

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Use culturally appropriate and respectful language when writing with, for or about First Nations people.

Guidance

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There is no single Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity

First Nations people are often called Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. But there is significant diversity within these 2 groups.

There is a wide range of nations, cultures and languages across mainland Australia and throughout the Torres Strait. Given this diversity, respectful language use depends on what different communities find appropriate.

‘Aboriginal’ is a broad term that groups nations and custodians of mainland Australia and most of the islands, including Tasmania, K’gari, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Groote Eylandt, Bathurst and Melville Islands.

‘Torres Strait Islander’ is a broad term grouping the peoples of at least 274 small islands between the northern tip of Cape York in Queensland and the south-west coast of Papua New Guinea. Many Torres Strait Islander peoples live on the Australian mainland. There are also 2 Torres Strait Islander communities at Bamaga and Seisia, within the Northern Peninsula Area of Queensland.

Authoritative guidance lives with the relevant community or individual

There is a legacy of writing about First Nations people without seeking their guidance about references and terminology. Educational texts and official websites can be inaccurate when written without consultation.

It’s important to consult with traditional owners, local elders, community and content experts. Consultation is essential when writing about sensitive matters like cultures and history.

Consultation protocols and respectful language use depend on the preferences of the peoples involved. As a result, there are very few hard rules. Respectful content and language use will always depend upon proper consultation.

Respectful language use starts with the basics

Basic respectful language means using:

- specific terms, like the name of a community, before using broader terms
- plurals when speaking about collectives (peoples, nations, cultures, languages)
- present tense, unless speaking about a past event
- empowering, strengths-based language.

Language that can be discriminatory or offensive includes:

- shorthand terms like ‘Aborigines’, ‘Islanders’ or acronyms like ‘ATSI’
- using terms like ‘myth’, ‘legend’ or ‘folklore’ when referring to the beliefs of First Nations people
- blood quantum (for example, ‘half-caste’ or percentage measures)
- ‘us versus them’ or deficit language
- possessive terms such as ‘our’, as in ‘our Aboriginal peoples’
- ‘Australian Indigenous peoples’, as it also implies ownership, much like ‘our’.

Many texts have referred to First Nations people in the past tense, for example:

- ‘The Aboriginal language existed for hundreds of years.’
- ‘Torres Strait Islanders once congregated at this place.’

This use of past tense continues the historical erasure of First Australians.

The 2 statements also show a lack of understanding about diversity within either group.

Statements to redress the historical erasure and inaccuracy would read:

- ‘There is no such thing as “the Aboriginal language”, it would be like saying “the European language”. There are literally hundreds of First Nations languages that exist today, and have been spoken for millennia.’
- ‘The people of Iama (Yam Island) in the Torres Strait have been living there for thousands of years.’

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always been here. They are still undertaking cultural activities. Be conscious of this and work to change the habit.

A Welcome to Country is not the same as an Acknowledgement of Country

Welcome to Country is an important ceremony for many First Australians. An Acknowledgement of Country is a way of showing respect. Both are distinct practices with different requirements and meanings. Always capitalise both.

A Welcome to Country is a ceremony to welcome people onto the land of the custodians. A local traditional owner performs a Welcome to Country. The welcome can take many forms. It might offer safe passage to visitors or outline any responsibilities while on country. Providing a Welcome to Country is a paid service. A traditional owner can assign a proxy if they are unable to attend unexpectedly, though this is rare.

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An Acknowledgement of Country is something anyone can do. It is a way a person of any descent can pay respect to the local community and nation(s). It acknowledges the custodians of the land on which a meeting is being held. And it recognises the local community's ongoing connection to, and care for, country. Some organisations also include acknowledgements in email signatures, websites and other materials.

Both are simple but important ways of paying respect. They redress the erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on their own lands.

First Nations diversity is reflected throughout Australia

Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in urban places. Historical stereotypes of 'traditional' peoples are inaccurate and can be offensive.

A common misconception is if people have fair skin or live in a city they can't be a First Nations person. This could not be more wrong. For a long time, policies dictated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who they could marry, and where they could live. Terms like 'half-caste' or 'part Aboriginal' reflect these policies. These terms are deeply offensive and hurtful.

Peoples were also forcibly removed to other locations. In every location in Australia, remote, regional or urban, there are traditional custodians. There may also be many different peoples currently living there. When writing about any particular place, make sure to be inclusive of all First Nations people living on country.

Naming protocols are complicated, specificity is often more respectful

Always ask for people's preferences about what they want to be called or how they want to identify. It is usually more respectful to be specific.

Use the following hierarchy based on what you are writing.

If writing about:

- a specific group, use their nation, island or community name
- many Aboriginal nations, there may be a regional term that is better, such as 'Murris' or 'Kooris'
- many Torres Strait Islander peoples or islands, there may be a regional term that is more appropriate, such as Kulkalgal (encompassing the central islands of Masig, Poruma, Warraber and Iama)
- both Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander peoples, use terms such as 'First Nations people', 'First Australians' or 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples'.

