Gender literacy:

All definitions taken and/or adapted from PFLAG National’s terminology guide (pflag.org) and the Glossary included in Trans Bodies, Trans Selves (transbodies.com).

Ready to have your trans ally conversations?

Here’s a list of terms that will help make your efforts even more effective. Please remember that terminology is a constantly evolving topic, so be aware that some people may have differences in how they understand certain words, and preferences for how they describe themselves. Remember to listen to each individual and respect their identifications. And keep in mind that terminology may change over time, so if you’re unsure about a word, check online by visiting one of the many resource sites we list in this book and on our website.

**Affirmed gender:** The gender to which someone has transitioned. This term is often used to replace terms like “new gender” or “chosen gender,” which imply that the current gender was not always a person’s gender or that their gender was chosen rather than simply in existence.

**Agender:** A person who does not conform to any gender.

**Ally:** A term used to describe someone who does not identify as LGBTQ but who is supportive of LGBTQ equality in its many forms and through a wide variety of different expressions, both personal and private.

**Androgynous:** A non-binary gender identity, having both/neither male and female characteristics. Can be used to describe people’s appearances or clothing.

**Asexual:** A person who does not experience sexual attraction. This term is a self-identity.

**Assigned gender:** The gender that is given to an infant at birth based on the infant’s external genitals. This may or may not match the person’s gender identity in adulthood.

**Assigned sex:** The sex (male, female intersex) that is assigned to an infant at birth.

**Binary gender:** The idea that there are only two genders, male and female, and that all humans fit into exactly one of these two categories

**Biological sex:** Sex determined by the physical characteristics of the body at birth, such as genetic markers and internal/external genitalia. Biological sex may differ from identity.

**Bisexual:** An individual who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to men and women. This is sometimes stated as “bi.” People who are bisexual need not have had equal sexual experience with both men and women and need not have had any sexual experience at all; it is attraction that determines orientation.
Cisgender: A term used to describe an individual whose gender identity aligns with the one typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. This is a term that is preferable to “non-trans,” “biological,” or “natal” man or woman.

Coming out: For people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, the process of self-acceptance that continues throughout one’s life. People often establish a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity to themselves first and then may decide to reveal it to others. Coming out can also apply to the family and allies of people who are LGBT. There are many different degrees of being out: some may be out to friends only, some may be out publicly, and some may be out only to themselves. It’s important to remember that not everyone is in the same place when it comes to being out, and to respect where each person is in that process of self-identification. It is up to each person, individually, to decide if and when to come out or disclose.

Cross-dresser: Someone who wears the clothes typically worn by another gender, sometimes only in their home, or as part of sexual play, and sometimes at public functions. It can be a self-identity. This term is not interchangeable with transgender, and some people who cross dress may consider themselves to be part of the trans community, while others do not. (This is a newer word for the older and less preferred term “transvestite” that is sometimes still used in this context.)

Disclosure: The act or process of revealing one’s transgender or gender nonconforming identity to another person in a specific instance. Related to, but not the same as, coming out.

Drag: The act of dressing in gendered clothing and adopting gendered behaviors as a part of the performance. Some perform in drag for entertainment, others as a political commentary, and others see it as personal enjoyment.

Drag king/Drag queen: Someone who dresses in either male (king) or female (queen) clothing as performance. People of all assigned sexes and gender identities can perform drag, and it does not necessarily follow that the individual will identify as transgender.

Female-to-Male (FTM): A term that describes someone who was assigned a female sex and gender at birth and currently has a male gender identity. The individual may or may not have had surgery or taken hormones to physically alter their appearance. Affirmed male is sometimes the preferred terminology.

Gay: The adjective used to describe people whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people of the same sex (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, “lesbian” is often a preferred term for women. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

Gender: A set of social, psychological, or emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations that classify an individual as either feminine or masculine.

Gender-affirming surgery: Surgical procedures that help people adjust their bodies in a way that more closely matches or desired gender identity. Not every transgender person will desire or have resources for surgery. This should be used in place of the older and often offensive term “sex change.”

Gender binary: The concept that there are only two genders, male and female, and that everyone must be one or the other.

Gender dysphoria: A mental health diagnosis that is defined as a “marked incongruence between ones’ experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender.” This term replaced Gender Identity Disorder in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition.
Gender expression: The manner in which a person chooses to communicate their gender identity to others through external means such as clothing and/or mannerisms. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity or sexual orientation. While most people’s understandings of gender expressions relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless combinations that may incorporate both masculine and feminine expressions—or neither—through androgynous expressions. The important thing to remember and respect is that every gender expression is valid.

Gender fluid: Someone who embodies characteristics of multiple genders, or shifts in gender identity.

Gender identity: One’s deeply held personal, internal sense of being male, female, some of both, or neither. One’s gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex (i.e., a person assigned female at birth identifies as male or a person assigned male at birth identifies as female). Awareness of gender identity is usually experienced in infancy and reinforced in adolescence.

Genderless: Not identifying with a particular gender.

Gender marker: A legal indicator of one’s gender. This can include one’s gender on a passport, birth certificate, license, or insurance card.

Gender neutral: Not gendered. Can refer to language (including pronouns), spaces (like bathrooms), or identities (being genderqueer, for example).

Gender nonconforming: A person who views their gender identity as one of many possible genders beyond strictly female or male. This is an umbrella term that can encompass other terms such as “gender creative,” “gender expansive,” “gender variant,” “genderqueer,” “gender fluid”, “gender neutral,” “bigender,” “androgynous,” or “gender diverse.” Such people feel that they exist psychologically between genders, as on a spectrum, or beyond the notion of the male and female binary paradigm.

