

Asking the Gender Question

Creating a Gender Inclusive Survey Resource Guide

Background

For many transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming individuals, filling out the "gender" question on surveys, registration forms, or other documents can be a difficult experience. This resource guide will help you go through the steps to create a survey that is more inclusive to all gender identities.

In addition to being more inclusive and respectful to transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming individuals, well crafted gender questions also lead to more accurate and useful data, which in turn can be used to gain insight and provide support to these communities. Poorly developed questions that result in incorrect, ambiguous, or non-useful answers in turn leads to poor data, and can ultimately hinder support.

Please note that this guide is designed to help you create an inclusive gender question and is not a "101" on gender. This guide will assume you have a basic understanding of sex, gender, gender identity, pronouns, etc. If you need a primer on gender, please see linked resources at the bottom of this guide.

Step 1: Determine what information you need, and ask for that specific information

Although it may seem redundant at first, take several minutes to reflect on what information you actually need to know:

- Do you need to know someone's gender?

- Do you need to know someone's pronouns?
- Do you need to know someone's sex assigned at birth?
- Do you need to know if someone is transgender?
- Do you need to know aspects of someone's physical or medical transition?
 - Medical transition includes, but is not limited to, cross-sex hormone therapy, gender-affirming surgeries, professionally-assisted voice training.
 - Physical transition is a more vague term, encompassing things such as changing haircuts, starting new or different grooming behaviors, or trying new styles of dress.
 - As always, it is best to be specific about what you need. Questions such as "have you medically transitioned?" are non-specific. Consider the precise information you want to obtain from your question, and ask for it.

Very likely, you do not need to know everything about everyone. Below are some examples of situations where you may be collecting gender-related information. Perhaps you are...

- administering a survey for diversity and inclusion or a community needs assessment and would like to know participants' gender and if they are transgender, but do not need to know anything about their sex assigned at birth or physical/medical transition status
- creating name tags and want to know what pronouns people want displayed, but don't actually need to know anything about their gender
- coordinating an international trip and need to know what sex marker is on a passport, in which case that is the exact question to ask - not their sex assigned at birth or anything about medical transition
- working in a doctor's office and need to determine if a patient needs a Pap test - you don't need to know their sex assigned at birth, gender identity, or medical transition status, but need to ask if they have a cervix
- ordering t-shirts and don't need to ask anything about gender at all, but instead what cut of t-shirt they want

These are only a few examples, but they illustrate you should ask for exactly what you need, and not more. This can extend to questions about name as well – do you need to know their legal name? Or do you need to know how their name is in a university system? Taking time to reflect on what information is actually needed for your form or survey is the first step in creating an inclusive question for transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming individuals.

It may also be helpful to explain why you are requesting the information that you are, and how it will be used and shared. For example:

- If you are collecting basic demographic information in a doctor's office, you might add text such as 'Please provide name and sex information that matches your government issued ID so that we can bill your insurance. In addition, please provide your pronouns, preferred name, and gender, for use in the office.'
- If you are collecting detailed information about a person's gender and transgender status for a research study about health disparities affecting LGBTQ+ individuals, you might add text such as 'All questions below regarding gender and sex are optional. We are asking these questions to get a detailed picture of the community. All answers are de-identified, and results of the survey will only be shared as aggregate data.'

Step 2: Create inclusive response options

After carefully considering what information you need, you may have determined that you either

- Need to know someone's gender
- Need to know if someone is transgender
- Need to know someone's biological sex*

For all questions, the ideal option is always to leave the question open-ended to allow respondents to self-identify. However, the reality is that for many surveys, this is not possible due to external constraints, such as data processing or reporting requirements.

If you must create a multiple-choice question, utilize the information below to help you craft your survey questions. Consider how your data will be reported and processed when creating your questions and response options.

