

Sample Essay

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

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

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

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

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 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.

We could build on Eligon's analysis to make a further claim about success not just of Black but of other terms that remind us of a shared history of oppression.

The writer suggests a way to draw a new conclusion using Eligon's evidence.

Despite the ongoing debates, his evidence suggests that the Black community has gravitated more toward reclaiming negative terms rather than inventing neutral ones. He notes that historically, W.E.B Dubois's push to embrace Negro and transform it into a positive was successful and that the Black Power movement did the same with black. It is true that the term African American has been partially successful, but clearly its relevance is waning: Eligon scarcely considers it necessary to mention this term further as he turns to the discussion of black vs. Black. The Black Lives Matter movement chose Black rather than African American, and this choice continued to feel appropriate when the movement grew dramatically after the killing of George Floyd.

The writer points to ideas that were implied but not emphasized by Eligon.

Why has the Black community continued to gravitate toward previously negative terms? Perhaps in this time of racial reckoning, in the face of active ongoing injustice, a label that points to the history of oppression is more empowering. It expresses defiance and determination. If so, perhaps it would make sense for *The New York Times* to adopt Black. Eligon does not take a side on this issue, perhaps because he is not writing an opinion piece, but it is a short distance from his piece to a piece advocating that the Times follow the lead of the Associated Press and the majority of Black leaders of the moment.

Here, the response claims that a particular stance on a controversial issue follows from Eligon's argument.

Howard Zinn, radical author of *A People's History of the United States*, writes, "The memory of oppressed people is one thing that cannot be taken away, and for such people, with such memories, revolt is always an inch below the surface." Reclaiming an oppressor's name for a people keeps this memory, and this potential for revolt, alive. Ideally, each time we use such a reclaimed term, we remember that inequity still permeates our society, and we recommit

The essay suggests a way in which this discussion of terms for an oppressed community can inspire us to fight oppression more broadly.

ourselves to fighting its many forms.

Eligon focuses only on the Black community in America, but it would

This passage adds to the conversation by suggesting parallels to groups beyond the Black community.

be interesting to learn more about the appeal of reclaiming negative terms by looking at trends among other marginalized groups. Which ones have chosen to embrace once-hateful terms, and which have chosen new, more accurate, more inclusive names? Does reclaiming negative terms become more common when oppression is more active? One obvious example lies in the reclaiming of the term "queer." Despite ongoing marginalization of queer people, the reclaimed term never gained dominance. "LGBTQ" and variations are used more commonly, despite their awkwardness. Another parallel lies in the debate over the use of Indian vs. Native American vs. indigenous. The term "cholo," too, was initially a slur referring to persons of mixed Amerindian ancestry in Bolivia and Peru, but is now used by some as a badge of indigenous pride and power. (It has various other meanings in Mexico, the United States, and in other Latin American countries.) Future discussions could analyze the historical trends in terminology and their relation to changing power relations for each of these groups. Perhaps comparing these histories could shed new light on the complex role of names in the struggle for social justice.

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

Works Cited

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action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

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