to gender. For example, *two spirit* is a beautifully complex term that doesn't entirely translate outside of North American Indigenous cultures; just as terms like *hijra, māhū, fa'afafine,* and many others aren't fully translatable outside their cultural contexts. Similarly, terms like *stud* and *aggressive* are terms that are specific to Black culture.

Historical context is also important. For example, it's undeniable that Joan of Arc did not conform to the gender norms of her day, but describing her as *transgender* isn't accurate, because today's cultural understanding of what *transgender* means can't be applied to people from a different era without knowing how they understood themselves in their own context.

2.7. **Practice particular sensitivity around bodies and anatomy.**

> Avoid: *female-bodied; male-bodied*

Some trans and non-binary people refer to themselves as being female-bodied or male-bodied, but this is never appropriate language for cisgender people to use. Trans folks employ all sorts of wonderfully creative language to refer to our body parts, and it is important that others—particularly our loved ones and medical providers—respect and mirror the language we use to describe our anatomy.

This isn't just about respect. For people with gender dysphoria, referring to our anatomy—particularly reproductive anatomy—using language that we don't associate ourselves with can be deeply triggering and traumatic.

So, when referring to trans and non-binary people, if you are someone (like a medical provider) who needs to refer to our anatomy, use generic and broad terminology (e.g., *genitals*, *reproductive organs*, and *chest*) instead of gender-loaded words (e.g., *vagina*, *penis*, and *breasts*). See 3.4 for more on sensitivity around anatomy-related language.

If you are a medical provider, check out these ten tips and standards of care from RAD Remedy.

Section 3. Sensitive and inclusive broader language

3.1. **Recognize that there are more than two genders. Use "singular they" in a generic sense and avoid the language of gender opposites.**

> Use: *Honor each person's truth about their identity; everyone; people of all genders; siblings; kindred*

> Avoid: *Honor each person's truth about his or her identity; men and women; the opposite sex; both genders; brothers and sisters*

Using *they/them/theirs* to refer to a person whose gender is unknown has a long and fairly consistent history in the English language, and many different people have documented how using *they* in both singular and plural fashion is grammatically correct, just as *you* can be used in both singular and plural fashion. Doing so is an essential way to create linguistic space for the existence of non-binary people.

3.2. **Do not use *LGBTQ* or its many variants (*LGBT*, *LGBTQIA+*, etc.) as a synonym for *gay*.**

> Use: *LGBTQ people versus non-LGBTQ people*

> Avoid: *LGBTQ people versus straight people*

If you're using an acronym that includes transgender people, it's important to actually include trans people in the context of what you are writing about. For example, if you're only writing about people in same-sex relationships, or if you're trying to refer to everyone with a marginalized sexuality, don't use *LGBTQ*. Some transgender people (15%) identify as straight.* *LGBTQ* and *straight/heterosexual* are not, therefore, opposites, and should never be treated as such.

3.3. Recognize *queer* as a valid sexual orientation.

More transgender people identify as queer (21%) than any other sexual orientation.* Although mainstream style guides and dictionaries have refused to recognize the evolution of this word, writing sensitively about transgender people requires honoring the language we use to describe not only our genders but also our sexualities. *Queer* is a complex word with many different definitions, and in the context of transgender communities, it must be recognized as a valid identity term.

3.4. Decouple anatomy from identity in your language.

Contrary to popular belief, anatomy is not inherently female or male. First of all, intersex people exist, and the Intersex Society of North America once estimated that as many as 1 in 100 bodies differ biologically from what is considered standard for females and males. Second, because of the existence of trans people, there are plenty of men who can get pregnant and plenty of women who need prostate exams (as just two examples).

What this means is that saying "women" as shorthand for all people who can menstruate or get pregnant, for example, or "MSM" (for "men who have sex with men") as the category of people most at risk for particular sexually transmitted infections, as another example, is neither fully accurate nor inclusive of trans and non-binary people.

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2.7 and 3.4: Bodies and anatomy

Pregnant women.

Pregnant people.

All men over 40 should get a prostate exam.

Everyone over 40 with a prostate should get screened for prostate cancer.

This product is for women and girls.

This product is for people who menstruate.

Re: trans people: Trans and non-binary folks employ all sorts of wonderfully creative language to refer to our body parts, and it's important that others respect and mirror that language. If you need to refer to our anatomy, find out what language we use and/or avoid gender-loaded words.

Re: people in general: Anatomy is not inherently female or male; words like *women* and *men* do not speak to universal truths about bodies or experiences. Decouple anatomy from identity in your language and keep trans and non-binary people in mind when considering who you're actually talking about and how to refer to them.

