Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines


Dear Colleagues,

Canada’s historical relationship with the first inhabitants of the land has been shaped by its imperial and colonial history. One result has been that for many years Indigenous peoples’ respective identities were neither recognized nor respected in mainstream discourse.

This is best exemplified by the fact that all of the Western Hemisphere’s autonomous Indigenous groups or nations came to be referred to simply as “Indians,” though they were and are distinct from one another linguistically, culturally, politically, and in many other ways. In subsequent years, Columbus’s misnomer of Indigenous people as ‘Indians’ has been superseded by a succession of other terms, such as Native, Aboriginal, First Nations, Indigenous and others, some of which derive from government discourse and others from international movements.

All of these terms carry connotations that can be functional or harmful, depending upon context, and, their usage by powerful social institutions such as universities makes a real difference.

This guide has been produced to help UBC communicators navigate the terminology and meanings associated with this subject in order to produce the best — and most respectful — results, with the recognition that, as time passes, the terminology is subject to change and this guide will need to be refreshed.

Please note that this guide is not a comprehensive treatment of this complex subject, but it is an entry point. Users are encouraged to expand their knowledge on the matter by referring to other sources, some of which are listed at the end of this document.

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Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines

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WHY TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

"št̓əq̓ey qeqən (Double-Headed Serpent Post)"
Brent Sparrow Jr., Musqueam
UBC Point Grey campus
Why Terminology Matters

1.0 In the history of relationships between the Canadian institutions and Indigenous peoples, terminology has often been deployed in ways that have been damaging to communities. The terminology used in public discourse has rarely been that actually preferred by Indigenous people, who most often refer to themselves by the traditional name of their specific group.

Using the best terminology in any given situation is not just a matter of being ‘politically correct,’ but of being respectful and accurate.
1.0 WHY TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

1.1 PEOPLES VS PEOPLE
The plural ‘peoples’ can be used to recognize that more than one distinct group comprises the Aboriginal population of Canada. In some contexts, ‘Aboriginal people’ may seem homogenizing, or seem to refer simply to a collection of individuals. In contrast, ‘Aboriginal peoples’ (plural) indicates a broad group that includes a number of separate Aboriginal populations.

For the purposes of style, it is acceptable to use ‘Aboriginal people’ when referring to separate Aboriginal populations, or in contexts in which the scope of reference is clearly aggregated, and then conversely to use ‘Aboriginal peoples’ in contexts in which a recognition of multiple communities, or the diversity of communities, is helpful. The subject and context will determine which is more appropriate, e.g., news article vs. an official report. In any case, the key is to be consistent, or to have a clear logic in each choice.

1.2 CAPITALIZATION
UBC uses uppercase for the terms ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Indigenous’, ‘First Nations’, ‘Native’ peoples and persons, consistent with the larger global community of specific demographics, e.g., Europeans, American.

Note: As a generalized adjective in non-specific running text, ‘native’ and/or ‘indigenous’ is not capitalized. For example, “milkweed is indigenous to the region” or “he’s a native Vancouverite.”

‘Métis’ and ‘Inuit’ are capitalized.

1.0 WHY TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

1.3 TERMS TO USE AND/OR AVOID

NATIVE
Today, ‘Native’ is a depreciated term, used very infrequently. We advise that you not use it, unless there is a specific reason to do so, such as in an organizational name that derives from an earlier period (e.g., Vancouver Native Health Society). ‘First Nations’, ‘Aboriginal’ and more recently ‘Indigenous’ are more current and are preferred by many in the community, though each has particular nuances.

ABORIGINAL
‘Aboriginal’ is a general term that collectively refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in Canada, and is found in the Canadian constitution. It is broad on one hand, because it includes all Canadian groups, but specific, on the other, in that it is not widely used in international contexts (in the US, for instance, it is not widely understood). Though until recently a preferred term, it does, for many Indigenous people in Canada, by the very fact of its use in government policy, carry a negative association, though not nearly as strong a one as its predecessor, ‘Indian’.

