

# First Nations – ethical and respectful style

In developing content with or about First Nations people, take care to consider issues of respect and culture. Terms, language and style should all be respectful and appropriate. Wherever possible, consult relevant First Nations groups and follow their guidance.

## Identity

Reference to Australia's First Peoples, and First Nations people everywhere, needs careful and respectful consideration.

The guidance here focuses on First Nations people in Australia. For guidance on developing content with or about First Nations people in other countries, consult other relevant groups and guides. Just as in Australia, terminology and preferences are changing and care should be taken to consider issues of respect and culture.

## Collective terms

Several collective terms are used to describe First Nations people.

However, Australia is home to diverse groups of First Nations people. Each Nation may have different preferences about which terminology is respectful. Specific communities, groups and individuals may also have their own preferences.

Always check what terms should be used. If possible, check with First Nations people you are writing about. If your organisation has specific guidance about First Nations terms, follow that guidance; noting though that any guidance should be developed together with relevant First Nations people.

Options for collective terms include:

- *First Nations* or *First Nations* *people* or *peoples*. This term is accepted and is currently [recommended for the Australian Government](#). Some First Nations people find the term inappropriate because the term originated in North America.
- *First Peoples*. This term is less common but is often accepted. Again, some First Nations people do not like the term because it originated in North America.
- *First Australians*. This term is less common but is often accepted. Some First Nations people

do not like the term because it accepts the premise of the 'Australian' nation, and does not recognise that First Nations sovereignty was not ceded. Some may also find that it erases their Nation identity.

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* or *peoples*. This term is often accepted. Some First Nations people do not like the term because it homogenises and recognises only 2 broad groups, rather than the diversity of groups.
- *Indigenous people* or *peoples*. This term is often accepted. Some First Nations people do not like the term because it describes First Peoples in any country around the world, as well as plants and animals belonging to a particular place. (Note: if you are writing about people, the term should be capitalised. If you are writing about plants and animals, the term should not be capitalised; for example, 'The fence is designed to protect indigenous species from predation by feral animals'.)

The terms should be capitalised as above (see also [Capitalising First Nations terms](#), in this guide).

Some groups prefer the use of *peoples* rather than *people*, to indicate that there are many First Nations and groups.

Whichever term is chosen, use it consistently throughout your content. You may wish to note in an introduction why the term was chosen, and acknowledge that there is no consensus on terminology and that you recognise some readers may not like the term you have used.

Further guidance is available from:

- Australian Government Style Manual [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples](#)
- Australian Public Service Commission [First Nations vocabulary](#)
- Australians Together [Language and terminology guide](#).

## Collective terms to avoid

The following terms are patronising and offensive in the Australian context, and should not be used:

- Aborigines, the Aborigines, our Aborigines or our Islanders
- acronyms ATSI or TSI to refer to people at any time (for example, in emails or job titles)
- terms such as primitive, prehistoric and native when referring to people.

Some First Nations persons describe themselves as *Black*; some use *Blak* instead of *Black* to [reclaim the negative connotations of the word black](#) and to signify the Australian context. These terms can be considered offensive when used by non-Indigenous people.

## Groups

First Nations people use various terms to describe themselves as a group. Best practice is always to find out what individuals and groups prefer to be called, rather than making assumptions.

Common terms include *Mob*, *Nation* and *community*.

Generally, a word like *Mob* would only be used by non-Indigenous Australians if they knew and lived or worked among First Nations people (see [AIATSIS Guidelines for the ethical publishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and research from those communities](#) for information).

It is usually fine for anyone to use the terms *Nation* and *community*. However, always consult First Nations groups and follow their preferences.

Take care with terms such as *Tribe* and *Clan*, and ask before using. *Tribe* tends to have a negative connotation in Australia, although the term has been used by some First Nations groups in their land claims. Likewise, some groups – for example, the Gumatj people in the Northern Territory – talk about *Clans* in relationship to themselves.

## Nations and regional groups

Wherever possible, use specific nation names; for example, *Ngunnawal*, *Wiradjuri* or *Yorta Yorta*. This recognises and respects the diversity of First Nations people. Many First Nations people identify themselves by their language group – for example, *Gurindji man* or *Gubbi woman*.

People might call themselves *saltwater people* if they live on the coast, or *freshwater*, *desert* or *spinifex people* if they live on that Country.

Torres Strait Islander people may prefer to use the name of their island to identify themselves to outsiders – for example, *Saibai man*.

