



# TIP SHEET

## INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

**Disclaimer:** There is no “one size fits all” approach to inclusive language for Indigenous Peoples. While Indigenous Peoples exist all around the world and encompass a range of histories, cultures, languages, traditions, and ancestral lands, this language guide focuses explicitly on Indigenous Peoples as the original inhabitants and caretakers of the land, which is now called Canada.

Remember that Indigenous communities are not a monolith. It is the right of individuals and communities to use whatever language, terms, and phrases they find most meaningful, authentic, and reflective of who they are. Even individuals within the same communities may not agree on terms.

In order to show Indigenous communities’ dignity and respect, it is important to pay close attention to how a community or individual identifies or describes themselves. The guidelines below are just that: guidelines. Always prioritize what is most affirming and accurate to each person’s lived experiences and identity.


### BEING INCLUSIVE

- Learn about our shared history and the negative and harmful, and ongoing effects of colonization, a term used to describe how Europeans imposed their own cultural views on Indigenous Peoples and took control of their lands and rights to self-determination.
- Work toward:
  - \* **Decolonization:** Reversing the discrimination and harmful stereotypes imposed on Indigenous Peoples. The long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power; and
  - \* **Reconciliation:** Ensuring Indigenous stories, history, and viewpoints are heard and included in our culture, with the aim of moving forward to a shared future.
- Be respectful. If you don’t know the correct term or don’t understand something, educate yourself and, whenever possible, confirm your learning with the community or person involved.

### DEFINING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES:

Canada’s Constitution Act uses the umbrella term “Aboriginal” to refer to three distinct groups of people: Indian, Inuit, and Métis. The term “Indigenous” is gaining in preference over Aboriginal and Native.

**First Nations:** People belonging to this group live in over 600 First Nation communities as well as in urban and rural areas within Canada. The term should not be used to encompass all Indigenous Peoples since it does not usually include Inuit or Métis. First Nations peoples are distinct in culture, history, and language and referring to the name of a specific nation or community is always preferred, such as the Anishinaabe First Nation. The Indian Act uses the terms Status Indian and Non-Status Indian to determine who is eligible for certain rights and benefits under the Act. However, First Nations peoples often have their own understanding of citizenship and identity within their communities that is not encompassed by these legal terms.



**Inuit:** Inuit traditionally live in the circumpolar regions of Canada, Greenland, Alaska, and Russia. Inuit Nunangat, the term for the Inuit homeland in Canada, comprises the Inuvialuit Region of the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador). Inuit means “the people” making the term “the Inuit” or “Inuit people” redundant. Inuk is the singular noun for a person.

**Métis:** The word Métis originated during the fur trade when First Nations and European peoples intermarried. Over time those who identify as Métis have developed a distinct culture and language (Michif). Within the Métis community, there are differences in how the term is defined, applied, and spelled: Métis or Metis can be correct, depending on the context or preferences of the people or organizations involved. Not all people with First Nations and European ancestry identify as Métis. When capitalized, Métis as an official identification refers to people who can trace and verify their heritage to the Red River settlement in Manitoba. However, people outside this distinction can claim métis identity, separate from membership in the Métis Nation.

## GENERAL TIPS

- Indigenous Peoples have treaty rights guaranteed by the constitution and are distinct from other equity-deserving groups.
- Be respectful of the diversity of history and culture among Indigenous communities. Indigenous Peoples’ practices and cultures are not homogenous.
- Use the names Indigenous Peoples originally called themselves before the arrival of Europeans. For example, use the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, not the Iroquois Confederacy, a term used by the French. It is respectful to research the correct name or to ask for the correct term.
- Don’t assume all First Nations people live on reserves or that Inuit or Métis live in specific Indigenous communities. While still identifying with their communities, many Indigenous peoples live in urban centres.

## INSTEAD OF, PLEASE USE.....

Instead of...	Please use...
Band	First Nation or community, unless the term is used in a legal context such as in the Indian Act or a name used by the community itself.
Discover	Arrival, as in “the first Europeans to arrive in what is now Canada were helped by the Indigenous Peoples living there.” The term “discovery” is not only ethnocentric but also indicates that the lands were legally unoccupied.
Eskimo	Inuk (singular). Inuit (plural). The origins of the word eskimo are unclear, but it is considered derogatory by Inuit who did not originate or agree to its use.

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# INSTEAD OF, PLEASE USE.....

“Canada’s Indigenous Peoples” or “Indigenous Canadians”	“Indigenous Peoples living in Canada.” Many Indigenous peoples regard themselves as belonging to a nation within the nation of Canada.
Indian	First Nations. The term Indian should be used only in historical or legal contexts, such as the Indian Act, or when a community uses the term itself, such as in the name of the Musqueam Indian Band.
Reserve	Community or First Nation, unless there is a legal use of the name, or the person you are addressing prefers it.
Tribe	First Nation or community, unless the term is part of a name used by an Indigenous community.
Pow wow	Discussion, party, get together This phrasing reduces an Indigenous cultural event to a common everyday occurrence and can make Indigenous communities feel like their culture is not respected.
Spirit animal, “They are my spirit animal”	I really relate to them, “They are so relatable”
Forceful removals	Kidnapping, Human Trafficking This language is often employed to sanitize what was a violent and unjust history that should provoke discomfort.
“A sad chapter in Canadian history”	“The historical and ongoing impacts of colonization”  Colonization and the struggle for Indigenous rights to their land, territories, resources, and self-determination are ongoing realities today and do not only exist in the past.
Residential Schools	Many Indigenous Peoples have been asking that we stop calling these facilities “schools” since they were more akin to prisons and subjected their “students” to incredible violence and harm. When referencing residential schools, be reflective/critical of how and why you are using the term.  “Why do we need to stop calling them schools? Because schools do not require graveyards.” - Seven Generations Education Institute (SGEI)
“Low on the totem pole”	“Less senior,” “junior level,” “lower rank”
“Climbing the totem pole”	“Aspiring to leadership,” “Advancing,” “Rising in rank”



## OTHER KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Colonialism/Colonization:** The policy and practice of a power creating borders, then extending control past those borders over other land and peoples. This usually includes the exploitation, enslavement, and displacement of Indigenous peoples, and the absorption and assimilation of colonized peoples into the culture and systems of the colonial power. Colonialism is often based on the ethnocentric belief that the morals, institutions, and values of the colonizer are superior to those of the colonized.

