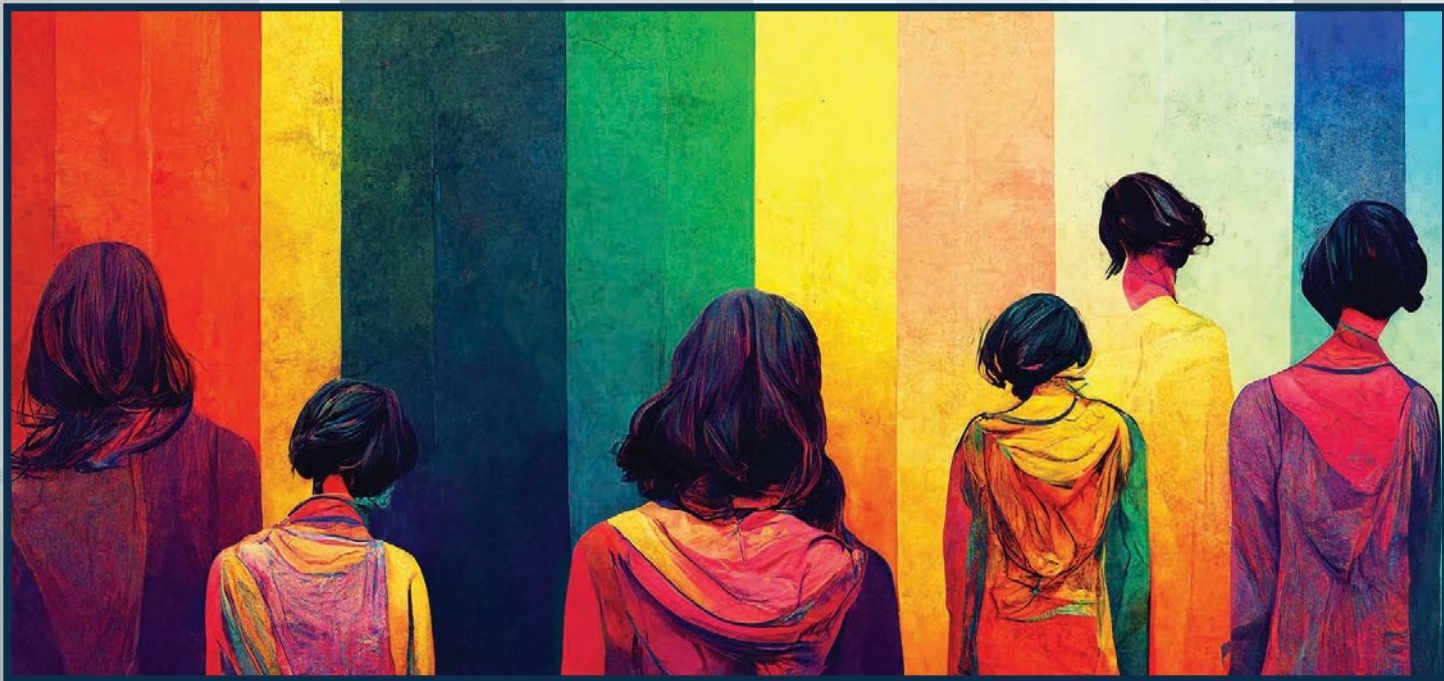


GENDER IDENTITY IN THE NEWS MEDIA



A Guide for Reporters and Editors

By Juliet Martinez (They/Them)

For the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association Foundation



*This guide is provided as part of the PNA Foundation's
Leading Local: The Media's Impact on Diversity, Inclusion and Equity
series and resources, sponsored by the Calkins Foundation.*



INTRODUCTION

This guide to gender identity for reporters and editors has been prepared at the request of the PNA Foundation to assist PNA members and Pennsylvania news companies in handling matters of gender identity ethically and sensitively. The content reflects the perspectives of reporters and editors, as well as best practices recommended by the organizations such as the Transgender Journalists Association, Columbia Journalism Review, Transgender Law Center, PEN America and the Pew Research Center.

Overview of gender identity in Pennsylvania newsrooms

Editors and reporters in Pennsylvania newsrooms describe gender identity as a topic that has gained prominence in recent years and that continues to evolve.

