Jobs for the Future

The Language of Racial Economic Equity

An Asset-Based Guide
to Advance Black Learners and Workers

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Introduction

At Jobs for the Future (JFF), we believe that language matters to our mission of driving equitable economic advancement for all. The words we use every day can perpetuate and exacerbate inequality, but they can also educate, empower, and drive positive change. That's why we've been examining our use of language and reevaluating how to describe the people our work centers on. Our latest thinking appears in JFF's *Language Matters Guide.*

Now JFF's Center for Racial Economic Equity—whose mission is to disrupt occupational segregation and eradicate the Black-white wealth gap—has developed this companion guide to dig deeper into language about race and Black people. It offers a foundation for understanding the impact that words and phrases pertaining to race can have on Black people and on efforts to promote racial economic equity.

The guide also emphasizes the importance of using asset-based language—words and phrases that focus on the strengths and potential of Black individuals and communities, rather than emphasizing disadvantages or challenges.

We recommend following these best practices when discussing or writing about Black people:

- **Recognize that Black identity is complex, deeply personal, and nuanced.**

    o Due to the complex nature of Black identity, this guide is not exhaustive; use it as one of multiple resources, not a universal source of truth.

    o Whenever possible, ask the Black individuals you work with about the terms they would prefer you use to discuss them and their communities.

- **Remember the three A's—Accountability, Acknowledgment, and Actions.**

  o **Accountability:** Consider the message you're trying to convey and determine whether accountability for the challenge or circumstances you're discussing has been placed on the correct individual or group. Step back and identify the root cause of the issue.

  o **Acknowledgment:** Be sure to acknowledge the accomplishments, assets, and potential of the individual or organization you're writing about or working with, especially in situations where an organization may be seeking new funding or partnership opportunities.

  o **Actions:** Take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that you're telling the story of an individual or group appropriately (by double-checking how people wish to identify themselves, for example).

In the table that follows, we identify terms as either Preferred, Use in Certain Circumstances, or Avoid—and we explain the rationale that led to our decisions. The work of JFF's Center for Racial Economic Equity is ongoing. Our recommendations will evolve as we consider these issues from multiple perspectives.

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
	African American		Use when discussing Black people who live in the United States and say they identify as African American. But be aware of the fact that not all Black people identify as African American. The terms "Black" and "African American" are not synonymous. Black identity is complex, and the layers of identity can be deeply personal and nuanced. Ask people how they prefer to identify themselves. Don't hyphenate African American.
(to) amplify voice(s) of		give voice to	Use "amplify the voice(s) of" when referring to efforts to create platforms that people from populations that have been explicitly or implicitly excluded can use to share their stories. Avoid saying that people, processes, or programs "give voice" to individuals. These populations have always had voices, but systemic barriers have muted them.
anti-Black			Use to describe systems, actions, and policies that have created or reinforced barriers for members of the Black community. Anti-Black practices can be overt (e.g., racist comments) or covertly embedded in structural and systemic racism (e.g., Eurocentric school curricula).
anti-racism			Use when discussing the actions individuals or groups are taking to combat racism.

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
Black		black	Capitalize "Black" in reference to race. Use "Black" as an adjective to describe individuals of African ancestral origin who identify as such (Black students). Don't use it as a noun (Blacks). Remember: Black and African American are not synonymous; ask people how they prefer to identify themselves.
	disadvantage, marginalize	disadvantaged, marginalized, minority, minorities	Don't use these terms as shorthand labels to describe people. For example, don't say "disadvantaged youth," "marginalized workers," or "minority students." It's OK to use "disadvantage" and "marginalize" as verbs in phrases that show how systems, policies, programs, or behaviors have harmed people. Examples: workforce development systems that marginalize people of color; students who have been disadvantaged by biased education systems and policies.
	discrimination	prejudice (as an exact synonym for discrimination)	Use "discrimination" when discussing unequal actions toward individuals or groups based on elements of their identity. Note: "Prejudice" and "discrimination" are often incorrectly used interchangeably. A key distinction is that "prejudice" refers to attitudes or opinions while "discrimination" refers to practices or actions.

