

# Wednesday WeBelong Monthly:



**Black or African American...**  
Does it matter?



# **Black or African American...**

## **Does it matter?**

In short, yes, because not all Black people are African American.

Now, **let's unpack.**

# Black Defined

## Black [blak]

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*adjective*

"The Black population of the United States is diverse. Its members have varied histories in the nation – many are descendants of enslaved people, while others are recently arrived immigrants." Christine Tamir, Pew Research

"Black is often a better default that recognizes and celebrates the race, culture, and lived experiences of people all over the world."  
Cydney Adams, CBS News

# African American Defined

## African American

[af-ri-kuhn uh-mer-i-kuhn]

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*noun*

"African Americans are those with the historical experience of the transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage to the Americas, living through a slave society and various forms of racist oppression, with a tradition of resistance in struggles for freedom."

Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies*

# African American Defined

"After devoting more than 30 years of my career as a historian to the study of the American past, I've concluded that African-American history might best be viewed as a series of great migrations, during which immigrants—at first forced and then free—transformed an alien place into a home, becoming deeply rooted in a land that once was foreign, even despised. After each migration, the newcomers created new understandings of the African-American experience and new definitions of blackness."

Ira Berlin, Smithsonian Magazine

# Real Life Nuances

And there's more—because people can have multiple identities.

"In the 2020 Census, 5.8 million respondents identified as Black or African American in combination with another race group, such as White or American Indian and Alaska Native" and "another 2.4 million, or 5%, self-identified as both Black and Hispanic, or Black Hispanic."

The 2019 and 2020 United States Census

So, for example, a White person from South Africa who gains American citizenship may identify as "African American."

# Did You Know?

"The census has drastically changed since its first administration in 1790. Then, only two racial categories were included: **free** (which mostly included White people) and **slaves** (who were mostly enslaved Black people).

The Census Bureau has modified terms used to refer to people of non-White racial identities throughout the years, in accordance with the politics and sensibilities of the times. For example, in the 2020 census, those who selected "Black or African American" as their race were asked to write more about their origins, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of Black racial identity."

Christine Tamir, Pew Research

# So, back to the question: Black or African American?

The ultimate answer is **always ask** a person their preference.

When describing or referring to someone, think about if naming their race is important. At the end of the day, if you have to describe someone's race, you can say "appears to be Black or a person of color" and use how they describe themselves once they share with you.



# Best Practices

- Let others define who they are
- Educate yourself
- Embrace the richness of our whole identities
- Don't make assumptions
  - This also means assuming that a person has links or knows their ancestry and heritage
- "Black" is not a monolith, and that's the same for any race