INDIGENOUS
The term ‘Indigenous’ also encompasses all of these groups, either collectively or separately, and is a preferred term in international usage, e.g., the ‘U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’. In its derivation from international movements, it is associated more with activism than government policy, and so has emerged, for many, as the preferred term. In some contexts, however, it can be ambiguous: a reference to ‘Indigenous people in Canada’ could include Maori or American Indian (US) people living here, as well as Canadian Aboriginal people, so in contexts in which legal specificity to people originating in Canada is important, ‘Aboriginal,’ or a more qualified use of ‘Indigenous’ may be warranted (e.g., The Indigenous people of Canada).

INDIAN
The term ‘Indian’ can still be found in use today, but in general, it is a depreciated term with very negative connotations for many, and should be avoided in most contexts, unless it is part of a historical reference, part of a legacy term, or used in reference to a government policy or classification (e.g., The Indian Act, ‘status Indian’, ‘The Musqueam Indian Band’). You may encounter, particularly in legal or policy contexts, the terms ‘status Indian’, ‘Indian status’ or simply ‘status’. All refer to the government classification system in which ‘status’ confers certain benefits (and historically, certain penalties). This is a technical area with sensitivities, so you may want to consult with knowledgeable people before initiating the use of any of these terms.
1.0 WHY TERMINOLOGY MATTERS

**FIRST NATIONS**

Most, but not all, reserve-based communities in Canada refer to themselves as ‘First Nations,’ though some (for us, notably, Musqueam) do not use this term in self-reference (e.g., ‘Musqueam community’ or, formally, ‘Musqueam Indian Band,’ but not ‘Musqueam First Nation’). For informal documents, use ‘First Nation’, or, collectively in referring to reserve-based communities, ‘First Nations’, but in specific references, use the name that the community (or First Nation) uses publicly, i.e., ‘Indian Band’, ‘First Nation’ or ‘Nation’.

The term ‘First Nations’ can be applied to individuals, but, technically, refers only to those who have Indian status under Canadian law as part of a recognized community. Many Aboriginal people in Canada do not have this formal connection, and those who are Métis or Inuit should never be referred to as ‘First Nations’.

Sometimes, the term ‘Nation’ is more generally applied to a whole cultural group, e.g., “Gordon George is from the Cree nation”. Generally speaking, this kind of attribution should be avoided (“Gordon George is Cree...” is preferable), and in some cases, the attribute of nationhood can be somewhat offensive: referring to the ‘Coast Salish Nation’, for instance, could be, as that notion of a ‘national’ grouping is not a traditional part of the culture of Salish communities in this area. Even the term ‘Coast Salish’ is falling out of favour with many, since it derives more from anthropology than community self-description.

In any case, specificity adds context and clarity, which makes for a richer story.

Do not use ‘Indian’ when referring to a First Nations individual! And wherever possible refer to someone’s actual affiliation, and use the spelling the community prefers.

For example: “Barb George is Gitxsan and a student at UBC” is preferable to “Barb George is an Aboriginal student at UBC”. The former is more accurate as well as more respectful of actual identity.

To learn more about BC First Nations’ traditional names, visit the First Nations People of British Columbia webpage (https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/map.htm)
1.4 Be Specific: Métis, Inuit and Aboriginal

Métis
Métis are a specific Indigenous (and Aboriginal) group in Canada with a very specific social history. Until very recently, they have not been regarded as ‘Indians’ under Canadian law, and are never considered ‘First Nations’. The term ‘Métis’ may be used as singular or plural, and refer to individuals or groups, e.g., “Tom, a Métis student, is attending UBC” or “The Indian Act does not govern the Métis”.

Please be sure to use the acute accent over the ‘e’ in Métis, unless quoting a name or source in which it is not used.

Inuit
Inuit are the third Aboriginal group, historically located in the Arctic, and legally and culturally distinct from First Nations or legally-defined Indians and Métis. The singular of ‘Inuit’ is ‘Inuk’, and because the translation of Inuit is ‘the people’, it is redundant to add ‘people’ after it.

Do not use ‘Eskimo’, which the Inuit consider to be a derogatory term.

Aboriginal
Be aware that Aboriginal people, however named, do not ‘belong’ to Canada. Therefore, do not preface any of the terms considered above with a possessive, e.g., “Canada’s Aboriginal (or First Nations, Inuit, Indigenous, Métis) people”, or worse yet, “our Aboriginal people”. This is profoundly insulting and not easily forgiven, as it invokes an entire history of paternalism and control.

