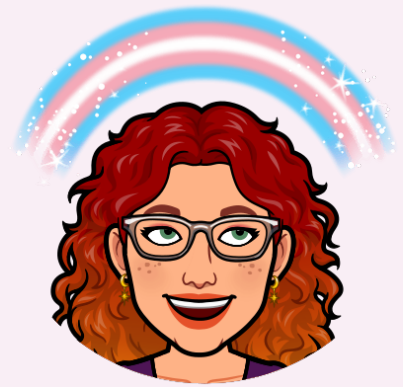


# Mimsy Borogove's Guide to Getting Missed and Ma'amed for Trans Feminine Newbies



Alright ladies, I've only been on this rollercoaster for nine months, but I have already noticed that there's a pesky wrinkle in the way that the transfemme community deals with questions. To wit: freshly-cracked eggs ask questions which get answered by a bunch of veteran transes who've been doing this for a long while. And while experience is certainly valuable, it can also blind you to how it was, years ago, when you were just starting out on this journey and all you want is actionable steps.

So this is me, just a little bit down the road from you, with some tips for the first few steps towards where those bitches are.

**What This Is Not:** this is not a guide on How To Be Trans. Doing the stuff listed here will not make you trans. *Not* doing the stuff listed here will not make you *less* trans. This is simply a guide for making it far more likely that strangers will call you "ma'am."

So let's start with the big one.

## Passing

The most common query from new trans girls is a simple question with a complex answer and a really shitty history. It's "how do I pass?"

Unfortunately we have to take an immediate detour into why we shouldn't be calling it "passing." Passing is a term coined and promulgated by the Black community of North America to describe the phenomenon where a person of Black heritage has light enough skin that they can be accepted as white by society. This can afford them incredible social advantages and historically could even be a means out of slavery. It isn't the trans community's word, and even if you are Black and trans, "passing" is the wrong word to use.

Passing is getting taken for that which you are not. It is deception—wholly justified by its context of oppression, but deception nonetheless. Trans women are women. When we get accepted as women, we are not taken for that which we are not. We are recognized for *what we actually are*. There is no deception involved. It's not passing.

I like to use the phrase "I get read as a woman" instead of passing, at least in formal contexts. More colloquially, it's fun to say "I got missed" or "I got ma'amed." Those are the words I'll be using from here on out.

### 3 Weird Things to Get You Missed and Ma'amed

So you want strangers to look at you, think, “that’s a woman,” and treat you accordingly. You may think that you have to undergo months of hormone replacement therapy, get some magical combination of surgeries, or learn how to do flawless makeup (or all three!) before people will start reading you as a woman. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Three simple things can do most of the heavy lifting in changing how you get read by strangers. Now there are literally thousands of things that you can do, but we’re going to focus on the three that are most accessible to do right away and the most effective at getting the response you want.

The first two items are obvious and the last one is less so; they are: *a skirt, boobs, and a hair thingy.*

#### **#1: A Skirt**

Let’s start with the easiest and most obvious feminine signifier: a skirt. Just look at the sign for the ladies restroom and you’ll see what society considers the most reductive image of femininity: not seeing her knees. It’s absolutely stupid, but it’s also stupidly effective.

Skirts are big. They’re easily seen at a distance, and often get noted before the ratio of your shoulders to your waist. They’re doubly effective if they’re colorful.

And as a lifelong pants-hater, let me tell you: they’re wonderfully liberating. Not having your legs encased in stiff fabric can feel a lot like not having your soul encased in stiff masculinity. But more importantly, it will get you read as feminine.

You might be thinking, “But Mimsy, I have no way of getting a skirt; I can’t just walk into the women’s section and straight-up buy a skirt!” And honey... yes, you can. Because the clerks do not care. The other shoppers do not care. Maybe they’ll think you’re buying something for your sister, but more likely they won’t think anything at all. This is a theme that we’ll return to often, but the reality is that most people pay very little attention to the world around them. And that’s your golden ticket.

You can also buy skirts online, for which you will need a waist measurement. You may have never actually needed a waist measurement before. It’s simply how big around you are at your belly button — or at least, that’ll get you close enough. You’ll also either want an elastic waistband or something with an adjustable belt. It can be counter-intuitive for lifelong pants-wearers, but the waistline of skirts ride higher than the “waistline” of pants. And then you’re off to the races.

