

Equity vs. Equality: What's the Difference?

While the terms equity and equality may sound similar, the implementation of one versus the other can lead to dramatically different outcomes for marginalized people.

Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.



Equality



Equity

In the illustration above, two individuals have unequal access to a system — in this case, the tree that provides fruit. With equal support from evenly distributed tools, their access to the fruit still remains unequal. The equitable solution, however, allocates the exact resources that each person needs to access the fruit, leading to positive outcomes for both individuals.

While the tree appears to be in a naturally occurring system, it's critical to remember that social systems aren't naturally inequitable — they've been intentionally designed to reward specific demographics for so long that the system's outcomes may appear unintentional but are actually rooted discriminatory practices and beliefs.

"The route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone justly according to their circumstances."

—Paula Dressel, Race Matters Institute

Equality and Equity are not synonyms.

The words *equality* and *equity* are often confused because, at a glance, they appear to mean the same thing. They both have to do with the way people are treated, and both are used in the fields of law, government, economics, and so on. Often, these terms are used to describe actions, laws, or rules that are attempting to end or oppose *injustice* or unfair treatment of people.

However, *equality* and *equity* as noted above are not synonyms, and the methods used to achieve them are often very different.

What does *equality* mean?

The word *equality* is defined as "the state or quality of being equal; correspondence in quantity, degree, value, rank, or ability."

Equality is usually simple to understand: three buckets that all contain five apples are in a state of *equality*. They all have exactly the same amount of the exact same items.

Under the law, Americans have *equality* in the sense that nobody can be legally denied their rights based on any personal quality.

The word *equity* is defined as “the quality of being fair or impartial; fairness; impartiality” or “something that is fair and just.”

Equity is more complicated than *equality*.

The complication with *equity* is that people often disagree on what is “just” or “fair.” These are subjective concepts and, as a result, laws and policies that attempt to achieve *equity* are often challenged in court or are controversial.

The use of the word *equity* has increased due to concerns about social justice and a desire for fairness for historically oppressed groups. In the law, minority groups may have equal rights but are still treated unfairly.

Historically oppressed groups such as LGBTQ+ people, Black people, and Indigenous peoples have not only fought for *equality*, but continue to fight for *equity* in society.

How do we use *equality* and *equity*?

The best way to show the difference between *equality* and *equity* is with an example.

For example, if I gave a rich woman and a poor woman each \$100 that would be an example of *equality* since I gave both the same amount of money.

Alternatively, if I gave a rich woman \$100 and a poor woman \$200, then it could be said I am trying to achieve *equity* by “fairly” giving the poor woman more help based on her financial situation.

Ideally, we would be able to achieve both *equality* and *equity* when it comes to the law and society, but this is usually very difficult.

However, knowing the difference between *equality* and *equity*, will give you a better idea about what goal a person is trying to achieve and the proper word to use to describe it.

