

Asking about sexual orientation

If you have not done so yet, we invite you to start by reading these [general guidelines for asking about demographic information](#). Asking for demographic information is often key to better understanding our society and the inequities within it. However, demographic information is often personal and its collection can raise ethical concerns.

1.0 Why asking matters

Sexual orientation can have an impact on people's experience of the world, including their campus and classroom experiences. Although homophobic discrimination can impact straight people, people who are not heterosexual are especially likely to encounter stigma, marginalization and other forms of subtle or overt discrimination. Heteronormative assumptions can also permeate teaching and learning environments through topics, examples, concepts, or case studies that only feature heterosexual couples.

As a result, LGBTQ2SIA+ often have more negative perception of campus climate and a lower sense of belonging than their heterosexual peers, especially if they also belong to other groups that experience marginalization (e.g., racialized people, people with disabilities).

Regardless of your rationale for asking, questions about sexual orientation should always be optional.

2.0 Language about gender and sex

Sexual orientation is unrelated to gender (being a woman, man, or non-binary person) and unrelated to being a trans person. If you are interested in asking about gender or about trans experience, please see our [guidelines on gender](#).

We highlight only a few key terms below. There are many identity words that people use to describe their sexual orientation, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, straight. If you need more information about specific identity terms, we suggest you consult a recent online glossary from a trusted source (such as a local queer and trans organization). One example is [QMUNITY's glossary](#).

- **Asexual** Someone who does not experience sexual desire for people of any gender. Some asexual people desire romantic relationships, while others do not. Asexuality is a spectrum, with some asexual people experiencing desire for varying types of intimacy.
- **Homosexual** A person who is mostly attracted to people of their own gender. Because this term has been widely used negatively and/or in clinical settings, most people prefer the terms 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'queer' especially when talking about someone's identity.
- **Pansexual** A person who is attracted to people regardless gender. This term was created to go beyond the binary implied in the "bi" prefix of "bisexual" and make it clear that the person's sexual orientation is inclusive of trans and non-binary people. Today many people also use "bisexual" in an inclusive way.

- **Queer** A term that has traditionally been used as a derogatory and offensive word for LGBTQ2SIA+¹ people. Many have reclaimed this word and use it proudly to describe their identity. Queer is also used as an inclusive umbrella term, and many people use it to signal that their identity is inclusive of trans and non-binary people.
- **Sexual orientation** Refers to someone's emotional, romantic or sexual attraction, desire or affection for another person.
- **Two-Spirit** "Two-Spirit" is a term used within some Indigenous communities, encompassing cultural,

spiritual, sexual and gender identity. The term reflects complex Indigenous understandings of gender roles, spirituality, and the long history of sexual and gender diversity in Indigenous cultures. Individual terms and roles for Two-Spirit people are specific to each nation. Due to its cultural, spiritual, and historical context, the concept of "Two-Spirit" is to be used only by Indigenous people. However, not all Indigenous people who hold diverse sexual and gender identities consider themselves Two-Spirit, many identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, or other identity terms. (Source: www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/trans-basics/two-spirit)

3.0 Being specific, relevant and inclusive when asking about sexual orientation

Am I asking about identity, attraction or behaviour?

The concept of sexual orientation contains multiple aspects including identity, attraction or behaviour. For some people, the three layers align neatly, but not for everyone. For example, a man may be attracted to people regardless of gender, but have sex much more frequently with men, and identify as gay. Or a non-binary person may identify as queer, experience attraction to people of all genders, but be in a committed partnership with a woman.

In the context of teaching and learning, people's identities – as lesbian, queer, Two-Spirit, gay, asexual, etc. – is most likely to be relevant. In other contexts, attraction or behaviour may be as, or more, important than identity. If you have determined that questions about sexual orientation are relevant to your research, make sure you are asking in a way that distinguishes between these three different layers: identity, attraction and behaviour.

An additional reminder: Discussions of sexual identity often overlook people who are asexual or aromantic, despite the fact that these identities have also been frequently marginalized or made invisible. Consider including these identities and perspectives as well.

How should I consider privacy concerns?

Some people – though not all! – feel like their sexual orientation is a private matter, and others may wonder why you are asking this question or feel like this information is not relevant. Others still may be concerned about being outed as non-heterosexual by sharing this information.

Make sure you take these concerns about privacy into consideration by making any question about sexual orientation optional. You can also include a rationale for why you chose to ask the question, or acknowledge potential privacy concerns and the steps you're taking to mitigate risks.

¹Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Two-Spirit, Intersex and Asexual. The plus sign indicates the possibility of other labels not captured in the list.

How many options should I give participants?

There is no simple answer because this depends on your analysis plan.

Often people are tempted to be inclusive by offering many response options. The problem is that there are so many different ways that people identify their sexual orientation that it is almost impossible to provide a comprehensive list of identities. Even long lists are likely to overlook some labels or identities that are meaningful to some respondents.

Start by considering what you are planning to do with the data. What information do you actually need? Do you need a large sample size for each of your categories so that you can run meaningful statistical analyses? Or is it more important to your project that you capture the multiplicity and complexity of people's identities? What are the advantages and disadvantages of including more or fewer categories?

