

What Racial Terms Make You Cringe?

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This is a version of the weekly Race/Related newsletter. To get it in your inbox, sign up here.

Diversity hire. Ethnic. Person of color. Exotic. Urban.

This week the Race/Related team is taking aim at a few of the words and phrases that we find bothersome when it comes to race. Some of the terms we chose also have entries in The Times's Manual of Style and Usage. We've included the manual's recommendations when appropriate.

Tell us if you agree or disagree with our choices, or send us your own picks at racerelated@nytimes.com. We'll include a selection of the responses in the next edition of the Race/Related newsletter.

Andrei Kallaur/The New York Times

So a friend's boss asks her to work on a study involving black patients. The friend is black and her boss is white. And the boss later becomes concerned about what she might think about his assigning her to the project.

He calls her into his office, stammers a bit and then assures her that he did not give her the assignment because she was "ethnic."

What makes a black person ethnic but a white person not?

On the one hand, this is about the normalization of whiteness — if you're not white, then you're something else. On the other hand, it speaks to how uncomfortable some people are to even discuss race. Someone more at ease with talking about race would have known that she wasn't "ethnic," she was just black.

John Eligon, National Correspondent

[Stylebook says: **ethnic**. Use the word freely as an adjective (*ethnic group*), but not as a noun except in direct quotations. The political coinage (*white ethnics*) is condescending.]

Antonio de Luca/The New York Times

“People of color” is too close, in my mind, to “colored people,” just a small grammatical shift away from a term tainted by the ugliness of segregation. I know it’s now commonplace, and that it’s used with the noblest of intent. But white is a color too so everyone is technically of color, right?

Marc Lacey, National Editor

[Stylebook says: **people of color**. Except in direct quotations, the expression is too self-conscious for the news columns. Substitute a term like *minorities* or, better, refer to specific ethnic groups — *black and Hispanic authors*, for example.]

Josephine Sedgwick/The New York Times

“Illegal immigrant” implies that the immigrant is illegal in the same way that drugs are illegal, and it creates a misleading framework to talk about immigration. Yes, there are millions of immigrants who entered the country illegally — though there are millions more who entered the country legally, but overstayed their visas.

Illegal immigrant — and its infamous companion, illegal alien — are negative in nature and intent. Using them stigmatizes the subject and prevents us, all of us, from seeing the man or woman behind the label. It is pejorative and purposely demeaning because it criminalizes the person, not the act. To normalize its use is to give people license to offend.

Fernanda Santos, Phoenix Bureau Chief

*[Stylebook says: **illegal immigrant** may be used to describe someone who enters, lives in or works in the United States without proper legal authorization. But be aware that in the debate over immigration, some people view it as loaded or offensive. Without taking sides or resorting to euphemism, consider alternatives when appropriate to explain the specific circumstances of the person in question, or to focus on actions: who crossed the border illegally; who overstayed a visa; who is not authorized to work in this country... Illegal immigration, because it describes the issue rather than an individual, is less likely than illegal immigrant to be seen as troubling...Do not use illegal as a noun, and avoid the sinister-sounding alien.]*

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William van Roden/The New York Times

“Urban,” as in Best Urban Contemporary Album. The award Beyoncé won last month. Is it a good thing as this article in the magazine Fader tries to explain or a not-so-good thing, as the football player Mark Ingram learned in London. Either way it just feels like code for black.

Bernadette Dashiell, Art Director

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Antonio de Luca/The New York Times

Multiracial people are often defined by their fractions - “half white,” “half black,” “a quarter Native American.” The math is convenient but inaccurate, suggesting a person’s identity can be sliced into clean, separate boxes. In reality, it’s all part of one unified, messy experience, defined more by the sum of its parts than by its divisions.

Audrey Carlsen, Graphics Editor

Peter Rentz/The New York Times

Don’t call me non-white, non-Jew, non-black. “Non” feels like a wall. Meant to clearly delineate what is and isn’t but it feels like the most alienating description you can make of a person and an awful way to define a relationship. You are so not, you’re non. Devoid of any character especially the one you’re non of.

Nicole Fineman, Video Editor

Robert Vinluan/The New York Times

Whenever candidates of color are being considered for positions or jobs, one question repeatedly comes up: Will they fit in? This drives me crazy as it becomes apparent that “qualified” gets replaced by “fitting in.” We aren’t hiring for a sorority house. We want to hire the best qualified!

Sandra Stevenson, Visual Editor

Grant Gold/The New York Times

If you’re a woman, you’re used to the male gaze. But if you’re a woman of color, something else also happens. You’re forever described as “exotic.” You know, the moment when your skin can only be fussed over as “mocha” or “cinnamon” or “caramel”? Brown works just fine, thanks.

I do remember one especially egregious moment when I was 20. It was my first night in a study abroad program in London; my first time out at a real English pub. There was a much older (white) man at the bar, whose stare remained squarely on me.

He eventually did approach me, and asked the dreaded question: “So, where you from?” I said America, New York City. “No, but where are you from, from? You’re just so exotic looking!” After barking out, “I am not a damn peacock,” he knew to move on. “Exotic” isn’t a compliment. A simple hello and a smile would do much better.

Fahima Haque, Social Strategy Editor

Grant Gold/The New York Times

“Diversity hire” is, in most contexts, used to define someone who is not white. Racial diversity is critical, but the term “diversity hire” or “diversity candidate” carries more weight than that and suggests a particular individual or group of individuals were hired because of their identity (and were perhaps not the most qualified), rather than their qualifications and identity.

Sona Patel, Social Strategy Editor

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Alamy

How should you respond to racially offensive comments in the workplace and in your community? Our latest live chat featured our correspondents John Eligon and Rachel Swarns talking with Madeline Vann, a reader from Virginia who reached out to them in search of a strategy. [WATCH] (Above, an awkward workplace that is not ours.)

Rachel Dolezal will answer readers’ questions on Facebook at 12:15 p.m. Eastern on Tuesday. Ms. Dolezal was the president of the N.A.A.C.P. chapter in Spokane, Wash. and a university instructor in African-American studies before she attracted national attention in June 2015 for her embrace of a racial identity she was not born or raised in. Send your questions for her to racereLATED@nytimes.com.

Follow us on Instagram, where we continue the conversation about race through stunning visuals.

Around the Web

Here are some of the stories that we’re talking about, beyond The Times.

This African summit meeting had no Africans.

Diddy's Revolt TV is being sued for reverse discrimination for alleged "animosity toward Caucasians."

A former Pentagon official in the Reagan administration is trying to denationalize American Muslims.

Baltimore County is struggling to move past segregated schools.

In The Times

The Times publishes many stories that touch on race. Here are a few you shouldn't miss, chosen by Race/Related editors.

A Man Who Hated Black Men Found a Victim Who Cared for Others [READ]

Tracing His Roots, Georgetown Employee Learns University Sold His Ancestor [READ]

Where Fiction and Reality Collide: Books and Black Lives Matter [READ]

White Artist's Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Draws Protests [READ]

How to Con Black Law Students: A Case Study [READ]

A Children's Museum 'Surprise Blockbuster': A Show on Islam [READ]

Seeking Style in the Markets of Abidjan, Ivory Coast [READ]