The idea of gender as comprising two opposite poles has begun to give way. Increasingly, people see gender, sex and sexuality as distinct. Some people's gender does not match the sex recorded on their birth certificate. Celebrities like Janelle Monae, Sam Smith and Demi Lovato have publicly declared their gender to be neither male nor female. Data from the Pew Research Center show four in 10 U.S. adults know someone who is transgender, and about a quarter know someone who uses they/them pronouns.

At the same time, significant elements of society reject ideas of gender diversity. At least 37 states have introduced bills limiting or prohibiting transgender teens' participation in sports. Legislators around the country have tried to control what medical care transgender youths can receive, and what bathrooms transgender people can use. Pennsylvania is the only Northeast state without codified anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation or gender identity.

What's more, best practices around gender identity are not widely taught in university journalism programs in Pennsylvania. While the younger generation of journalists may bring greater awareness to this issue, a systematic approach is lacking.

Hence this guide. Journalists may find themselves covering unfamiliar topics in the realm of gender identity. They may interact with sources whom they think are one gender, and their assumption may be wrong. The goal of these guidelines is to offer an introduction to the core concepts of this topic, to clarify some of its terms and offer stylistic and ethical approaches based on best practices.



CORE CONCEPTS

Gender is part of a person's social identity. It may or may not correspond to their biological sex.

Gender identity is a person's internally felt sense of being male, female, neither or a combination of different gender states. Gender identities that are neither male nor female include nonbinary, agender and genderqueer. Fluctuating gender identities include genderfluid, demiboy and demigirl.

Biological sex is also called a person's **assigned gender** or **sex assigned at birth**. Biological sexes may include male, female and intersex.

Gender presentation is how a person expresses their social identity through their appearance and mannerisms. People whose gender presentation does not match societal expectations for their gender are **gender nonconforming**.

Cisgender and **transgender** describe a person's relationship to their sex assigned at birth.

Cisgender individuals have a gender identity that matches their sex assigned at birth.

Transgender individuals' gender does not. Some nonbinary individuals consider themselves transgender, some do not. A person's sexual anatomy and whether they have had gender-confirming surgery are private matters.

Transitioning is the process of changing one's gender presentation to match one's inner gender identity. This may or may not include changes in clothing, hairstyle, name, pronouns and medical interventions. The details of a person's transition, their sexual anatomy and whether they have had gender-confirming surgery are private matters.

Sexuality and **sexual identity** both refer to a person's patterns of sexual or romantic attraction. Sexual identities may include lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or heterosexual.



ASSIGNMENTS AND REPORTING

Assignments and transgender or gender-nonconforming reporters

Editors normally assign stories based on reporters' beat, expertise or interest. This practice should extend to stories about gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender individuals. These stories should not automatically be assigned to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender reporters.

Getting pronouns right

Reporters normally ask for a source's personal details such as the correct spelling of their name, their age and other pertinent information. Failing to ask what pronouns a source uses can lead to damaging assumptions. Using the wrong pronouns for someone is called misgendering. Being misgendered can be painful. Reporters and editors should strive to avoid needlessly hurting sources.

Don't make a big deal about it

If the story is not about gender or transgender issues, do not belabor the issue. There is no need to stipulate that someone is cisgender, so there should be no need to stipulate when someone is transgender. A cisgender woman's pronouns are not specifically introduced, so a nonbinary person's pronouns should not be, either.

If you're not sure, ask the right people

Hire transgender reporters and editors. Learn about transgender issues from transgender people. Familiarize yourself with the following resources and consult them regularly. If you aren't sure if a story is correct, respectful and ethical, hire a transgender sensitivity reader or hold the story until you are sure it will not harm a source or reader.

- Transgender-related publications and out transgender journalists
- Trans Journalists Association Style Guide
- Five tips for journalists on covering trans and nonbinary people
- Nonbinary Wiki: Guide for journalists



STYLE CONSIDERATIONS

They/them/their/themself

For some, the most challenging issue when writing about gender is the use of they/them/their to refer to a single person. Reporters may worry the reader will be confused.

Copyeditors may want to change it to whatever gender they assume for the source.

It is important to remember that misgendering hurts. When someone has given their time to help us do our jobs, we do well to treat them with respect.

A variety of approaches may be useful here.