## #2: Boobs

This one's so obvious it hardly needs an introduction. Society believes that boobs make you a woman, in so many different and usually problematic ways. Breasts change your body's silhouette in ways that are immediately significant to the simplistic heuristics most folks use to read gender.

"But Mimsy, I don't have boobs, that's the whole problem, here!" you might be thinking. But I am not suggesting that you wait the months and years it takes for hormones and surgical wait queues. I'm talking about immediate solutions, and that means breast prosthetics, also known as "falsies."

If you are having an immediate kneejerk reaction that falsies are cheating or not real or tawdry... I say this with love, honey, but take a moment to get over yourself. Ask yourself if somebody's prosthetic arm or prosthetic leg or prosthetic ear (they exist!) is tawdry. Breast prosthetics are the same exact thing: they help you move through society. Breast prosthetics might even make you feel whole in ways that you've never felt before.

First you'll need a bra. The best way to acquire one is to go get fitted at a lingerie or department store — again, the clerks do not care — but ordering online can work, too, albeit with a little trial and error. You should absolutely do what's comfortable for you, but here's one thing to consider: ordering online can take weeks to find something that fits; you can go in and get a fitting *tomorrow*.

Bras are sized by a number and a letter. The number is (very roughly) your

underbust measurement, how big around you are an inch or two below your nipples. The letter is the cup size, which is (very *very* roughly) how many more inches your bustline is, compared to your underbust.

You get to choose your cup size at this point, and you might try a few different sizes to see what suits your frame and your self-image. We'll get to that in a moment, but for now, just start at a C cup. You may be surprised how much larger things look when they're on your body instead of somebody else's.

Once you have a bra, you'll need to fill it.

The cheapest and easiest option is Knitted Knockers (<https://www.knittedknockers.org/>). These are knitted breast forms filled with cotton fluff, originally intended to cover mastectomies. They hold shape well with just enough give that they don't look like rocks under your shirt. And best of all, they're free. You can fill out a web form on the site and some kindly knitter will send you a pair in the mail. Do they know that they're outfitting trans ladies? Probably not. But they *do* want to help women whose silhouettes don't match societal expectations, and that's you. There are also patterns if you want to knit your own, and you can (but are not required to) send a donation to cover costs.

If you want to spend more, or if jiggle is important to you, there are silicone falsies that you can order online. These will feel and move more "realistically" than a knitted knocker, are a touch heavier, and cost a lot more than free. You can also attach them to your chest with skin adhesive, in or out of a bra. If a knitted knocker doesn't work for you, silicone might be the upgrade you need.

As mentioned before, you might try different sizes to see what you like best. Do not evaluate which size you like by wearing just the bra and whatever you're filling it with. Always try out new sizes under a shirt or favorite top. Take pictures to compare—your memory will lie to you.

### #3: And a Hair Thingy

Whether it's a bow, a headband, a scarf, or a fluffy scrunchie, a hair thingy is a surprisingly effective feminine signifier. Society does not believe that dudes decorate their hair, so if you're visibly decorating your hair, you must be a girl. If this sounds bonkers to you, remember that society is bonkers, and this guide is about speaking its bonkers language.

A hair thingy is hard to miss, right there on top of your head. And that's worth underscoring: you want a hair thingy that's large enough to be noticeable. A colored elastic ponytail band is not, for our purposes here, a hair thingy. Those very pretty hair accessories that are only visible from the back, too, are unfortunately not going to cut it. But a simple solid-color headband, wide enough to be notable, can make a huge difference.

Hair thingies also have the advantage of being super cheap. Collect them, mix and match them with your skirts, get special occasion hair thingies. Picking out a hair thingy from your collection can be a pleasantly affirming way to start your day.

Short hair with a hair thingy reads more feminine than long hair without a hair thingy.

As a quick note, some ladies can't wear breast prosthetics, either due to allergies or because it actually increases dysphoria for them. There's no quick fix, here, unfortunately. If you think that you couldn't possibly wear a breast prosthetic, I encourage you to at the very least try them out before writing them off entirely. You may be surprised.

