How to ID Your Crystals When They All Look the Same

People ask me all the time how I got so good at identifying stones. The answer, like most things, is practice. I look at literally thousands and thousands of crystals every year and after all of that exposure to crystal eye candy, it’s easy to begin noticing some defining characteristics for each.

Am I always 100% right in my ID’s? Probably not. Do I know what EVERY single stone is that I come across? Nope…there are always a few stumpers in the mix.

However, when you have practice looking at all sizes, shapes, and colors of stones, you begin to appreciate the common characteristics of each…those little things that help you pick out one type of stone in a group of similar crystals.

So, today I’m sharing this blog post about how to tell the difference between black stones (when they’re all tumbled and look almost identical). I want to teach you how to spot the differences between crystals that, at first glance, all look alike. Following are some of my tips and tricks to helping you identify tumbled stones when they all are very similar color. These aren’t definitive, but they’re definitely helpful keys.

Jet has a little bit more of a silvery black appearance than just a straight black color. It’s also very light weight because it’s carbon-based. You’ll notice its weight difference in comparison to other tumbled stones. It also usually has a very high polish on it depending on its place of origin. An exception to this rule about the highly polished surface is tibetan jet. This type of jet can have an almost matte finish. Tibetan jet is rarely seen in larger, rounded, tumbled stones. It’s typically found in flatter pieces because the nature of the material.

Tumbled black tourmaline often has little cracks or grooves (like veins) on the surface of the stone. The inside of the cracks and crevices is often very shiny or sparkly compared to the glassy exterior of the stone.
Black obsidian, like jet, is fairly lightweight, but it has a very glassy sheen to it (because it’s a natural glass). It’s also more of a true black color than jet (which is more of a silvery black).

Black onyx, which is often confused for black obsidian, is almost a little waxy in its texture. The surface of black onyx often looks a bit dull in comparison to other stones (except in jewelry when the stone is highly polished, giving it a glassy shine). It is useful to know that when black onyx has a high polish it does look similar to Black obsidian, but since onyx is typically only highly polished for jewelry, this can help you ID your stone. You see, black obsidian is RARELY set in jewelry because it is easily broken and difficult to work with from a lapidary perspective. So, if you have a black stone with a high polish set in jewelry, it is very likely to be onyx.

Black Tektite is another type of natural glass, formed from meteoric impacts. When polished, it often has a glassy shine to its surface, but it will have large pock marks (almost like little bubbles that have been popped) on its surface. These little craters, or grooves, in the surface of the stone can be small or large and create a dimpled pattern on the crystal.

Shungite, similar to jet, is carbon-based and silvery black in color. Also like jet, it’s very lightweight. Often, Shungite is hand-polished. This means that the surface of these stones isn’t quite as smooth and rounded as a piece of jet (it’s a bit more angular). Additionally, some very high grade Shungite is more of a matte black color with veins or cubes of Pyrite displayed throughout the stone.

I hope this introduction to six common black stones has helped you learn a few tips for identifying pieces in your own collection. Have fun!