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
	diverse		Use "diverse" to describe groups of people collectively, such as candidate pools or workforces that are made up of individuals of multiple identities or from a range of backgrounds. Do not use "diverse" to refer to individuals or groups of individuals from nonwhite racial or ethnic backgrounds. Correct: *The new finance specialist is Black; we selected her from a racially diverse pool of applicants.* Incorrect: *We recruited a diverse candidate for the finance job.*
Enslaved, enslavement		slave, slavery	Use "enslaved" and "enslavement" and avoid using "slave" and "slavery" when discussing the previous enslavement of Black people in the United States. Example: *Descendants of enslaved individuals.* Constructions using "enslaved" and "enslavement" better convey the humanity of people who were enslaved.
equity, equitable		equality (as an exact synonym of "equity")	Use "equity" and "equitable" when describing circumstances in which resources and opportunities are distributed and made accessible in a way that eliminates the likelihood that one's prospects for success or failure aren't limited or enhanced by longstanding biases favoring or disadvantaging various groups in our society. Avoid using "equality" interchangeably with "equity." "Equality" refers to efforts to treat everyone the same, regardless of individual needs.
	ethnicity	race (as an exact synonym for ethnicity)	Use "ethnicity" when describing people's identity based on ancestry, language, culture, nation, or region of origin. Avoid using "ethnicity" as a synonym for "race" because "race" refers to the physical features that a group of people share (such as skin color).

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
	implicit bias		Use when discussing prejudices that people may have but are not aware of that may impact their judgment, understanding, actions, etc. toward people who are members of other groups. Avoid using when referring to the prejudices that others knowingly act on in relation to those in different groups.
inclusive, inclusion			Use when discussing settings or circumstances in which individuals are fully involved in spaces they were traditionally not allowed to occupy. Can also be used to describe situations where people of all identities and backgrounds are present and welcome to share their perspectives, thoughts, and ideas.
longstanding oppression longstanding discrimination		historic (in reference to oppression and discrimination)	Use terms like "longstanding oppression" or "longstanding discrimination" to describe the systemic inequities embedded within U.S. structures that have negatively impacted Black people and members of other demographic groups for generations. Avoid using the term "historic" (meaning "happened in the past") to describe barriers limiting advancement opportunities for Black people and members of other demographic groups. Many of those barriers are still present in the United States today. Consider naming where the oppression is situated (institutional, systemic, individual).
	Negro		Avoid using "Negro," which is commonly considered offensive today. It's OK to use it when citing historical data, quoting historical sources, analyzing the evolution of language, or naming organizations that use the term. Note the rationale for using it.
	race	ethnicity (as an exact synonym for race)	Use when discussing the visible physical traits and features that are typically characteristic of certain demographic groups. Avoid using as a synonym for ethnicity.

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
racial disparity			Use when referring to the differences in outcomes one racial group experiences as compared to another racial group.
racial equity			Use when referring to an instance in which race is no longer a determinant of outcomes.
stereotype(s)			Use to describe often unfair and/or untrue beliefs that people may have about all people from a particular demographic group. These generalizations can be distorted positively or negatively, however both types can cause harm and impact the way we perceive and interact with others.
	systemic racism		Use when discussing the laws, regulations, and norms of systems, institutions, and society at large that create inequitable outcomes for different racial groups. Avoid using when referring to racism of a single person or individual.
		talent deficit, talent shortage	Avoid using terms like "talent deficit" and "talent shortage" to describe labor market conditions that lead employers to say they there's a lack of people qualified for certain jobs in Black communities and other populations that are underrepresented in well-paid occupations. Such usages diminish the intellectual abilities of the members of the groups in question and ignore root causes of the issue, including inequitable access to education and training. Consider what the message is you're trying to convey. Call out actors and circumstances that have created this reality.

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
		underfunded, under-resourced, underserved	Don't use terms like these as shorthand to describe people or communities, as in "underserved young people" or "under-resourced neighborhoods." Instead, use people-first language that calls out the systems that have not met people's basic needs. Examples: groups that have been underserved by public and private institutions; communities that have not received equitable investments from the government or the private sector
		urban	Only use "urban" to describe a municipality, neighborhood, or other locale when you want to convey its actual meaning: "of or relating to a city." Don't use it as a shorthand label for an area whose residents are primarily Black or experiencing poverty. Instead, describe the locale using statistics such as population, population density, demographic data about the people who live there, economic data such as median income and housing prices, etc.
white supremacy			Use the term "white supremacy" to describe the systems, actions and policies that stem from the belief that white people constitute a superior race. Use it to directly call attention to actions or beliefs that threaten Black people and members of other populations.

Glossary

This glossary offers further explanations of and insights into some of the terms and ideas covered in the table above. Many of these entries include links to online resources about race-related language that we hope you'll find useful.