Go back and read that line again, especially if you have short hair. It's convenient shorthand to say that girls typically have long hair, but long hair will not make you look girly. It just makes you look like a hippie. Add a hair thingy, though, and now you look like a hippie girl. And the same works with short hair: add a hair thingy, prest-oh change-oh, now you look femme.

Further down the road, you'll probably be getting a haircut. Feminine haircuts differ from masculine haircuts not just in rough length but also in... characteristics which I still do not fully understand. A good hairdresser is a fucking sorcerer. But until then and even after that, a hair thingy remains a powerful and simple signifier of femininity.

Some ladies are bald or balding, and so a hair thingy might feel impossible or silly. Wigs are the obvious go-to, here, and if your kneejerk reaction is "that's cheating," I direct you back to the paragraph about prosthetics. The other rather counter-intuitive option is to shave your head completely. Combined with some makeup, this is actually a very feminine look. Scientifically then, we can only conclude that a shaved head *is* a hair thingy. Also, bald ladies are *fucking hot*.

## The Fourth Thing: Shaving

I said you only need three things, but there's one thing that you need to *not* have, and that's facial hair. Or to frame things in a grammatically positive way, you need a shave.

The closer the shave, the better. Electric shavers are not going to cut it (ha ha); you'll need safety razors or (if you're brave) straight razors. Shave with a sharp blade—swap out your safety razor head every week; keep your straight razor wicked sharp. Holding a hot towel to your face right before shaving or shaving right after a hot shower also helps: the heat relaxes the hair follicles so they give up their whiskers easier.

Exfoliating before shaving and moisturizing after shaving are essential. You will fuck up your skin and give yourself rashes and pimples if you skip these steps.

I personally use Dollar Shave Club, whose marketing used to be very bro-focused but has gotten better recently. They have a great pre-shave exfoliating scrub, shaving butter, and post-shave moisturizing 'dew.' The subscription model means I never skip shaving because I forgot to restock. They also send me so many razor blades that I don't feel wasteful switching to a new blade.

The sensitivity of your skin may be the biggest consideration in how often you shave. Frequent shaving may cause irritation and rashes, and you'll need to back down a bit. You may need to be strategic about which days you shave.

If you have dark facial hair, you will be shaving a lot—probably as often as your skin allows it. If you dread your five o'clock shadow and your circumstances and skin allow it, you can shave twice a day. Whatever works!

If you have light-colored facial hair, you are in luck. You can probably shave every other day, or even go *three whole days* before shaving. But shaving regularly is still going to be a part of your life for the foreseeable future.

## Putting It Together

While these steps can femme you up a bit individually, they are most effective in combination.

As you compile these things, you'll necessarily be acquiring them separately. You'll try on skirts without breast prosthetics, you'll get sized for bras without wearing hair thingy, you'll shop for hair thingies on days you haven't shaved.

It's easy to try on one or two things and get discouraged because they're not magic bullets. You owe it to yourself to collect the "complete set," and try them all together, before making a final decision.

Ideally, you'll try them all together outside, among other people, because the point of this list is to get *other people* to read you as femme.

If you don't find your own reflection convincing, even with the complete set, know that you are and always will be your own harshest critic. I am nine months into transition and I still hardly believe that I reliably get read as a woman. I'm only just beginning to see it when I look in the mirror.

But one of the first times I went out with the "complete set," it was for my first appointment with a new family doctor. *With my chart in front of him*, he asked me when my last pap smear was. If that's not the medical version of ma'aming, I don't know what is. And it happens to me all the time, now. And you can get ma'amed—or missed, if you're a youngun—just as reliably.

## How It Works

Now that we've got past the easy actionable steps you can take immediately, we can take a moment to talk about why this stuff works. This section is also going to stray further into unverifiable abstract opinion rather than empirically-proven methods. You've been warned!

While it may seem like all of the above deals with gender presentation, we're actually manipulating gender *reception*. And while you may have read a whole bunch of gender theory and hung out with lots of queers and gender rebels and picked up a lot of this stuff just via osmosis, most folks have not. Most folks have very basic understandings of gender. And I mean *very*.

Try to imagine how "regular folk" understand gender after a lifetime of never having to examine it. Think you've got a good grasp on that? Try again, it's more basic than that. Nope, more basic still. No. Really. Even more basic. It's only when you get to the level of, well, stupid, that you're anywhere close.