**Cultural Appropriation:** The adoption, borrowing, or imitation of elements from Indigenous cultures by members of the dominant society, often without understanding or respect for their cultural significance, which can contribute to the erasure and commodification of Indigenous cultures.

**Doctrine of Discovery:** The Doctrine of Discovery is a historical legal concept that provided the basis for European powers to claim and colonize lands outside of Europe, particularly in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The doctrine asserted that Christian European nations had the right to claim and govern lands inhabited by non-Christian peoples. This concept was used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and the establishment of European colonies.

**TIP:** Treaties are agreements negotiated by Indigenous Peoples with the Canadian government. We are all treaty people with rights and responsibilities. [Learn more.](#)


**Elder:** In Indigenous communities, an “Elder” holds significant cultural, spiritual, and community roles. An Elder embodies traditional teachings, cultural values, and wisdom. Elder as a title should be capitalized to indicate honour.

**Eurocentrism:** The practice of conceptualizing the world from a European perspective and with an implied belief, either consciously or subconsciously, in the preeminence of European or European-American culture.

**Healing Circles/Circles of Support:** Restorative justice practices derived from practices and cultural values of different Indigenous Peoples, involving dialogue, shared storytelling, and community support to address harm, promote healing, and restore relationships.

**Indigenous:** This umbrella term encompasses the First Nations, Inuit, or Métis Peoples of Canada and is the preferred term to use in global context. Indigenous Peoples are culturally distinct racial/ethnic groups whose members are directly descended from the earliest known inhabitants of a particular geographic region. Indigenous communities are incredibly diverse with varying cultures, histories, ancestral lands, languages, forms of governance, and spiritual traditions.

**Indigenization:** refers to the process of integrating Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, practices, and values into various aspects of society, institutions, policies, and systems. It involves recognizing and valuing Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and actively incorporating them to foster inclusion, representation, and equity for Indigenous Peoples.



**Indigiqueer:** This is an identity term that may be used by someone who is both Indigenous and queer that emphasizes the intersections of both identities. Joshua Whitehead, a Two-Spirit, Oji-nêhiyaw Indigiqueer scholar from Peguis First Nation who popularized the term, describes it as “a braiding of two bridges”—indigeneity and queerness—and “the forward-moving momentum for two-spiritedness.”

**Intergenerational Trauma:** Intergenerational trauma (sometimes referred to as trans- or multigenerational trauma) is trauma that gets passed down from those who directly experience an incident to subsequent generations. Research has found that trauma can be passed down genetically through changes in DNA expression, socially through traumatic events affecting social interactions, or structurally through the continued marginalization of the traumatized groups. Intergenerational trauma has been found to affect the families of holocaust survivors, residential school survivors, refugees, and other groups who experienced traumatic events.

**Land Acknowledgement:** A formal statement recognizing Indigenous Peoples as the original stewards of the lands on which we now live or come together on Land acknowledgements usually open an important event or gathering. Commencing important gatherings with a land acknowledgement is commonplace, even policy, in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and certain parts of the United States of America.


**TIP:** Land acknowledgements are one small part of disrupting and dismantling colonial structures. Acknowledgment without action fails to address the systemic issues facing Indigenous Peoples. [Learn more about meaningful land acknowledgement guidelines.](#)

**Land Claim:** Refers to the legal and political process through which Indigenous Peoples seek recognition, restitution, or negotiation regarding their rights to land and resources that have been historically occupied or used by their communities.

**Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S):** Refers to the ongoing violence and continued genocide of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people across Canada and the United States. In May 2019, a 1,200-page report from Canada was released on the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). It includes over 230 recommendations and concluded that these murders and disappearances are an ongoing genocide.

**Oral Tradition:** The passing down of knowledge, history, stories, and cultural practices through spoken word, song, dance, and other forms of non-written communication, which is a vital part of many Indigenous cultures for generations.

**Reconciliation:** Means establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. There must be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of harm, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour for that to happen.



**Repatriation:** The process of returning sacred objects, ancestral remains, cultural artifacts, and intellectual property that was unjustly taken through colonization, acknowledging their rightful ownership and promoting cultural revitalization.

**Self-Determination:** Self-determination is codified by article 3 of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which states, “Indigenous Peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

**Time immemorial:** A phrase used by Indigenous Peoples to describe their connection with ancestral lands that is not defined by historical dates.

**Turtle Island:** Turtle Island is the name used by some Indigenous people to refer to the continent of North America. This name is based on creation stories, passed down through oral tradition, that describe the role of a turtle in the formation of the land. Many versions of this story exist, and not all include a turtle.

**Two-Spirit:** This umbrella term, proposed in 1990, bridges Indigenous and Western understandings of gender and sexuality. Two-Spirit refers to another role shared among most North American Indigenous people, that has a proper and respected position in most Native societies. Each nation’s understanding of sexual and gender diversity varied widely and was grounded in different spiritual beliefs.

**Unceded:** Land - territory that was never formally relinquished to the Canadian government or the Crown through formal treaties or agreements.

**TIP:** Learn about the land you live and work on. [Check out the Native Land Application.](#)

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