Gender norm: Societal expectations about how people of different designated genders are supposed to act, live, and look.

Gender policing: Enforcing gender norms and attempting to impost gender-based behaviors on another person.

Genderqueer: A mindset of understanding gender as having more than two options. A term that is sometimes used to describe someone who defines their gender outside the constructs of male and female. This can include having no gender (agender), being androgynous, or having elements of multiple genders.

Gender variant: A term, often used to describe children and youth, that describes those who dress, behave, or express themselves in a way that does not confirm with dominant gender norms. Some people do not use this term because they feel it suggests these identities are abnormal. (See gender nonconforming.)

Homosexual: An outdated clinical term often considered derogatory and offensive, as opposed to the preferred terms, “gay” and “lesbian.”
Intersex/disorders of sex development (DSD): A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy or genetic construct that does not fit the typical definitions of male and female. Not everyone who has one of these conditions identifies as intersex. This term is not interchangeable with transgender.

Lesbian: A woman whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience; it is the attraction that helps determine orientation.

LGBT: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender which refers to these individuals collectively. It is sometimes stated as “GLBT” (gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender). Occasionally, the acronym is stated as “LGBTA” to include allies, “LGBTQ,” with “Q” representing queer or questioning.

Male-to-Female (MTF): A term that describes someone who was assigned a male sex and gender at birth and currently has a female gender identity. The individual may or may not have had surgery or taken hormones to physically alter their appearance. Affirmed female is sometimes a preferred term for MTF.

Medical transition: The process of taking hormones or undergoing surgical procedures in order to change one’s body in a way that affirms one’s gender identity. Surgical procedures are sometimes discussed separately as surgical transition.

Misgendering: Referring to a person using the incorrect gender pronoun, one that they do not identify with.

Nonbinary Gender: The concept that gender encompasses a variety of different possibilities rather than only two mutually exclusive categories. Nonbinary gender identities may include genderqueer, gender nonconforming, agender, gender fluid, multigender, or many other labels that indicate a mindset of viewing gender as having more than two categories.

Pansexual: A person whose emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction is to people of all gender identities and biological sexes. People who are pansexual need not have had any sexual experience; attraction determines orientation. Sometimes referred to as omnisexual.

Physical transition: The process of making physical changes to the body, such as taking hormones, having surgery, or undergoing procedures as part of a gender transition.

Preferred gender pronouns (PGP): Refers to the set of pronouns that a person prefers (e.g., him, he, she, her, ze, hir, they). It is polite to ask for a person’s preferred gender pronoun when meeting them for the first time.

Queer: A term currently used by some people—particularly youth—to describe themselves and/or their community. Some value the term for its defiance, some like it because it can be inclusive of the entire community, and others find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, “queer” is disliked by some within the LGBT community, who find it offensive. Due to its varying meanings, this word should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (i.e. “My cousin self-identifies as queer.”)

Questioning: A term used to describe those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about
their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.

**Sex:** Refers to biological, genetic, or physical characteristics that define males and females. These can include genitalia, hormone levels, genes, or secondary sex characteristics. Sex is often compared or interchanged with gender, which is thought of as more social and less biological, though there is some considerable overlap.

**Sexual orientation:** Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. People who are straight experience these feelings primarily for people of the opposite sex. People who are gay or lesbian experience these feelings primarily for people of the same sex. People who are bisexual experience these feelings for people of both sexes. And people who are asexual experience no sexual attraction at all. Other terms describing sexual orientation include (but are not limited to) pansexual and polysexual. Sexual orientation is part of the human condition, while sexual behavior involves the choices one makes in acting on one’s sexual orientation. One’s sexual activity does not define who one is with regard to one’s sexual orientation; it is the attraction that determines their orientation.

**Social transition:** Transitioning in the context of everyday life and social space, without necessarily taking steps to medically transition.

**Standards of care (SOC):** Guidelines developed by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) to assist health providers in caring for transgender people.

**Stealth:** A term used to describe transgender individuals who do not disclose their trans status in their public lives.

**Transgender:** A term that may be used to describe people whose gender expression does not conform to the cultural norms and/or whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth. Transgender is also considered by some to be an “umbrella term” that encompasses a number of identities which transcend the conventional expectations of gender identity and expression, including FTM, MTF, genderqueer, and gender expansive. People who identify as transgender may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity (see transsexual.)

**Trans*: An asterisk is sometimes added to the word trans to signify that trans communities are diverse and include many different identities. Can be read as “trans star.”

**Transition:** The process one goes through to discover and/or affirm their gender identity. This can, but does not always, include taking hormones, having surgeries, or going through therapy.

**Trans man:** A person who is transgender who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a man.

**Transsexual:** A term that has been used to describe those who have undergone some form of gender-related surgery. Some people who identify as transsexual do not identify as transgender and vice versa.

**Trans woman:** A person who is transgender who was assigned male at birth and identifies as a woman.

**TGNC:** Acronym which stands for trans and gender nonconforming. Often used when talking about groups of people with diverse gender identities.

**Third gender/third sex:** A term that incorporates genders other than male or female such as the Fa’afafine in Samoa, Kathoey or Ladyboys in Thailand, and Hijras in India and Pakistan. Some people in the United States, especially in communities of color, use the term third gender to self-identify.
Two spirit: A self-identity adopted by some indigenous North American people who take on a multitude of gender roles, identities, and expressions. Those who identify as Two Spirit often see themselves as embodying both masculine and feminine spirits and characteristics.