



Global  
Diversity  
Insights

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# Which Term Is It? African American or Black?

## Understanding The Dynamics of Diversity Categories

In the 30 years I have been in the diversity, multicultural, and inclusion industry, one of the most active topics focuses on diversity names, categories, and labels. Let me share my perspective on one category that causes both agreement and disagreement to those who lay claim to its importance and meaning in our global society.

### **Question: Which Term Is It? Black or African American?**

**Answer: Either term is appropriate.** Some people prefer African American, while others prefer Black. Style, tradition and history dictate which term to use. From a global perspective, Black is more appropriate, referring to any person of African descent from Lagos, Nigeria, to Liverpool, England to Long Island, New York.

The term African American pertains to those individuals living in the United States. It can relate to people like me, a 7th generation American whose ancestors were born in slavery. It can also relate to those born outside of the US, but now living in America.

However, don't be surprised if you encounter those born outside of the US who still reject self-identifying as "African Americans." For example, some in the Haitian community will call themselves Haitian-Americans or Haitians before calling themselves African Americans.

### **It gets tricky because one term does not fit all.**

Your best bet is to ASK QUESTIONS and get feedback from a person or group before arbitrarily assigning a label to someone.

### **Here's where it gets a bit complicated:**

Socially acceptable term to use in the US: People of Color

NOT acceptable in the US: Colored People (this is an old term closely tied to racial discrimination of the past.)

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Please Note: The term "colored" is still used by some in South Africa to describe people of mixed race.

### **Old Fashion Term in the US that may turn heads if you use it:**

Negro or Afro-American

Yes, I know about the Afro-American Newspaper in Baltimore, Maryland. The publisher was the best man at my brother's wedding. It is one of the oldest and most respected newspapers in the US. I also know about the NAACP - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. That organization, like several others, decided to keep their original name first created in 1909.

A term that is NOT ACCEPTABLE anywhere: **Nigger**.

It's so distasteful that it's difficult for me to even include it in this article. I am particularly offended that it is the word of choice by some hip hop artists, rap artists, comics, and other entertainers. NO, it is not at all cool to use that word. The historical implications connected to its violent past are still too radioactive to consider mainstreaming its use.

We'll look at other terms in future articles.

Your feedback is welcome at our website [www.carolecopelandthomas.com](http://www.carolecopelandthomas.com) or email me at [carole@mssconnect.com](mailto:carole@mssconnect.com). I especially enjoy hearing from those readers who only prefer to be called an "American" or "human" and see no value at all in the realm of diversity categories and labels.