

Sample Essay Z

English 1C

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Typography and Identity

John Eligon's *New York Times* article, "A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans 'Black' or 'black'?" outlines the ongoing

conversation among journalists and academics regarding conventions for writing about race—specifically, whether or not to capitalize the "b" in "black" when referring to African-Americans (itself a term that is going out of style). Eligon argues that, while it might seem like a minor typographical issue, this small difference speaks to the question of how we think about race in the United States.

Are words like "black" or "white" mere adjectives, descriptors of skin color? Or are they proper nouns, indicative of group or ethnic identity? Eligon observes that until recently, with the prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, many journalistic and scholarly publications tended to use a lowercase "black,"

while Black media outlets typically capitalized "Black." He suggests that the balance is now tipping in favor of "Black," but given past changes, usage will probably change again as the rich discussion about naming, identity, and power continues.

Eligon points to a range of evidence that "Black" is becoming the norm, including a recent change by "hundreds of news organizations" including the Associated Press. This comes in the wake of the George Floyd killing, but it also follows a longtime Black press tradition exemplified by newspapers like *The New York Amsterdam News*. Eligon cites several prominent academics who are also starting to capitalize Black. However, he also quotes prominent naysayers

The opening sentence introduces the text this essay will respond to and gives a brief summary of the text's content and argument.

The thesis statement includes two related ideas explored by Eligon: the current trend toward using "Black" and the value of the ongoing discussion that leads to changing terms.

Summary of a counterargument.

The choice of "points out" signals that everyone would agree that mostly white supremacist groups capitalize White.

This paragraph shifts focus from present to past trends and debates.

This paragraph summarizes the historical examples Eligon gives. Phrases like "He cites" point out that certain ideas are being used to support a claim.

Summary of a historical trend that parallels today's trend.

Summary of a historical countertrend based on a counterargument to the idea of reclaiming negative terms.

Describes a response to the counterargument, a justification of today's trend toward Black.

and describes a variety of counterarguments, like the idea that capitalization gives too much dignity to a category that was made up to oppress people. Capitalizing Black raises another tricky question: Shouldn't White be likewise capitalized? Eligon points out that the groups most enthusiastic to capitalize White seem to be white supremacists, and news organizations want to avoid this association.

Eligon's brief history of the debate over racial labels, from "Negro" and "colored" to "African-American" and "person of color," gives the question of to-capitalize-or-not-to-capitalize a broader context, investing what might seem like a minor quibble for editors with the greater weight of racial identity and its evolution over time. He outlines similar disagreements over word-choice and racial labels by scholars and activists like Fannie Barrier Williams and W.E.B. Du

Bois surrounding now-antiquated terms like "Negro" and "colored." These leaders debated whether labels with negative connotations should be replaced, or embraced and given a new, positive connotation. Eligon observes that today's "black" was once used as a pejorative but was promoted by the Black Power movement starting in the late sixties, much as the word "Negro" was reclaimed as a positive word. However, the Reverend Jesse Jackson also had some success in calling for a more neutral term, "African American," in the late eighties. He thought it more appropriate to emphasize a shared ethnic heritage over color.

Eligon suggests that this argument continues to appeal to some today, but that such terms have been found to be inadequate given the diversity of ethnic heritage. "African-American" and the more generalized "people/person of color" do not give accurate or specific enough information.

Ultimately, Eligon points to personal intuition as an aid to individuals in the Black community grappling with these questions. He describes the experience of sociologist Crystal M. Fleming, whose use of lowercase “black” transformed to capitalized “Black” over the course of her career and years of research. Her transition from black to Black is, she says, as much a matter of personal choice as a reasoned conclusion—suggesting that it will be up to Black journalists and academics to determine the conventions of the future.

This last sentence of this summary paragraph focuses on Eligon's conclusion, his implied argument about what should guide the choice of terms.

Eligon's statistical and anecdotal survey of current usage of Black and black covers enough ground to convince us of the trend in favor of capitalization. But the value of Eligon's article lies in the attention it brings both to the convention and the discussion as a way for the Black community to wrestle with history and define itself. By presenting a variety of past and present opinions from Black leaders, Eligon gives a sense of the richness and relevance of this ongoing debate. His focus at the end on the opinion of one Black scholar, Crystal Fleming, offers an appealing intuitive approach to these decisions about naming. This idea is more hinted at than developed, leaving us to wonder how many other leaders share Fleming's approach and whether this approach might lead to chaos, as each writer might choose a different way to refer to racial identity. Still, Eligon's ending leaves us hopeful about the positive outcome of continuing the discussion: perhaps decisions about naming can help the Black community find self-definition in the face of historical injustice.

This sentence indicates the shift from summary to a positive assessment of the argument's effectiveness.

This part of the assessment emphasizes not just what is effective at convincing readers, but what is most valuable about the argument.

This sentence offers a gentle critique of the limits of Eligon's evidence on this last point and the existence of possible counterarguments that are not addressed.

Works Cited page uses MLA documentation style appropriate for an English class.

Works Cited

Eligon, John. "A Debate Over Identity and Race Asks, Are African-Americans

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