



GENDER

AS A PROXY VARIABLE

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August - December 2023
→ February 2024



"I would argue that you almost never have to ask for gender...

"If you're collecting gender identity data to personalize user-facing copy, try asking for preferred* pronouns instead. If you're asking because you want to make in-app content recommendations, try asking about the user's content preferences. If you're asking to generate a user avatar, let the user generate their own. **Gender identity is a poor proxy variable** — stick to asking for the information you actually want."

- Nikki Stevens, quoted in "How to Make Your Software More Trans-Inclusive," emphasis mine

* pro tip: just say "pronouns" & drop the "preferred"

So, what are you asking for when you ask for

GENDER?

- pronouns?
- title or prefix?
- health needs?
- clothing preferences?
- bathroom use?
- public profile data?
- demographic data?
- legal identification?
- medical information?

FORMATTING NOTE

Open circles indicate that users should pick one answer:

- A
- B

Open squares indicate that users should pick all answers that apply:

- X
- Y
- Z

...PRONOUNS

What pronouns should we use for you?

- he/him/his
- she/her/hers
- they/them/theirs
- other: ze/hir/hirs

Worried about parsing that free text field? Try:

- subjective: she
- objective: her
- possessive (adj): her
- possessive (prn): hers
- reflexive: herself

...TITLE OR PREFIX

What title or prefix should we use for you?

- Mr.
- Mrs.
- Ms.
- Mx.
- Rev.
- Dr.
- Hon.

(et cetera)

- no prefix
- other: _____

...HEALTH NEEDS

Do you require private facilities for breastfeeding or other health and wellness needs?

- o yes
- o no

Provide a write-in space for specific needs, such as refrigeration or running water.

...CLOTHING PREFERENCES

Which style of shirt would you prefer?

- o straight cut
- o fitted

...BATHROOM USE

Do you require any of the following restrooms?

- all-gender
- single-occupancy
- wheelchair-accessible
- other: _____

All restrooms should be provided with menstrual products.

...PUBLIC PROFILE DATA

What is your gender? **This information will be viewable on your profile by all logged-in users.**

- man
- woman
- nonbinary
- other: _____

Make sure to note the visibility level!

...DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

What is your gender? **This information is collected for demographic analysis only.**

- man
- woman
- nonbinary
- other: _____

...LEGAL

What is your legal sex as marked on government-issued identification?

- M
- F
- X

...MEDICAL

What is your gender?

- man
- woman
- nonbinary
- other: _____

What sex were you assigned at birth?

- male
- female
- other: _____

An organ inventory and/or surgical history may also be a useful tool.

But let's talk more about that

GENDER QUESTION

Is:

- man
- woman
- nonbinary
- other: _____

enough?

Maybe not! ~~Probably not, in fact!~~ But what are our other options?

Expansive lists can be overwhelming to users, fall quickly out of date, and are prone to significant localization issues.

Free text entry removes many of the downsides of expansive lists but introduces new problems with data storage and analysis.

Having a **few primary options and a write-in**, as shown above, is a good balance!

A little more on

ANTI-PATTERNS

Consider the following options:

- o man
- o woman
- o trans man
- o trans woman

Aside from the lack of nonbinary gender choices, did you notice that?

These **exclusive choices** present “man” and “trans man” (and “woman” and “trans woman”) as separate genders, when what they’re most likely *trying* to convey is:

- o cis man
- o cis woman
- o trans man
- o trans woman

Avoid treating “cis” as the unspoken default.

Other anti-patterns include:

- automatic detection of gender (just don’t)
- immutable gender fields (make gender *easily* editable)
- grouping all nonbinary or nonstandard genders under “other” (add common gender terms for the relevant culture; include write-in fields)

PATTERNS

Here's some additional positive patterns that can be appended to many of the earlier examples:

- Make fields optional unless truly necessary, or include "decline to specify"
- When questions can't accommodate a free text field, include "gender not listed here" for those who have an answer but don't see it reflected in the form
- Allow for edits
- Allow for the removal of old data

SOURCES

This zine draws from material I gathered for a longer blog post: <https://leecat.art/gender-in-data>

Linked in that blog post are numerous sources; the most heavily relied on here was from Drupal's documentation and is found under the section headed "Do you need gender data?"

AUTHOR

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