- The minimum options you should have on your gender question are “man,” “woman,” “none of the above,” and “prefer not to answer.”
 - It is ideal to add additional options to allow for a wider range of answers. Good options include “non-binary” and/or “gender-nonconforming.”
 - It is recommended to make your question a “choose-multiple” option, as some respondents may identify with more than one gender
 - However, consider how you will use this data. If you will only be able to use one response in your data processing, take this into consideration when designing your questions.
 - Depending on your sample size and survey purpose, consider how your options may limit respondents’ anonymity.
- Always include options of “prefer not to respond” AND “none of the above.”
 - “None of the above” or “prefer to self describe” are preferred phrasing over “other,” as this avoids literally othering respondents who do not fit into the options you’ve provided.
 - When possible, include write-in option “none of the above.”
- Use language such as “man” and “woman” when referring to gender, as opposed to “male” and “female.”
- The best way to differentiate between cisgender and transgender men and women is to ask one question that asks about gender, where the options do not differentiate between cisgender and transgender respondents, and a follow-up question that asks “Are you transgender?”

- Do not have the options “male,” “female,” “transgender male,” “transgender female,” (or “man,” “woman,” “transgender man,” or “transgender woman”).
 - This suggests that cisgender men and women are the standard, normal, or default, while transgender men and women are the “other”.
 - Additionally, this implies that transgender men and women are not men and women, since they are being asked to select an option besides simply “man” or “woman”.
 - If you must differentiate in one question, use options like “cisgender man,” “cisgender woman,” “transgender man,” “transgender woman.”

- Do not have the options of “man,” “woman,” or “transgender.”
 - Transgender is NOT a gender, but an adjective describing gender.
 - Additionally, this phrasing implies that transgender individuals are not men or women, since they are being asked to select an option other than “man” or “woman” to describe themselves. While some transgender people are outside the gender binary, many transgender people are also men and women.

- Really, really, really reconsider if you actually need to know someone’s biological sex*. Do you? Probably not!
- If you really must ask about biological sex*, you can ask “What sex were you assigned at birth?” with options of “male,” “female,” and “prefer not to answer” followed by “Are you intersex?” with options of “yes,” “no,” and “prefer not to answer.”
 - *A note on “biological sex”: This term is non-specific. While you may need information regarding certain medical information, legal demographics, or intersex identity, biological sex does not have a specific consistent meaning.
 - For example, someone may be intersex, but their assigned sex at birth may be female or male, since most locations only allow male or female on birth certificates.

- For example, a transgender man may have had top surgery and changed all legal gender markers to male, but still have a menstrual cycle. If you ask about "biological sex" you may get different answers depending on if you mean sex assigned at birth, legal sex (such as for payroll, travel, or insurance benefits), or you are a medical professional inquiring which sex organs a patient may have.
 - "Legal sex" is also nonspecific. Someone may have different sex markers on their driver's license, passport, social security documentation, birth certificate, etc.
- Do not make assumptions based on questions you did not ask.
 - If you ask about sex assigned at birth and gender, but do not ask if someone is transgender, *you do not know if that person is transgender or not.*
 - If you ask about sex assigned at birth and if someone is transgender, but do not ask their gender, *you do not know that person's gender.*
 - If you ask about someone's gender but do not ask about their pronouns, *you do not know that person's pronouns.*

Putting it All Together

Below, find several examples of appropriate ways to ask about gender, sex, and transgender identity. These are just a few possibilities; there is not a 'one size fits all' format, and your specific question should be tailored to your survey goals, population, data constraints, etc. There are also multiple ways to ask questions about gender in a more inclusive manner.

Example 1:

1. Please describe your gender (select all that apply)
 - Man
 - Woman

- Nonbinary or genderqueer
- Prefer not to answer
- Prefer to self-describe

2. Are you transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Example 2:

1. Please select the option below that best describes your gender:

- Man
- Woman
- Nonbinary
- Prefer not to answer
- Prefer to self-describe

2. Are you transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Example 3:

1. Please select the option below that best describes your gender:

- Man
- Woman
- Nonbinary

Prefer not to answer

Prefer to self-describe

2. Do you identify as transgender?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer

3. What is your assigned sex at birth?

Male

Female

Prefer not to answer

4. Are you intersex?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer

Finally, remember that language around gender and sex is constantly evolving, and we must learn and grow with it. You may see different suggestions if you talk to others, or find other resources.

Introduction to Gender Resources

[The Trevor Project: Trans + Gender Identity.](#)

[GLADD: Transgender FAQ.](#)

[Planned Parenthood: Sex and Gender Identity.](#)