

Defining Hispanic vs. Latinx

Often used interchangeably, these terms refer to two slightly different, but often related things. Basically, the term “Hispanic” refers to those whose native language is Spanish and/or two descended from those of Spanish-speaking populations. “Latinx” refers to those who are from or are descended from people of Latin America. Not every country in Latin America was colonized by the Spanish. Anyone from Central or South America or the Caribbean may identify as Latinx. For example, Brazil’s official language is Portuguese and Haiti’s French Guiana’s is French.

Hispanic refers to language — an element of culture, which makes it similar to an ethnicity, or a group of people who share a common culture. Even still, many different ethnic groups with very different cultures can identify as Hispanic. Just think: People from Argentina, the Dominican Republic and Mexico all practice different cultures, but share the common cultural element of language.

On many U.S. documents, Hispanic and Latinx are considered races. While many people do view these identities as racial, many still check the Hispanic/Latinx box and note an additional race. In the U.S., Hispanic and Latinx people are often associated with having “brown” skin and many do consider Latinx to be their primary race. However, Hispanic and Latinx people can be of any color or race: Black, white, Indigenous, mixed or even Asian. Some Black Hispanic/Latinx people identify as Afro-Caribbean or Afro-Latinx to differentiate from other populations of Hispanic/Latinx people with European and/or Indigenous heritage.



People of different races and cultures from around the world identify as Hispanic and/or Latinx. Saying Hispanic/Latinx people can come from any race does not erase the reality of racism and colorism for those who are not white or light-skinned. European colonization and white supremacy uphold race as a construct with very real implications. Hispanic/Latinx people with lighter features often have privilege over those with darker features. Not everyone who identifies as Hispanic/Latinx is treated the same.

The -x ending of “Latinx” is a newly-adopted LGBTQ-alternative to using the traditional gendered Spanish -o and -a endings. With the LGBTQ movement drawing attention to non-binary or genderqueer individuals who do not identify as male or female, “Latinx” acknowledges the intersection, or combination, of being LGBTQ and of Latin American descent. The term, which sprung from academic circles, offers an alternative to the gendered grammar of the Spanish language, which ends adjectives with either feminine -a or masculine -o endings, depending on the “gender” of the accompanying noun. Many news outlets such as NPR have already adopted the term into their stylebooks. While some argue this amending of the language erases an element of Spanish-speaking culture, it is part of a larger movement to adopt more gender-neutral terms in the ways we speak (similar to adopting the singular “they” or the term “police officer” instead of “policeman” in English). Linguists also point out that the -x in Latinx makes a political statement that, historically (think, Malcom X), signifies resistance to the mainstream.