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Read the whole guide

When anatomy and identity are inextricably linked in our language, it does harm to those whose anatomy doesn't align with norms and assumptions. It invisibilizes us, it erects barriers to us accessing health care, and it puts the onus on us to correct or educate health providers when we are at our most vulnerable.

For example, when prenatal care groups are promoted as being for women, it keeps pregnant men and non-binary people from getting the care they need; when HIV research, prevention, and care lump trans women into the "MSM" category (and keep trans men out of it), it makes it almost
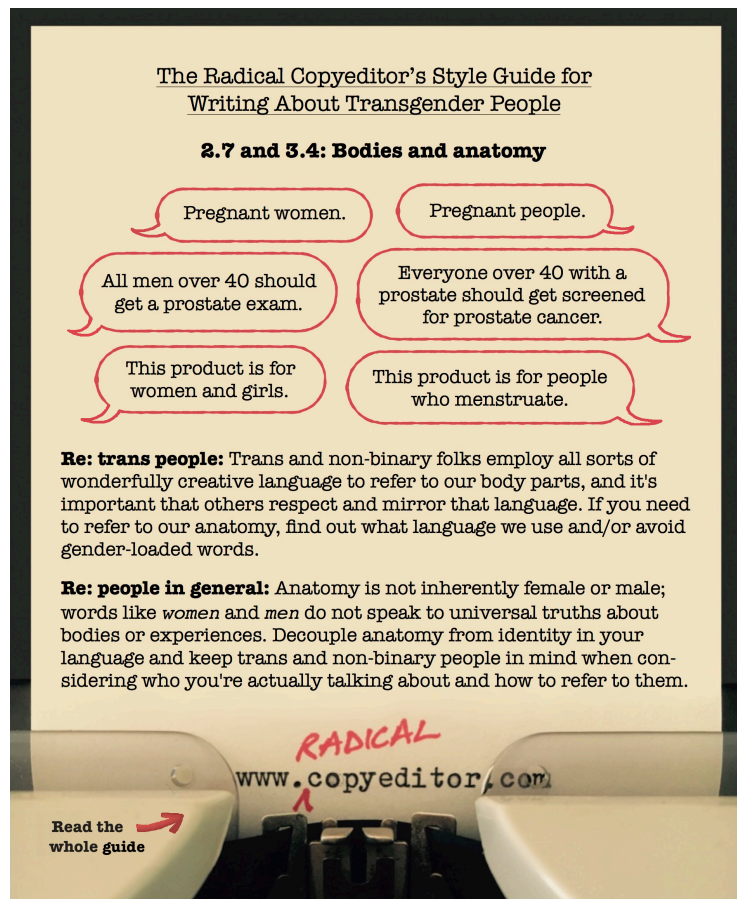
impossible to tailor services to trans women—one of the most at-risk populations for HIV—and blocks trans men from population-specific HIV prevention care.

Note that being mindful about not linking identity and anatomy doesn't mean stripping identity from our language entirely. For example, sometimes it's important to be able to talk about particular health disparities or discrimination against women and girls. Context is everything, and determines whether you should say "trans and cis women," "women and trans people," or "pregnant people," for example.

3.5. **Embrace the fact that language can evolve quickly.**

The language of gender identity and expression is evolving at lightning speed. This can easily feel overwhelming to some people and results in every sort of reaction, from knuckling down and resisting language changes to throwing up one's hands in despair to becoming judgmental or dismissive of new (or old) words and the people who use them.

There's another way. Choose to celebrate this rapid evolution of language because of what it means: that people who have been marginalized for centuries are finding ways of reclaiming agency and legitimacy; that those of us who have been written out of existence are finding ways to rewrite reality to make room for our true selves. The purpose of language is to communicate, not to regulate.

A final note

A style guide can never serve as a replacement for being in relationship with the real people you are writing about. If you are writing about transgender people—whether you yourself are trans or not—always do so from a place of relationship. Don't assume; ask. Always bring in additional trans perspectives on what you've written—across lines of gender, age, race, class, ability, and sexuality. Never fall for the trap of thinking that a single trans person can represent or speak for the breathtaking diversity of all of those who are encompassed by the word *transgender.* If you do nothing else, this one thing will always steer you right.

Zr. Alex Kapitan is the founder of Radical Copyeditor (www.radicalcopyeditor.com), a project to illuminate the intersections between social justice and language and help people use words in ways that align with their values. Alex is a queer and transgender editor, copyeditor, consultant, educator, organizer, and anti-oppression activist who regularly serves as a workshop facilitator and speaker on topics including radical inclusion, intersectional social justice, and gender and sexuality diversity 101.