If a First Nations person is mentioned in text, include details of their language nation and place in parentheses after their name. For example, 'Detailed guidance has been developed by Danièle Hromek (Budawang/Yuin) and Sophie Herbert.' Further guidance is available from the [James Cook University APA 7th referencing guide](#).

There are also local terms for First Nations people from different parts of Australia: *Koori* (across southeastern Australia), *Murri* (in south and central Queensland), *Nunga* (in southern South Australia), *Noongar* (also Nyoongar, Nyungar; around Perth), *Yolngu* (in Arnhem Land), *Anangu* (in central Australia) and *Palawa* (in Tasmania).

Take great care with these terms. It is not appropriate to assume that Koori, accepted in the southeast of the country, can be used to describe someone in Darwin. Always consult relevant First Nations groups and follow their preferences.

## First Nations map

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [Map of Indigenous Australia](#) provides information about the diversity of First Nations, languages and social groups.

However, it should be noted that this map was developed only from published sources. Some Nations are missing, and boundaries may not be accurate.

## Titles

Titles such as Elder, Knowledge Holder, Aunty or Uncle are given within First Nations as a sign of respect. First Nations people who have these titles may only want the title used within their community. Always ask the person how they would like to be described in any content and if they would like their title to be included. Always capitalise the title if used.

## Capitalising First Nations terms

Many modern style guides recommend a simple style in which the use of capitalisation is minimised (for example, *government departments* and *company directors* rather than *Government Departments* and *Company Directors*).

However, many First Nations people see capitalisation as a mark of respect.

This is especially important when referring to people. Nations and language groups are always capitalised (for example, *Barkandji*, *Ngambri* and *Warlpiri*). It is also recommended that *Elders*, *Traditional Custodians* and *Traditional Owners* are capitalised.

A note about usage – some First Nations people prefer the term *Traditional Owners*, to signify that sovereignty was never ceded. Some prefer *Traditional Custodians*, to signify that First Nations people are stewards rather than owners of land. Some use the 2 terms to signify 2 separate concepts (definitions from the [State of the Environment report 2021](#)) :

- Traditional Owners – First Nations owners of their traditional Country, as granted by government or as determined through the purchase of freehold or the native title process
- Traditional Custodians – First Nations people or nations who have responsibilities in caring for their Country.

Consult with relevant First Nations groups about their preferred use of these terms, and include explanations in content as appropriate.

It is recommended that *Country* is capitalised in a First Nations context. First Nations people may refer to being or living *on Country*. *Country* is the First Nations concept of everything within a landscape, including the land or sea itself; the plants and animals within it; the history, culture, law and traditions associated with it; and the connections between people and the environment.

Other terms for concepts and items important to Indigenous people may be capitalised, depending on the context and the preferences of the group. Names of language groups, cultural objects and spiritual entities are often capitalised to show significance and respect. Examples of terms that

may be capitalised include Nation, Traditional Knowledges, Law (or Lore), Knowledge Holder (or Keeper), Dreaming, Songlines and Storylines.

In some cases, lower case is preferred for specific terms and languages. In particular, [the written form of palawa kani](#) (translated as 'Tasmanian Aboriginal speak'), is titled in lower case and has only lower case words following a [decision by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre](#) to discontinue capitals. However, to show respect for the people and group, Palawa is capitalised when writing about the Palawa people. Place names in palawa kani can be capitalised or lower case, although it is becoming common practice to capitalise.

If you are writing or editing content about First Nations people, best practice is always to ask the relevant First Nations groups what terms should be capitalised or left lower case.

## Language and culture

When words in language are included in content, they should be italicised and have clear attributions to the Language Nation and speaker.

Take care to identify and address other sensitive language and cultural issues that may arise, such as:

- Death. In many First Nations, the use of names, voices or images of deceased members of the community is avoided. You should follow appropriate social conventions or provide warnings for these audiences.
- Continuity. Avoid language that refers to First Nations people, practices and culture in the past tense. First Nations people, practices and culture are all continuing and continuous.
- Colonisation. Take care around the terms used for European arrival in Australia. The term 'settlement' ignores the dispossession and violence experienced by First Nations; many First Nations people prefer 'colonisation' or 'invasion'. Colonisation should be talked about as ongoing, rather than as a past event.

This guide has been developed with advice from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Universities Australia Deputy Vice Chancellor / Pro Vice Chancellor Indigenous Committee.