- Reporters may simply use the pronouns they/them as they would he/him or she/her. The only difference is that the singular pronoun *they* carries a plural verb, i.e. *Taylor said they plan to graduate this fall*. Make sure it is clear to the reader that *they* refers to one person, i.e. *Halstead introduced their partner, Elgin*.
- The subject's name can be substituted for the pronoun when possible, i.e. *The company will honor Fullerton at a ceremony later this month*.
- Write around it. It is often possible to re-word in order to avoid confusion or awkward constructions.

Newsrooms that handle they/them pronouns well do so because respect for their sources guides them to talk and learn about this issue. They understand that readers will get used to this usage as they encounter it more.

Reporting on transgender young people

Special care must be exercised when reporting on issues affecting transgender young people. Reporters normally make sure that any source understands that being interviewed may mean their name, comments and pronouns will be published. This applies even more to transgender teens, who may face rejection from their family or community. Reporters must take care not to endanger the safety of a teen whose family is unaware or unaccepting of their gender identity.

Increasingly, matters concerning transgender children have been the subject of media stories, inflammatory rhetoric and legal battles. Interviewing transgender children and supportive parents as sources can illuminate these stories tremendously. But not all transgender children are ready to come out as transgender. They and their families may be ostracized and suffer other harms when they go public. Sensitivity, respect and transparency are essential.



ETHICS

Names and transparency

Transparency is vital in maintaining the trust of our audiences. One of the ways we are transparent is by naming our sources. However, some transgender individuals have changed their names socially, but not legally. In these cases, using their legal name, or deadname, can cause them pain or even put them in danger.

When a subject's legal name has already been used, for example in a police report, it is best to simply explain that they do not go by that name, and use the preferred name thereafter, i.e. *Police said Thomas, who goes by Cynthia, was the victim of a hit-and-run on Thursday. Cynthia was taken to the hospital and treated for a broken bone.*

Not every situation can be anticipated in a guide like this one. Reporters and editors would do well to talk together and thoughtfully consider how to best respect the identity and humanity of a subject while maintaining their credibility.

Mistakes

It is natural for even the most well-intentioned and professional journalist to err at times. In matters of gender identity, mistakes are best owned, admitted and corrected. That may mean apologizing, correcting a name or pronouns in a story that appears online, or printing a prompt correction.

SOURCES, REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Sources Interviewed

- Scott Blanchard, Director of Journalism, WITF News and StateImpact Pennsylvania
- Jade Campos, Editor in Chief, The Daily Collegian
- Lisa Cunningham, Editor in Chief, Pittsburgh City Paper
- Shane Fitzgerald, Editor in Chief, Bucks County Herald and formerly, Pennsylvania State Editor for the USA Today Network
- Gabriela Martínez, Multimedia Reporter, WITF
- Walter Middlebrook, Foster Professor of Practice, Penn State University
- Anthony Orozco, Multimedia Journalist and Host, WITF
- Jason Villemez, Editor, Philadelphia Gay News

References Consulted

9 questions about gender identity and being transgender you were too embarrassed to ask
AP Style Guide, online edition

Five tips for journalists on covering trans and nonbinary people

Gannett Network guidance on transgender and pregnant people word usage

GLAAD

- **Talking About Suicide & LGBT Populations | GLAAD**
- **GLAAD Media Reference Guide - In Focus: Covering the Transgender Community | GLAAD**

How Trans Journalists are Challenging—and Changing—Journalism - Nieman Reports

List of transgender publications, organizations and journalists

More in US now know someone transgender or using gender-neutral pronoun | Pew Research Center

Nonbinary Wiki **Guide for journalists**

Trans Journalists Association

- **Trans Journalists Association Style Guide**

WITF 2021 Diversity Statement

Recommended Resources

9 questions about gender identity and being transgender you were too embarrassed to ask

Five tips for journalists on covering trans and nonbinary people

GLAAD Media Reference Guide - In Focus: Covering the Transgender Community | GLAAD

List of transgender publications, organizations and journalists

Nonbinary Wiki **Guide for journalists**

Trans Journalists Association

- **Trans Journalists Association Style Guide**

Transgender Law Center: **A resource for media professionals reporting on transgender and gender non-conforming youth**



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