



## Guidance: Using gender inclusive language in research

Northeastern University strongly recommends gender inclusive language and consciousness in all study materials including surveys. Sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are specific terms and should not be used interchangeably. When researchers ask questions about sex, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation, there must be an understanding of what is being asked and what information is sought.

This guidance explains the rationale behind this recommendation, how to comply, and examples of respectful language. Gender inclusivity, in this context, refers to considering all possible options regarding sex, gender, and sexual orientation when collecting research data.

### Definitions

- ❖ Gender/Gender Identity describes how a person refers internally to the self, regardless of biology. Response options to questions categorizing gender: woman, man, transgender, non-binary.
- ❖ Gender Inclusivity will be used as a catch-all term to include representational equity with respect to sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation.
- ❖ Sex refers to the anatomy of chromosomes, hormones, and secondary sex characteristics. Response options to questions categorizing sex would typically include male, female, and intersex.
- ❖ Sexual Orientation refers to an individual's emotional, physical, and sexual attraction to other people. Response Options to questions categorizing sexual orientation would typically include heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, etc.

Northeastern supports a culture of inclusivity, as such, investigators are expected to conduct research in a way that demonstrates respect for research subjects' gender identities and sexual orientations. The following should be considered when investigators intend to collect information about sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation:

Consent documents, survey questions, interview questions, and other participant-facing documents should use language that is both precise and inclusive. The IRB understands that there may be some conflicts between inclusive data collection and methodological needs, such as establishing representativeness. In these cases, the researcher should provide justification for using less inclusive methods.

### Necessity of the question:

Investigators should consider how the information will be used: if the information is used for tabulation purposes only or for ensuring diversity of a sample, or if the information is germane to research hypotheses or data analysis. If the information is not needed for analysis purposes, there may be better ways to ensure sample diversity than asking personal or potentially invasive questions.



### Appropriateness of the question

Investigators must determine what specific information they need for their analyses. For instance, sex would be more relevant than gender identity in research primarily concerned with the effect of hormonal differences. Or if the research is about people’s adjustment to college life, the investigator might want to ask about sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Investigators should ask questions and use language appropriate to their research objectives.

### Not requiring a response for participation

Voluntary participation is a central requirement for human subject research. This voluntariness extends to individual survey or interview or demographic items. Investigators must allow individuals the option to not respond to questions about sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation (or other sensitive or personal characteristics), or provide an option indicating that the subject chooses not to reply.

### Privacy and confidentiality concerns

Sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are sensitive and personal characteristics. Similarly, they are not always externally apparent. As such, it is important to protect this information, especially when it is recorded with identifiers. Investigators should enable research subjects to provide this information in a setting where they are comfortable, and which ensures their privacy.

### Gender inclusive language

All study documents should use gender-neutral language and avoid gendered terms (e.g., mailman, chairman) and gendered pronouns (he, she, he/she). Gendered terms should be replaced with non-gendered versions (e.g., mail carrier instead of mailman or chairperson instead of chairman). Sentences using gendered pronouns should either use gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., singular they as in “Each subject will receive their gift card upon completing the study.”) or be reworded entirely to avoid such pronoun use (e.g., “Subjects will receive their gift card upon completing the study.”)

### Pronouns

When interviewing individuals or in situations where the researcher might use quotes or refer directly to individual subjects, it is considered respectful practice to ask subjects which pronouns they use.

### Acceptable Questions and Response Options

#### Sex:

- Female
- Male
- Intersex
- Not Listed: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to reply

#### Gender/Gender Identity

- Woman



- Man
- Transgender/Trans woman
- Transgender/Trans man
- Non-Binary
- Not Listed: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to reply

**Sexual Orientation**

- Heterosexual/Straight
- Gay/Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Not Listed: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to reply

Pronouns: When appropriate, investigators should ask subjects which pronouns they use.

- He/Him/His
- She/Her/Her
- They/Them/Their
- Not Listed: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to reply

**Additional Resources**

For further information on this topic, please see the following resources:

[SurveyGizmo](#), How to write gender questions for a survey,

[American University: The Center for Diversity & Inclusivity](#)

[National Center for Transgender Equality](#)

[Inclusive Language, US government website](#)