

INDIGENOUS TERMINOLOGY GUIDE



This guide is intended to support professionals in culturally safer and more appropriate use of terminology in the Indigenous and Canadian context. It is important to know that not every First Nations, Metis, and Inuit person will necessarily agree upon terminology. However, there are some promising practices many Indigenous leaders, scholars, activists, and community members agree upon which we intend to share in this guide.

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Indigenous/Aboriginal In the Canadian context both Indigenous and Aboriginal are used as an umbrella term to describe the original peoples before the colonial country was formed: First Nations, Metis, and Inuit.

First Nations is a term that eventually replaced the term “Indian” in the 1970’s. First Nations peoples are land-based nations that trace their heritage back to their traditional territory. There are over 600 different First Nations across Canada with distinct cultural practices, traditions, and languages. More than 200 First Nations communities can be found in colonial British Columbia.

Metis The Metis Nation is made up of the descendants of Indigenous women and Euro-Settler men. The Métis are a distinct Indigenous nation with their own history, culture, languages, and territories with deep historical roots in the three prairie provinces. A common misconception with Metis is that it just means a person with mixed ancestry between First Nations and European cultures. This is not true. To identify as a Metis person, you have to come from Metis parents or trace your heritage back to the founding of the Metis Nation.

Inuit The Inuit live in communities across the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavut,

Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador). The Inuit call this vast region Nunangat.

Indian

The term “Indian” is a semi-retired term that has specific uses in political and legislative contexts in accordance with Indian Bands, Indian Status Cards, and the Indian Act. The term Indian may still be used by older generations of First Nations people, but we do not recommend using the term Indian in any other context.

Native

Is a casual term used to describe Indigenous peoples as the original inhabitants of these lands and territories now called Canada. While you may hear the term “Native” used by Indigenous peoples as a means of self-identification and to describe Native experiences, we recommend you do not use the term Native in professional contexts as the term is too casual and can be problematic to non-Indigenous people.

Settler fatigue

arises from an unwillingness to take responsibility for colonial violence and resistance out of a fear of the loss of colonial entitlements (Stein 2020).

Reconciliation fatigue

arises when Indigenous peoples are tired of explaining, justifying, education, and advocating for human rights and Indigenous specific rights (Stein 2020).

Decolonization

a process of dismantling, deconstructing, and disrupting cultural & colonial barriers that separate us, suppress us, and quite often oppress us (Pierre 2019).

Settler colonialism

a form of colonization in which outsiders come to a land inhabited by Indigenous peoples and claim it as their new home.

CULTURAL SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR TERMINOLOGY

1. Always capitalize the 'I' in Indigenous just as you would capitalize the 'C' in Canada. What we capitalize we pay respect to and recognize its value in a name.
2. Avoid using possessive terminology such as "our" Indigenous partners, or "our" Indigenous communities, or "Canada's" Indigenous peoples. We do not belong to anyone or anything. Using possessive terminology reinforces the power gap between colonial institutions and Indigenous peoples.
3. Always pluralize "people" to "peoples" following the word Indigenous. While it may sound odd and your Microsoft Word document may pick it up as an error, we pluralize the word 'people' to reflect and respect the significant diversity among Indigenous peoples. We are not one homogenous group, rather we are composed of many distinct cultures, traditions, languages, and identities.
4. The term 'Elder' can be capitalized when referenced in an institutional context. For example, when referring to Elders on meeting agendas, reports, or institutional positions like "Elders in Residence" we encourage you to capitalize the 'E' in Elder to respect the role and expertise of those positions in your organization and in the community.
5. Be mindful of writing in past-tense terms regarding Indigenous situations. As Indigenous peoples, we are not a peoples of the past, we are alive and well today with strong elements of culture, tradition, language, and identity.
6. Avoid pathologizing tones in writing and speaking. When becoming aware of the widespread and systemically scaffolded inequity against Indigenous peoples in Canada, it can be easy to unintentionally use language that deems Indigenous peoples as 'abnormal' or 'unhealthy'. This tone can also sound like belittling or over sympathizing with Indigenous peoples.
7. Avoid using phrases that divide the term Indigenous. For example, saying or writing sentences like "Indigenous and First Nations people" or "Indigenous and Metis people". The term Indigenous is including and encompassing First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Divisive terms can sound like excluding certain Indigenous groups or create a power imbalance.

8. The term Inuit means “The People”, therefore it is not necessary to say Inuit People because that would be like saying the people people.

9. While there are many terms to avoid and many may seem not to be appropriate, the best cultural safety strategy to use with Indigenous peoples and communities is to follow their lead with how they choose to self-identify. For example, as we have encouraged you not to use the term Native or Indian, if a community or person self-identifies and wishes to be called as such, then we suggest you follow their lead and identify them in the way they feel most respected.