The issue with general terms and when to use them

'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are broad terms imposed on First Australians without consultation. These are not words they chose for themselves.

While the term 'Indigenous Australians' is in common use, many First Australians may not be comfortable with it.

Using 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to First Australians is relatively recent. Its use became popular through international discussions, where the term 'indigenous' is appropriate (with a lower case 'i'). But it is a blanket term that homogenises a wide array of peoples and cultures. This can cause offence.

Due to the common use of 'Indigenous Australians' in our society, there may be times when you can't avoid the term. It can come up in discussions with government organisations, in the names of some organisations or in grant applications.

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If you must use it, remember to only do so when writing generally about Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander peoples. The term should always appear as ‘Indigenous Australians’ in the first instance, always with a capital ‘I’. Afterward you can use ‘Indigenous’, capitalised, so long as the context is correct and clear. Using ‘Indigenous’ alone is inaccurate.

Example

‘Indigenous Australians’ is a broad term and covers a large array of peoples. Often Indigenous peoples themselves do not identify using this term, they will use their local community, island or language group.

Indigenous peoples also have regional terms that they use for specific geographical locations, such as ‘palawa’ or ‘Noongar’ to name a couple.

Some people use Aboriginal ‘and/or’ Torres Strait Islander. This is a good idea when the audience isn’t clear or specific. It’s also important to realise that some individuals identify with both groups.

Style for First Australian languages needs to recognise continuing cultures

Hundreds of distinct First Nations languages and dialects are alive and spoken today. Never refer to them as ‘extinct’. Many communities are working to revive their languages. The preferred term to describe these languages is ‘sleeping’.

Spelling

Written sources are often viewed as ‘better’ or more ‘reliable’ in Australia. But spellings for words from First Australian languages are inconsistent across many sources.

Many colonial attempts to document First Nations languages and cultures introduced inaccuracy and misrepresentation. This includes inaccurate spellings for names, nations and locations.

First Nations cultures are oral-based traditions. Oral sources must have precedence. Follow the spellings that local traditional owners, elders or community members use for words from their languages.

Consultation is essential. You can use a style sheet to record terms you have checked with the relevant community.

Italics

Do not italicise names or words from First Nations languages. They are Australian languages, not foreign languages.

Capitalisation and meaning

There are few firm rules for capitalisation, as different peoples have their own preferences. Always ask the relevant community’s preferences and usages, and follow their advice.

Many First Nations people have developed their own dialects of English as well as creole/Kriol languages. This means common nouns used in Standard Australian English can shift into proper nouns at times.

The information on this page follows the convention of minimal capitalisation. But there are many First Australians who have their own preferences, and these should always take precedence.

Examples of words that are sometimes capitalised include Elders, Country or Traditional Custodians. Important cultural practices are also capitalised. For example, Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country.

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Some words in Standard Australian English sound the same in Aboriginal English dialects and in Torres Strait dialects, such as Yumpla Tok. But the meaning can be very different. Words like deadly, country, elder and law are good examples.

Listen carefully to the context these words are being placed in and ask for clarity if you need it.

Example

For Standard Australian English, 'dreaming' has a very particular meaning. For some Aboriginal peoples, there is also another meaning.

Within some communities, the Dreaming means something very different. It refers to a range of systems of spiritual beliefs. This term is complex. It should always be capitalised when used in this way.

Some peoples still use 'the Dreamtime'. But, it has fallen out of use with many, as it implies a timeframe or 'past', which is not accurate.

Some peoples use terms that don't have an English equivalent.

First Nations spirituality is easily misused or misrepresented

Some First Australians' beliefs are being used in disrespectful ways. For example, the use of ancestral beings such as the Rainbow Serpent, or Wandjinas as characters in 'fictional' stories, art or other forms of media. Most often they are used without permission, and portrayed in deeply hurtful ways.

Sometimes wider Australian society has denigrated these beliefs. For example, climbing Uluru in direct contradiction to requests from the traditional custodians not to do so.

Both instances show a lack of understanding or respect for others' beliefs. And unfortunately, there's a legacy of willful ignorance in this country that is only now being addressed. As with any religion or spiritual belief, words like 'myth' or 'legend' are minimising and hurtful.

Example

A bunyip is a being that many Aboriginal peoples believe is real. Yet many Australians speak of it using terms such as 'myth' or 'legend'. They also use it without permission, and appropriate it for their own purposes. Appropriating others' beliefs and treating them in this way is disrespectful.

It is not necessary to believe in or understand someone else's beliefs to be respectful of them.

Strengths-based language respects continuous cultures and connections

Content about First Nations people has often focused on 'problems'. This has 2 outcomes: making First Australians 'the problem' or continuing a deficit discourse. Neither is acceptable.