We're talking, "has boobs, is girl." That's what most folks are working with.

This is because most folks' understanding of gender is based on *heuristics*. Unlike a considered, rational, and researched understanding of a topic, a heuristic is something super simple that gets the job done quickly and easily ninety percent of the time. For people who don't know any trans people or any queers, heuristics have never failed them their entire lives. (Or more accurately, their heuristics have failed occasionally, but it happened rarely enough and got corrected easily enough that they've forgotten it ever happened.)

Most folks have a number of heuristics for gender reception—which sounds fancy, but we're really talking about a bunch of quick tricks their brains have developed to sort some new person they just laid eyes on into the 'he' box or the 'she' box.

A whole bunch of these heuristics are the proportional ratios of body parts: shoulders compared to waist compared to hips, temples to cheekbones to chins. Eyes relative to face. Voices, too, are ratios, comparing the sound frequencies produced by the resonating chambers of the throat and mouth. These can be managed, but it takes time. Luckily, there's a bunch of quick and easy ones, too, namely: a skirt, boobs, a hair thingy, and facial hair.

All of these heuristics run in a split second, unconsciously, most of them at first glance. Importantly, they don't all agree all the time. In fact, they *usually* don't all agree, even when evaluating cisgender people. But the brain can very quickly tally up how many heuristics report "feminine" and how many report "masculine," and there's usually a clear majority. So the brain concludes: most of my gender heuristics report "girl," so this must be a girl. The more the heuristics agree, the more certain the conclusion feels.

Fascinatingly, these heuristics develop at about two years old. Toddlers hitting this developmental threshold may suddenly have trouble applying gendered pronouns to people they've known their entire lives. This is because, up until then, their little baby brains had individually stored the pronouns for *every person they know*. Which is, frankly, amazing. But around two



years old, the kid realizes that there are patterns to the inchoate firehose of data that is their world. And they start to organize things into boxes, such as gender. This not only frees up some hard drive space, as it were, but gives them tools to understand the new people that they'll meet in the future.

Most folks never update the heuristics they developed at two years old.

## Let's Get More Abstract and Complicated!

At this point, you might be wondering how three or four simple things stand up against the tons of heuristics that are about body proportions, voice, and other things you haven't changed yet. The answer is simple: not all heuristics are given equal weight, and they're not evaluated simultaneously.

Most heuristics are little things: the ratio of your waist to your hips, or the length and fullness of your eyelashes. They're also not good indicators: loads of cisgender men have enviably full eyelashes. These heuristics don't count as much on their own. They can and do pile up—gender reception is a compilation of a thousand little things—but they're so minor and so unreliable, they're kind of a wash.

Some heuristics count for a lot more, and some of these heavy hitters are easy to flip. The four weightiest that are easiest to flip are, you guessed it: skirt, boobs, hair thingy, and facial hair.

Which is handy for us, honestly, because we can leverage them. Skirt, boobs, hair thingy? Must be a woman. It's also worth remembering that for most of the people you deal with on any given day, you're not dealing with sophisticated understandings of gender. You're dealing with two-year-olds.

Gender reception heuristics also don't all happen at the same time. The big stuff that's immediately visible get evaluated first: things like your size, the breadth of your shoulders, and your hair. As other signifiers present themselves, the viewer continually updates their heuristic tallies. But here is where we find an exploitable wrinkle: the sooner a heuristic is evaluated, the greater weight it is given. Or to put it in simpler language, first impressions matter most.

It's no coincidence that our big three are evaluated very early in the heuristic tally. A skirt, a silhouette with boobs, and an eye-catching hair thingy are things that people will notice right off the bat. If their first impression is "feminine," they're less likely to change their minds later.

So there you have it: the very theoretical and probably fundamentally unverifiable underpinnings of a reductive "three weird things" web article. But I know these three things work, and every day I watch people interact with each other, I see these heuristics at work. Possibly I'm just seeing things, but now I bet you'll start seeing them, too.



## More?

There's always more thoughts and observations rattling around my head, and I may extend this document with additional content in the future. Or I may have successfully exorcized the stuff that wanted out of my head and onto the page and I'll never come back to this document again. Only time will tell.

Stay strong and be yourselves, ladies.

—Mimsy Borogove, February 23rd, 2023

This is version 1.0.

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