Do not use ‘Aboriginal’ as a noun, but rather as an adjective.

For example: Do not say “The Aboriginals of Canada…” or “the student is an Aboriginal”. Instead say “The Aboriginal people of Canada…” or “He’s an Aboriginal student (person, athlete, leader, etc.)”.

When in doubt as to what is the most appropriate term(s) to use, ask the person or group involved, learn what is in use in your area or subject field, or simply ask someone knowledgeable.
1.0 Why Terminology Matters

1.5 Other Key Considerations

**Reserve**

An ‘Indian reserve’ is a legally defined geographical area belonging to a community, and, historically, to which a community was confined. In general, it is better to refer to a ‘community’ than to a ‘reserve’, unless the geographic or legal precision of ‘reserve’ is required. Please note that the term ‘reservation’, commonly used in the United States, is not used in Canada.

**Traditional, Ancestral and Unceded Territory**

Use ‘traditional territory’ in recognition of lands traditionally used and/or occupied by First Nations, including ‘ancestral’ for land handed down to subsequent generations. ‘Unceded’ refers to land not turned over to the Crown by treaty or some other agreement.

‘Traditional territory’ almost always refers to a more extensive area than a legal ‘reserve’: the Point Grey campus, for instance, is most definitely part of Musqueam traditional territory, though not part of the very small Musqueam reserve. And most traditional territory in BC (though not elsewhere in Canada) is unceded, including the Point Grey campus, because very few treaties were negotiated here.

**Acronyms**

For brevity, it is acceptable to refer to a First Nation by its initials but only after its full name has been used at least once in a story, e.g., ‘WFN’ as a later reference to ‘Westbank First Nation’ in a story. Of course, this is not advisable in a story in which two communities would share the same acronym.

**Potlatch and Feast**

The word ‘potlatch’ is derived from Chinook Jargon and essentially means ‘to give away’ or to gift something to someone at a ceremonial feast. Potlatches are the traditional ways in which many forms of interactions have been formalized and confirmed along the coast for centuries. Since ‘potlatches’ were banned for many years under the Indian Act, and the term generally used in this and anthropological contexts, a spokesperson from a community in which the practice is currently used may well prefer the term ‘feast’ instead of ‘potlatch’ to describe an event. Use the term the spokesperson uses or the one commonly associated with the community or communities in question.

**Poles and Posts**

The popular term ‘totem pole’ is a general term derived from anthropological discourse that is sometimes used by community members. Depending on its purpose, a more accurate reference might be to a heraldic (or crest, family), honour, memorial, welcome, shaming, or mortuary pole. Such poles, furthermore, are characteristics of some, but not all, communities in which carving is common. Other communities may carve statuary figures or house posts, and not ‘totem poles’, and will find the misnomer annoying if not insulting. The Musqueam sʔiƛ̓q̓əy ʔeqən (see Resources, on page 17, in regard to using diacritic characters for Musqueam terms) by the bookstore and Alumni Centre, for instance, is a ‘post’ and not a ‘totem pole’. When possible, it is a good practice to determine what kind of pole or post is being discussed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND RECOGNITION
2.0 ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND RECOGNITION

2.1 ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The UBC Point Grey campus is situated on the traditional territory of the Musqueam people, and UBC’s other Vancouver operations are situated on the territory best regarded as shared by the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. The Okanagan campus is situated on the traditional territory of the Okanagan people. It now a common practice at public and private university events, important business meetings, and in formal documentation, to acknowledge these relationships, as appropriate to the specific location.

Below are some common ways in which this is done, and they can also serve as a guide for your own unique acknowledgment. It is, of course, most important that recognition of territory and these relationships not be or appear to be nominal or pro forma. The way to avoid that is for people making the recognition to think about why they are doing it, and do what they can, even in a brief statement, to convey that it has a real purpose.

WRITTEN RECOGNITION

Point Grey Campus:
• We acknowledge that the UBC Point Grey campus is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.

Downtown Vancouver Campus:
• We acknowledge that UBC (Robson Square, VGH, etc.) is situated on the traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples (unceded, etc., optional).

Okanagan Campus:
• The UBC Okanagan campus is situated on the territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation.