If you need large sample size, then limiting response options may make sense to try and ensure that no category is too small to be taken into account during analysis. You still need to think about creating a meaningful choice among your response options, as it will likely be important to distinguish between categories beyond heterosexual and non-heterosexual. For example, some research shows that the experiences of bisexual people can be distinct from the experiences of people who are gay or lesbian.

If you are not planning to run statistical analyses, an open-ended field may be an option. It will give people an opportunity to identify their sexual orientation without any preconceptions on your part. It can also allow you to uncover new language being used amongst your research participants to describe their sexual orientation. However, it may make it difficult for the research team to make sense of some of the data. Consider what you might make of a respondent identifying as a straight asexual man, or as a lesbian man.

You should also generally avoid open-ended fields if you need to have categories to report on the research (e.g., 53% of respondents identified as X) because this likely means that you will have to re-categorize people's answers during the analysis phase. Not only is this difficult to do with complex data, it also raises ethical questions about researchers imposing categories onto their respondents, especially when these respondents have underrepresented or marginalized identities.

There is a wide range of possibilities between these two extremes (very limited response options and open-ended fields). We give examples below.

Should I include an option for people to write-in their identity?

An option for write-ins (often framed as 'my identity is not listed above, please specify:') often seems like an easy way to be inclusive of people's complex identities. However, because write-ins make analysis much more complicated, the pros and cons of having an open-ended write-in option should be considered carefully. What is your plan for analyzing these categories? How will you make sure that the complexity of people's identities is recognized? What will you do with categories that cannot be reported because they have fewer than five respondents (for example, how will you make sure participants feel represented by the umbrella term you decide to report them under)?

One potential benefit of write-in categories is that they can help uncover new language as it emerges. For example, 'queer' used to be primarily used as an insult, but this has significantly changed over time and now it has been reclaimed by many people as a positive identity label.

What about asexuality?

As noted above, asexuality is often forgotten in conversations about sexual orientation. Make sure to include it if it might be relevant to your work. If you are primarily interested in people's romantic rather than sexual identities, it may be worth including aromantic in addition or instead of asexual.

How can I take into account non-binary genders?

Historically, our understanding of sexual orientation assumed that there were only two genders, and people could be attracted to men, women, or both.

To make sure you take into account non-binary people when asking about sexual orientation, make sure you:

- **Avoid definitions and wording that implies there are only two genders or sexes.** For example, instead of asking if people are attracted to people of the opposite sex, ask if people are attracted to people of a gender different from their own.
- **Make sure to include at least one option that can be inclusive of being attracted to non-binary partners (e.g., queer, pansexual).**

What if I am interested in sexual orientation or experiences of homophobia?

In some cases, people's perceived sexual orientation may matter as much as their actual sexual orientation. People may make assumptions about someone else's sexual orientation, often based on their gender expression (including their hairstyle, clothing, speech patterns, physical appearance). As a result, people who are not gay or lesbian may still encounter and be impacted by homophobia.

If your research is concerned with experiences of stigma and marginalization, you may want to take these cases into consideration.

1.0 Examples of inclusive questions

Note: These questions focus on dimensions of identity as we are concerned primarily with the teaching and learning context.

Do you identify as a member of LGBTQ2SIA+ communities?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer



PROS:

The dichotomous response options will create a large categories that can be useful for statistical analyses. At the same time, the acronym allows some recognition that people can identify in many different ways, especially if an inclusive definition is included.



CONS:

There is no room for nuance or differences of experiences among people with non-dominant sexual orientations.



Choose one

How do you identify?

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Straight
- Asexual or aromantic
- Prefer not to answer



PROS:

The list captures many of the major identity labels and still allows people to give some detail about their identity.



CONS:

Some people may not see themselves reflected in these options. Some people may identify with more than one of these labels (queer and lesbian, for example).

Open-ended question

What is your sexual orientation? (e.g. gay, lesbian, straight, pan, queer, etc.)



PROS:

This open ended question allows respondents to identify in the language that feels meaningful to them.



CONS:

Data generated by this question cannot be easily (or necessarily ethically) grouped for statistical analysis or reporting purposes. Depending on the fluency of your research population around sexual orientation, some participants might not know how to answer.

2.0 Additional resources

- [UBC Positive Space Campaign](#) (for foundational knowledge about sexual orientation)
- Dharma, C. (2016). *Evaluation of Sexual Orientation Items in Population Health Surveys Among Canadians: A Mixed Methods Approach*. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3977
- Pryor, J. T. (2018). Visualizing queer spaces: LGBTQ students and the traditionally heterogendered institution. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(1), 32–51. [doi:10.1080/19361653.2017.1395307](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2017.1395307)
- Rankin, S., Blumenfeld, W. J., Weber, G. N., & Frazer, S. J. (2010). *State of higher education for LGBT people: Campus Pride 2010 national college climate survey*. Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride.
- Rivers, I. (2015). Homophobic and transphobia bullying in university. In H. Cowie & C.A. Myers (Eds.). *Bullying Among University Students: Cross-national perspectives* (1st ed.). London: Routledge. [doi:10.4324/9781315750132](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315750132)

