

They say a name like mine can hold you back in life, but I will never change it

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What does your name mean? Do you know where it comes from?
- Has anyone ever had a problem saying your name? How did you feel?
- Do you think a name can change a person's chances in life? Why?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

confused

get on

heritage

job applications

job opportunities

proud

response

react

respect

1. _____ are the chances you have to get the job you want.
2. When you _____ someone, you admire or like them because of what they have achieved in life.
3. A(n) _____ is an answer or a reply to something.
4. To _____ means to behave in a certain way because something has happened.
5. When you are _____, you don't understand something very well or you don't know what to do.
6. _____ are the forms or documents you complete to try and get a job.
7. When you _____ with someone, you have a good relationship with them.
8. Your _____ is the history, traditions and culture of your family.
9. When you are _____ of something, you are pleased about something you or someone else has done.

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. My family's _____ includes stories and recipes from our home country.
2. I am _____ of my little brother for winning the swimming competition.
3. Eliza sent an email to her penfriend, but she hasn't got a(n) _____ yet.
4. My friends and I _____ because we like the same things.
5. Marco sent _____ to several companies last week and is waiting for replies.
6. There are more _____ in big cities than in small towns.
7. Many people got _____ about the time of the meeting, so some of them arrived late.
8. Alex didn't know how to _____ when he heard the surprising news.
9. It's important to show _____ to your teachers and classmates.

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An unusual name can have a detrimental impact on your life and finances – but in my experience, it also has advantages

Xaymaca Awoyungbo
13 January, 2025

1 Every first day of a new school year, there was always the same moment when the teacher read the register.

“Blake.”

“Here, sir.”

“Aaron.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then, there was my name. The teacher would stop and look confused.

“Hmm ... wow ... how do I ...? Please forgive me if I mispronounce your name.”

“It’s Xaymaca [zy-ma-ka], sir.”

I’ve heard all kinds of mistakes, from “Zakamaya” to “Can I call you something else?” Sometimes, they would say, “I’m not even going to try.”

2 My name is interesting to some people and strange to others, but it can cause problems. A 2022 study found that people with names that are difficult to say are less likely to get their first academic job in a college or university.

3 My surname, Awoyungbo, makes things more difficult. Research from the University of Oxford shows that people with Nigerian heritage need to send 80 per cent more job applications than white Britons to get a good response.

4 Some people choose to change their names to avoid problems. For example, the actor Kal Penn (real name Kalpen Modi) found he got 50 per cent more job opportunities after he started using an English name. “I was amazed,” he said.

5 But I will never change my name. My name has history. Xaymaca means “land of wood and water” and was the name for Jamaica. My name is also a great way to start conversations.

6 How people react to my name says a lot. If someone says my name is strange, I know we probably won’t get on with them. But if they are interested and ask questions, I think we could become friends.

7 For me, it’s about respect. When someone respects you, they will learn your name. Think about famous people like Ronaldinho, Beyoncé or Tchaikovsky – people respect their names because they respect them.

8 My first name has the same number of letters as Charles and the same number of syllables as Benjamin. It’s not difficult, just unusual. My name is not only on my job applications – it’s part of who I am, and I’m proud of it. I believe we should all be proud of our names.

9 Before my grandfather moved to the UK, my great-grandfather said, “The name Awoyungbo shall be heard in London.” I don’t want to disappoint him. By keeping my name, I hope to make things better – not just for me, but for other journalists and the next generation of teachers.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Choose the correct answer (a, b or c).

1. What always happened on the author's first day at school?
 - a. The teacher learnt all the students' names.
 - b. The teacher had trouble saying the author's name.
 - c. The students wrote their names on the board.

2. What does the name Xaymaca mean?
 - a. land of wood and water
 - b. beautiful island
 - c. strange name

3. How does the author feel about his name?
 - a. He wants to change it.
 - b. He is proud of it.
 - c. He doesn't like it.

4. What did Kal Penn do?
 - a. He moved to a new country.
 - b. He changed his name.
 - c. He chose a different career.

5. What happens when someone respects you, according to the author?
 - a. They give you a new name.
 - b. They don't say your name aloud.
 - c. They learn your name.

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6. How many syllables does the name Xaymaca have?
- two
 - three
 - four

4 Key language

a. Find a form of these words in the article.

best

fame

journal

like

pride

usually

b. Choose the correct form of the words from the previous activity to complete the sentences.

- You should feel very _____ of the excellent work you have done on the project.
- I _____ get up at seven o'clock during the week.
- It is _____ to snow this afternoon in the north of the country.
- I'm _____ at cooking than my husband.
- Would you like to be a(n) _____ movie star?
- Philip works as a(n) _____ and writes for *The Guardian* newspaper.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you know anyone with an interesting or unusual name? What is it?
- Some people change their names to make it easier for others. Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?

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6 In your own words

- a. Research to find the meaning and history of your own first or surname and write a brief description of it. You can ask family members for information, search historical records or find online resources. Explore where the name might have come from (e.g. country, culture or language) and what it might mean.
- b. Share any relevant or interesting information you find with your class.