



Room to grow

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Updating our style guide

On June 19, the Associated Press Stylebook — the grammar and stylistic standard for most journalists across the country — announced its decision to capitalize “Black” when used in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense. This decision was long-awaited for many, and some style guides and newsrooms, such as the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), had already begun doing so.

In a June 30 Poynter article, Kristen Hare wrote of numerous journalists who celebrated AP Style’s update, which would ultimately influence many mainstream newsrooms “to acknowledge Blackness as a culture and identity worthy of a proper noun.” Hare cited articles and journalists as early as 1999 who advocated for capitalizing the “B” but knew the change most likely wouldn’t surface for a while.

“To me, it’s an issue of respect, fairness, equality and parity. When we use a lowercase letter it makes the word less visible, less prominent and maybe less important. It’s the diminutive form. My name is written with an uppercase ‘A’ and ‘C’ for ‘Aly Colón.’ I consider that a sign of respect,” journalist Aly Colón told Poynter’s editor in 2003.

After countless behind-the-scenes and meaningful discussions to move toward stylistic and syntactic justice, AP Style chose to implement the capital “B” on Juneteenth of 2020.

This decision to capitalize “Black” quickly raised the question of whether or not to capitalize “White.” Proponents to capitalize it claimed that it made grammatical sense to capitalize both; it demonstrates consistency and leaves less room for confusion. Additionally, some argued that not capitalizing “White” would make it appear as the default, which should not be the case. However, many opponents to capital “W” said that, unlike Black culture, there is less of a shared culture and history among White Americans. Also, throughout history, many white supremacists have capitalized the “W,” and requiring journalists to follow this same style seemed wrong.

My initial thinking aligned with AP Style’s decision: capitalize “Black,” out of respect and recognition of a resilient and shared culture, and leave “White” lowercase, not drawing any more attention to it. However, a Washington Post opinion, “Why ‘White’ should be capitalized, too,” by Nell Irvin Painter changed my perspective.

Painter explained that to leave “White” lowercase affirms how many White Americans have viewed themselves throughout history: an unraced identity. This is a problem because when White people do not acknowledge their role in racial injustice throughout time, it makes it nearly impossible to change the system. Painter said that a capitalized “White” challenges the freedom of a raceless identity.

“No longer should White people be allowed the comfort of this racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced. Being racialized makes White people squirm, so let’s racialize them with that capital ‘W,’” Painter said.

At first, capitalizing “White” did make me uncomfortable, and, if I’m being completely honest, it still does. I think it is hard for White people — myself included — to own up to our privilege and the damage our race has done throughout history. Even if we have not intentionally perpetuated racism, we still reap the benefits of a White-centric society.

So, with these ideas in mind and in accordance with NABJ, The Bison has chosen to deviate from AP Style for this matter and capitalize both “Black” and “White” (unless referring to white supremacists or nationalists or white privilege), and any other race, for this school year’s style guide. While we want to always leave room for growth and individual preferences, this is the standard we are setting for this year.

Let the capital “W” serve as a reminder that our language and words hold tremendous power: We can no longer be a raceless and unaffected personhood, but instead we must realize the role we have to play in repentance and restoration.

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