African American A U.S. resident with African, particularly Black African, ancestors. This isn't a synonym for Black—not all Black people in the United States identify as African American.

amplify voice To provide a platform for the stories and experiences of people from populations that have been explicitly or implicitly excluded to be heard.

anti-Black A mindset or ideology that voids Blackness of value while systematically marginalizing Black people and their issues. The first form of anti-Blackness is overt racism. Beneath that is the covert structural and systemic racism that categorically predetermines the socioeconomic status of Black people in this country. The structure is held in place by anti-Black policies, institutions, and ideologies.

anti-racism The work of actively opposing systemic racism by advocating for changes in systems, actions and policies.

Black The population of Black people in the United States is quite diverse, made up of people with varied racial and ethnic identities and experiences. It includes all people who say their race is Black, either alone or along with other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

disadvantage A condition or situation that causes problems, especially one that causes something or someone to be less successful than other things or people.

discrimination The unequal and unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, national origin, age, intellectual ability, or other characteristics.

diversity The presence of different and multiple characteristics that make up individual and collective identities, including race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, socioeconomic status, language, and physical ability.

enslavement Replaces the term "slavery" and relates to the previous bondage of Black people in the United States. This construction better conveys the humanity of Black people by recognizing that their bondage was not intrinsic to their identity, rather imposed and upheld by systems that allowed forced labor to thrive.

equality In the context of diversity, equality is typically defined as treating everyone the same and giving everyone access to the same opportunities. It means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities.

equity The condition that comes into being when resources and opportunities are distributed and made accessible in a way that eliminates the likelihood that one's prospects for success or failure aren't limited or enhanced by longstanding biases favoring or disadvantaging various groups in our society.

ethnicity A common identity based on ancestry, language, culture, nation, or region of origin. Ethnic groups can possess shared attributes, including religion, beliefs, customs, and/or shared memories and experiences.

inclusion The creation of a culture of belonging that welcomes the contributions and participation of all people.

marginalization The process that occurs when members of a dominant group relegate a particular group to the edge of society by not allowing them an active voice, identity, or place. Marginalized groups have restricted access to resources like education and health care.

oppression A system of supremacy and discrimination for the benefit of a limited dominant group perpetuated through differential or unjust treatment, ideology, and institutional control.

prejudice An inclination or preference, especially one that interferes with impartial judgment. A form of prejudice that results from the universal tendency and need of individuals to classify others into categories.

race A social construct that divides people into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (particularly skin color), ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, cultural history, and ethnic classification. Ideas about race are often associated with the social, economic, and political needs of a society at a given time.

racial disparity The imbalances and incongruities between the treatment of racial groups, including economic status, income, housing options, societal treatment, safety, and many other aspects of life and society.

racial equity Circumstances or conditions that come into being with the acknowledgment and repair of systems that create barriers along racial lines and limit access to quality jobs and careers that offer opportunities to advance economically and build wealth.

stereotype A generalization about individuals or groups. Often rooted in false assumptions, stereotypes can cause people to have prejudiced attitudes, make judgments without thinking critically about certain issues, and intentionally or unintentionally discriminate against others. Stereotypes are typically negative and are based on incomplete or inaccurate information that does not recognize individualism and personal agency.

systemic racism An interlocking and reciprocal relationship between the individual, institutional, and structural levels of racism that together function as a system of racism. At the individual level, racism is perpetuated via interactions between people. At the institutional level, it occurs within institutions and systems of power. And at the structural or societal level it is perpetuated between and among institutions and across society. In many ways, systemic racism is synonymous with structural racism.

talent deficit, talent shortage Terms used to describe labor markets in which there's a lack of people qualified for certain jobs. Employer claims of talent deficits should be analyzed critically—it may be that they aren't able to fill jobs because the wages they're offering aren't high enough, or because they aren't willing to recruit and hire people from certain racial or ethnic backgrounds.

underfunded Lacking access to the funds necessary to function properly.

urban A term that literally means "of or relating to cities" but which is often used in an offensive way to describe the experiences, lifestyles, or cultures of Black or African American people living in economically depressed city neighborhoods, or to refer to Black or African American people themselves.

white supremacy The idea or ideology that white people are superior to people of color, and therefore their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions are superior to the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of people of other backgrounds. White supremacy is ever present in U.S. institutional and cultural assumptions that implicitly or overtly assign value to white people while casting aspersions on people of color. Examples include assigning morality, goodness, and humanity to a white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, inhuman, and undeserving.

About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. and education systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About JFF's Center for Racial Economic Equity

Jobs for the Future's Center for Racial Economic Equity accelerates Black economic advancement by identifying solutions and best practices to disrupt occupational segregation and eradicate the Black-white wealth gap. For more information, visit https://info.jff.org/racialequity.