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Terminology

So, which terms do I use?

Terminology, particularly as it relates to Indigenous peoples, can be tricky to navigate. A term that might be acceptable to some might be offensive to others. Because of this, many people do not feel confident using certain terms when referring to Aboriginal peoples. Fear of using the “wrong” word should never stifle important dialogue and discussions that need to be had.

By taking a moment to consider the history of certain terms, it is very possible to learn and be comfortable with which words to use in which contexts. We have compiled this guide to help inform your decisions on terminology.

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Why does terminology matter?

The history of relationships between the Canadian state and Aboriginal peoples is complex, and has oftentimes been paternalistic and damaging. As a result, terminology can represent something more than just a word. It can represent certain colonial histories and power dynamics. Terminology can be critical for Indigenous populations, as the term for a group may not have been selected by the population themselves but instead imposed on them by colonizers. With this in mind, one might understand how a term can be a loaded word, used as a powerful method to divide peoples, misrepresent them, and control their identity—what we can see today in Canada with “[status](#) (https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/indian_status)” and “[non-status Indians](#) (https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/indian_status),” the legally defined categories of people under the [Indian Act](#) (https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act).

On the other hand, terms can empower populations when the people have the power to self-identify. It is important to recognize the potential these words may hold— but it is also important and very possible to understand these terms well enough to feel confident in using them and creating dialogue. We have included several of these general terms below, although many Aboriginal people may prefer to identify themselves by their specific cultural group. As you will see, the most respectful approach is often to use the most specific term for a population when possible.

Aboriginal

The term “Aboriginal” refers to the first inhabitants of Canada, and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This term came into popular usage in Canadian contexts after 1982, when [Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution](#) (https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/constitution_act_1982_section_35) defined the term as such. Aboriginal is also a common term for the Indigenous peoples of Australia. When used in Canada, however, it is generally understood to refer to Aboriginal peoples in a Canadian context. This term is not commonly used in the United States.

First Nations

"First Nation" is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s and '80s and generally replaced the term "Indian," although unlike "Indian," the term "First Nation" does not have a legal definition. While "First Nations" refers to the ethnicity of First Nations peoples, the singular "First Nation" can refer to a [band](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/bands), a [reserve](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/reserves)-based community, or a larger tribal grouping and the [status](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/indian_status) Indians who live in them. For example, the Stó:lō Nation (which consists of several bands), or the Tsleil-Waututh Nation (formerly the Burrard Band).

Inuit

This term refers to specific groups of people generally living in the far north who are not considered "Indians" under Canadian law.

Métis

The term Métis refers to a collective of cultures and ethnic identities that resulted from unions between Aboriginal and European people in what is now Canada.

This term has general and specific uses, and the differences between them are often contentious. It is sometimes used as a general term to refer to people of mixed ancestry, whereas in a legal context, "Métis" refers to descendants of specific historic communities. For more on Métis identity, please see our section on [Métis identity](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/metis).

Indian

The term "Indian" refers to the legal identity of a First Nations person who is registered under the [Indian Act](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act). The term "Indian" should be used only when referring to a First Nations person with [status](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/indian_status) under the Indian Act, and only within its legal context. Aside from this specific legal context, the term "Indian" in Canada is considered outdated and may be considered offensive due to its complex and often idiosyncratic colonial use in governing identity through this legislation and a myriad of other distinctions (i.e., "treaty" and "non-treaty," etc.). In the United States, however, the term "American Indian" and "Native Indian" are both in current and common usage.

You may also hear some First Nations people refer to themselves as "Indians." While there are many reasons for an individual to self-identify as such, this may be a deliberate act on their part to position and present themselves as someone who is defined by federal legislation.

"**Indian Band**" is also a legal term under the Indian Act to denote a grouping of status Indians. (For more information on this, see our section on [bands](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/bands).)

Indigenous

Indigenous is a term used to encompass a variety of Aboriginal groups. It is most frequently used in an international, transnational, or global context. This term came into wide usage during the 1970s when Aboriginal groups organized transnationally and pushed for greater presence in the United Nations (UN). In the UN, "Indigenous" is used to refer broadly to peoples of long settlement and connection to specific lands who have been adversely affected by incursions by industrial economies, displacement, and settlement of their traditional territories by others. For more on how this term was developed, please see our section on [global actions](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/global_actions).

Native

"Native" is a general term that refers to a person or thing that has originated from a particular place. The term "native" does not denote a specific Aboriginal ethnicity (such as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit). In the United States, the term "Native American" is in common usage to describe Aboriginal peoples. In Canada, the term "Aboriginal" or "Indigenous" is generally preferred to "Native." Some may feel that "native" has a negative connotation and is outdated. This term can also be problematic in certain contexts, as some non-Aboriginal peoples born in a settler state may argue that they, too, are "native."

While "native" is generally not considered offensive, it may still hold negative connotations for some. Because it is a very general, overarching term, it does not account for any distinctiveness between various Aboriginal groups. If you are referencing a specific group, it is generally considered more respectful to use another term that more specifically denotes which peoples you are referring to.

However, "native" is still commonly used. Many people find it to be a convenient term that encompasses a wide range of populations. When wanting to use a general term in the Canadian context, one might prefer the use of the term "Aboriginal."

Peoples

The plural "peoples" recognizes that more than one distinct group comprises the Aboriginal population of Canada. For example, "Aboriginal people" (singular) might mean each Aboriginal individual, whereas "Aboriginal peoples" (plural) indicates a number of separate Aboriginal populations.

To capitalize or to not capitalize?

There is no official consensus on when to capitalize certain terms. Some people consider capitalization a sign of respect to the people you are referring to. Therefore, it may not be necessary to capitalize when using the term as an adjective and not in direct reference to a population. (For example, consider, "She is a native to the area" to "She is Native American" or even, "She is Native.")

Perhaps the term with the most definite capitalization "rule" is "Indian," as it is a legal entity enforced by the Canadian government.

Ultimately, style guides have not created strict guidelines. As a result, you may find variation depending on your resources. Oftentimes, authors will explain their decision in a preface or a footnote.

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