ORAL RECOGNITION

Point Grey Campus:
• I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.

Downtown Vancouver Campus:
• I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. (Note: The anglicized pronunciation of Tsleil-Waututh is ‘slay-wah-tooth’. Sometimes you will hear people say ‘coast Salish’, but we recommend naming the communities: ‘coast Salish’ is regarded by some in communities as a depreciated anthropological term.)

Okanagan Campus:
• We respectfully acknowledge the Syilx Okanagan Nation and their peoples, in whose territory we stand and are gathered upon today. (Note: The anglicized pronunciation of Syilx is ‘say-el-ks’.)
2.2 ACKNOWLEDGMENT RESOURCES
To learn more, view the short video, Why We Acknowledge Musqueam Territory (http://aboriginal.ubc.ca/community-youth/musqueam-and-ubc/).


2.3 A NOTE ON IMAGERY
Indigenous artworks almost always contain culturally significant iconography associated with important stories. Attribution helps to avoid the trivialization of these artworks, and it avoids the fact or appearance of appropriation (see example below).

In general, video, photographic and graphical representations of Indigenous-related artworks should be attributed to the artist, along with Indigenous affiliation and the artwork’s name and location. In most instances, permissions for use should be secured if the work is not in the public domain (as it might be, for instance, if it appeared in news coverage of a public event). In some cases, it may be advisable to seek advice from the artist or custodian to ensure an artwork’s image is used in a manner consistent with its intended purpose.

• “The Respect to Bill Reid Pole,” James Hart, Haida, Totem Park, MOA
As with any living, adaptive language such as English, the 'rules' are in constant evolution and adjustment and part of the multi-faceted world it strives to represent. We have seen, in the past few years, for instance, a very rapid rise in the use of 'Indigenous' in both publications and in usage by community members.

So if you are feeling less-than-confident in using certain terms in reference to Indigenous peoples, keep in mind that fear of using the 'wrong' word should never stifle important dialogue and discussions that need to be had. And please do not be insulted or defensive if someone suggests a correction, but do try to understand the logic of the suggested change.

While nuances can be challenging to understand and navigate at times, every effort should be made to be specific and use the correct word in any given context.

As UBC communicators, the goal is to provide consistent, clear language with the objective of being respectful, non-hierarchical, and inclusive at all times.
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

SOURCES AND RESOURCES
4.0 RESOURCES

RESOURCES
SABAR Key Terms
• Substantial French glossary and guide
• Excellent style and usage guidelines
  (in the ‘Download Key Terms’ pdf linked on the page)
• Focused on writing and reporting in journalism

INAC Words First
• Explicitly composed for style and word usage
• In-depth
• Lots of examples (do’s and don’ts)
• Supplementary role as a glossary

RIIC Lexicon and Terminology
• Good, broad strokes
• Refers back to SABAR for most points
• Not substantial as a stand-alone guide

Library and Archives Canada Research on Aboriginal Heritage Terminology Guide
• Thorough glossary and terminology
• Not a style guide
• Good for background and historical reference

If you are in need of a font that supports all the Indigenous languages of the Americas, we suggest using Huronia. Additionally, Communications and Marketing, in consultation with members of the Musqueam community, has created many diacritic characters for typesetting Musqueam words in the Whitney font. These are available to UBC communicators upon request. Another option is to install the First Nations Unicode Font, which allows you to render certain characters used in First Nations languages in your preferred font.

SOURCES
This guide was informed by existing resources at UBC:
• Indigenous Foundations
• UBC Style Guide (former)

THANK YOU
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PHOTOGRAPHY DESCRIPTIONS
Cover and back, unidentified UBC students (Photo credit: Martin Dee);
Table of contents, UBC Aboriginal graduates at the First Nations House of Learning’s 2015 Graduation Celebration (Photo credit: Don Erhardt);
Page 2, see description on page;
Page 11, Thelma Stogan, Musqueam, blesses sʔi:łq̓aʔ qeqən (Double-Headed Serpent Post) at the unveiling ceremony (Photo credit: Martin Dee);
Page 14, Dr. Alanise Goodwill, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education (Photo credit: Martin Dee);
Page 16, tipi structure, Indigenous Health and Research Education Gardens, UBC Farm (Photo credit: Paul Joseph).