

GLBT Historical Society Style Guide for Subject Terms

This guide is intended both for research and for use in archival processing, and encompasses both Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and terms GLBTHS has elected to use because they are more precise, neutral, and modern. All new collections should be tagged with as many relevant subject terms as possible.

Gay men

The LCSH term is “gay men.” Please tag all collections relating to gay men with this term.

Lesbians

The LCSH term is “lesbians”; LCSH also contains dated versions of the term (such as “lesbianism”) which are not used today, and should not be used as subject headings.

Bisexual/Pansexual

The term we use is “bisexual people” (the LCSH uses “bisexuals,” but no one in the community pluralizes it this way; it also offers “bisexual women” and “bisexual men,” but there is no need to break an already tiny category down by gender).

“Bisexual” means “attracted to genders which are the same as yours, as well as different from yours,” and is the generic catalog term for a queer person who isn’t strongly oriented towards a single gender. If the person identified with a different but related term, such as “pansexual,” include it in the notes but do not use it in the subject heading.

Some people have sexual experience with both genders and don’t identify as bisexual; some people identify as bisexual and have sexual experience with one gender. Defer to the subject’s self-identification if possible. Otherwise, act in accordance with whatever biographical information you have.

Transgender people:

The term we use is “transgender people,” which is in the LCSH; however, the LCSH also has a number of older terms on record, reflecting the slow evolution of mainstream terminology for gender-nonconforming identity. Most of these are variants or subheadings of either “transsexual” or “transvestite,” all of which modern cataloging should avoid.

Like “bisexual,” “transgender” is an umbrella term – in this case, a term for anyone who is not cisgender. It includes people who identified primarily as cross-dressers and did not medically transition (often these will be earlier materials, as it was more common to identify this way before 2000). The place to describe nuance of this kind is in the notes, not the subject terms.

In addition to “transgender people,” please tag with “trans women,” “trans men,” and “nonbinary people” if the collection has a human subject or a single-gender focus. (The LCSH has no concept of nonbinary identity; “nonbinary people” is a local term.)

Other LGBTQIA+ identities

Our term for intersex people is “Intersex people,” which is in the LCSH.

Tag Two-Spirit people with the LCSH term “Two-Spirit people,” a term which encompasses many identities on the queer and trans spectrum among Indigenous people.

As of this writing, we have not cataloged any collections from people who identify as asexual. There is an LCSH term – “asexuality (sexual orientation)” – which is adequate to the purpose, but please use “asexual people” instead to bring it in line with the standard format.

The LCSH does not use the term “queer” outside the context of “queer theory,” “queer theology,” or the alternative suggestion “sexual minority community.” There is no need to tag with the subject term “queer,” as all of our collections fit under that umbrella. Also avoid “sexual minority community,” which is excessively clinical and has no basis in community usage.

People of color

Always use the local term “people of color” (no LCSH equivalent). Use more detailed terms in addition and as appropriate.

In some cases, there is more than one accepted term for a group in this category, with overlapping connotations and meanings. Please list all accepted terms for a group in order to ensure searchability.

Appropriate terms for people of color can evolve rapidly and be dependent on context, and at times the LCSH usage is dramatically out of line with contemporary usage. Here are the terms we use for people of color, with LCSH equivalents in parentheses:

Black people/African Americans (LCSH: African Americans)

Latinx people/Latinos/Latinas (LCSH: Hispanic Americans)

American Indians/Native Americans/Indigenous people (LCSH: Indians of North America)

Asian Americans (LCSH: Asian Americans)

On the subject of Japanese-American experiences during the Second World War, we use the terms “forced removal,” “incarceration,” and “incarceration camp,” rather than “relocation” and “internment.”

Religious groups

Members of religious groups should be tagged where relevant. Be as specific as possible; consult the LCSH, but recognize when their usages may be dated. Here are the local terms we use for some major religions, with their LCSH equivalents:

Jewish people (LCSH: Jews)

Catholic people (LCSH: Catholics)

Christians (LCSH: Christians)

Buddhists (LCSH: Buddhists)

Unitarian Universalists (LCSH: Unitarian Universalists)

We categorize all non-Catholic Christian denominations (Protestant or unspecified) under the general umbrella term “Christians.” The place for nuance is in the notes. Unitarians have their own category because some Unitarians identify as Christians and others do not.

People with disabilities

Our term is “people with disabilities,” which is an LCSH heading. The LCSH offers two queer-themed subheadings, “gays with disabilities” and “sexual minorities with disabilities,” neither of which is a common, intuitive, or current usage; both should be avoided. Since all of our collections concern LGBTQIA+ people, it is safe simply to use the heading “people with disabilities.”

Drag

Our subject term – both historically and going forward – is “drag.” The LCSH term for drag artists is “female impersonators,” but this doesn’t account for the differences between contemporary drag and the straight-coded Victorian theatrical form of female impersonation. Use “female impersonators” only in the notes, and only for early performers who were billed as such.

Kink

Our subject term is “kink.” The LCSH has a fairly limited and pathologizing set of terms – “somasochism,” “sexual dominance and submission,” and “fetishism (sexual behavior),” for example. These do not convey the breadth of activity in the kink community, nor do they reflect what the kink community actually calls itself.

The leather community is a major subset of our kink-related collections. Please tag these collections with “leather” rather than the LCSH’s choice of “leather lifestyle.”

Other subject terms

These terms reflect major areas of interest in our collections. Please use as many as are relevant. We consulted the Library of Congress Subject Headings in building this list, and for the sake of the greatest possible usability on OAC, we’ve used many of them. However, we are a specialty archives, and many keywords that we need either to reflect our materials or to speak respectfully – such as “Imperial Court system,” “Pride parades,” “sex work,” and “homophile movement” – weren’t available there. As such, many terms are local.

Addiction and recovery

Aging

AIDS (disease)

AIDS denialism

Amateur film

Architecture

Art

Bathhouses

Bears (Gay culture)

Comic books, strips, etc.

Dance

Diaries

Education

Erotica

Fashion

Fat-acceptance movement

Feminism

Health

Historic preservation

Homophile movement

Homophobia

Imperial Court System

Journalism

Labor

Law

Law enforcement

Literature

Long-term relationships (for collections pertaining to lifelong partnerships)

Marriage equality (for the fight for legal marriage; if the collection uses “gay marriage” or “same-sex marriage,” include these terms in scope notes, but use “marriage equality” as the subject term)

Mental health

Motion pictures

Motorcycle clubs

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Music
Nightlife
Oral history
Photography
Politics and elections
Polyamory
Pride parades
Radical Faeries
Radio
Sex work
Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence
Sports
Stand-up comedy
Straight allies
Television and radio
Theater
Veterans
World War, 1939-1945
Youth

Locations

Although we do not ordinarily tag by location, it may be useful to do this for some digital collections. Use the LCSH terms for locations; if there is no existing LCSH term, create a new one in the general LCSH format.

Existing LCSH terms:

San Francisco Bay Area (Calif.)

Folsom Street (San Francisco, Calif.)

Extrapolated terms:

Tenderloin (San Francisco, Calif.)

Vallejo (Calif.)

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