It's important to acknowledge the many wrongs and ongoing injustices that stem from our shared history. And it's not about ignoring issues. But it is just as important to acknowledge the strength of those First Australians whose cultures survive and thrive today.

Make sure to:

- Use empowering, strengths-based language.
- Tell positive stories.
- Emphasise ongoing connections to community, culture and country.

Write this

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The program supports First Nations people to achieve their goals.

Not this

The program seeks to address the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problems within the community.

The difference between 2 outcome statements above:

- The first has a strengths-based emphasis.
- The latter perpetuates a deficit discourse.

Be careful not to perpetuate patronising or paternalistic language use. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures are millennia old. They are not 'in need' of being 'rescued' or 'saved'.

It is about working together, not doing things 'for them' or 'to them'. Also, setting up a dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' perpetuates division and exclusion. This language use is not acceptable.

Consultation is a must

Consultation starts with elders of any given community. They might not be living on their traditional lands, or there might be multiple groups to consult.

If it's not clear who you need to talk to, there are many community organisations that exist today and can help. These include land councils, housing, medical, legal or social organisations.

These groups will likely have a direct link to traditional owners and/or elders they can help you contact.

There is clear information about communities within the region on the [Torres Strait Regional Authority's website](#). They are able to do this because it is a geographically small area.

Mainland Australia is much larger, and there is no single body that can offer guidance for all communities.

Cross-cultural communication is not easy. Some basic starting points include:

- Communicate clearly without jargon or acronyms.
- Understand that community concerns will take precedence over your request.
- Make sure to build in plenty of time around the request to support this. When receiving a response, listen. Body language is also important, so pay attention to what is not said.
- Understand that silence is an important part of First Australians communication.
- Do your research.

It is normal to want to avoid offending or upsetting people. In any process mistakes will happen. If this occurs, you might have to ask for clarity. Do not rush to fill any silence. Listen closely, apologise and try to learn from it.

When working in this manner, always give the group final control. Make sure to return whatever is taken from the community, or ensure a returned benefit. This includes knowledge and stories.

For full guidance around consultation visit [AIATSIS Ethical Research Guidelines](#).

Forming a working relationship with a specific group is wonderful. But understand that this does not translate into knowledge about any other groups.

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Working with content experts, such as a First Nations editor or liaison officer, is invaluable. People in these roles can play an important role as a cultural translator.

Sorry business

Sorry business is an important grieving process when someone passes. It involves not only immediate family, but the entire community.

If a person has passed, approval must be sought from the family around the use of their name and image. There might be some avoidance protocols you need to adhere to.

Some communities are okay these days with the use of a name, an image, or both. Others still request the use of neither. The community will have a way to refer to someone in this case and can give guidance.

Always adhere to these requirements for all community members. If in doubt, ask.

Australian audiences are familiar with standard warnings about use of names, images or voices of deceased people in many publications and media. This is a respectful acknowledgement of sorry business practices and beliefs, and is meant to warn others. Using a standard warning *does not* replace respectful consultation with the community.

Permissions

The permissions process is vital and differs from standard copyright procedures. As well as consulting with elders and/or traditional owners, there are other steps to take. When seeking permissions for the use of any item, individuals sometimes need to provide approvals too.

Example

You have images of a group of people you wish to print. You are already in consultation with the elders or relevant family groups in the community and they are happy with what you have. You then learn that you also have to ask the individuals within any image for approval.

This is not a firm rule, but one example of how things can change. Always follow the guidance of the appropriate elders or community members.

Use of images

Many historical images lack any contextual information. It can be impossible to trace the names of peoples or locations that feature in the images. As a result, it can be inappropriate and offensive to publish them. Avoid using photographs where people are unnamed.

Illustrations and photographs should include diverse, dynamic and contemporary representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Visual representations will depend on context. Just like use of terms in text, images should be specific to the particular nation, region or community that relates to the content.

Release notes

The digital edition significantly revises and updates guidance on content that relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It provides more comprehensive guidance than both the sixth edition and the Content Guide.

For example, the sixth edition described the term ‘Indigenous’ as ‘widely acceptable’ as a subset of the broader term ‘Australian’. The digital edition cautions that use of the term ‘Indigenous’ can be inaccurate without proper context.

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The digital edition offers more options for general terms than the sixth edition around ‘precise and inclusive language for collective references’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The sixth edition based recommendations about preferred terms on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission advice. The digital edition recommends consulting directly with relevant communities and individuals. It states, ‘Respectful content and language use will always depend upon proper consultation.’

The digital edition recommends against use of italics for names or words from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. This departs from stylistic convention: ‘borrowed’ words (not absorbed into Australian English) are otherwise italicised.

This page was updated in June 2023 when the term ‘First Nations Australians’ was replaced by ‘First Nations people’. This reflects a change in language usage.

About this page

References

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