

# Indigenous Terminology

## Overview

This handout provides an overview of appropriate terminology to use when writing or discussing topics related to Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Colonialism, and Eurocentrism. It outlines some common errors:

## Common Errors:

**The use of synonyms that are not relevant to the specific topic or may be outdated/offensive.**

- In an attempt to not sound repetitive in a written paper, some writers may replace appropriate terms such as Indigenous Peoples with perceived synonyms such as *Native(s)* and **Indian(s)**. Similar issues will arise when the terms **colonized/colonizing** are replaced by **civilized/civilizing**. These may be “innocent errors” as the writer/speaker is unaware of appropriate terminology. Generally, when writing a paper involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada, use the terminology that is consistent with, and modelled by the course instructor.
- Occasionally, when reading about Indigenous issues in Canada, the following quote may be encountered: “what is (now) known as North America/Canada”. Although it may seem awkward, this is a way Indigenous writing discusses and challenges Canada as a nation-state.

## General Principles:

- Use the terminology that Indigenous Peoples choose to use themselves;
- Acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous cultures and societies by using the most specific term appropriate to the subject.
- Avoid offensive terminology, e.g. *Native(s)*, *Indian(s)*, *Eskimo*, *Aboriginal(s)*, *Half Breed*, *Civilize(d)*, *Canada’s Indigenous Peoples*.
- If you are unsure about how someone identifies, ask how the person identifies rather than making an assumption.

## Identity

Indigenous: (Preferred term in Canada), best representative of the different groups and cultures in Canada such as specific **First Nations groups, Metis, and Inuit Peoples**. Widely accepted globally as the most accurate way of describing people who have been on the land prior to colonization.

First Nations: A collective term for Indigenous groups who are not Metis or Inuit. While “First Nations” refers to the ethnicity of First Nations Peoples, the singular “First Nation” can refer to a band, a reserve-based community, or a larger tribal grouping and “status Indians” who live in them. (e.g. Anishinaabe, Wet’suwet’en, Mohawk, Mississauga). Such names are not interchangeable as they refer to distinct groups.

Aboriginal: The use of this term in Canada is being phased out as it lumps people with different backgrounds into one group. The term “Aboriginal” refers to the first inhabitants of Canada and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

Indian: (Outdated term) traditionally used by the Canadian government in order to legislate the identity of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. In the United States of America, the terms “American Indian” and “Native Indian” are still commonly used today.

Indian Band: A legal term under the Indian Act to denote a grouping of status Indians. Membership in a band determines an individual’s ability to live on a reserve and participate in band elections. ([More information](#))

Status Indian: This is a term of legal identity, and denotes someone who is recognized as “Indian” under the Indian Act. Indian status is unilaterally determined by the Canadian government’s Indian Act. (Not all Indigenous Peoples in Canada are recognized as Status Indians).

Non-Status Indian: Someone who has “Indian” ancestry but is not recognized as a Status Indian. Not eligible for the same rights as Status Indians.

Treaty Indian: Treaty Indians are those who are members of a community whose ancestors signed a treaty with the Crown (the British / Canadian government) and as a result are entitled to treaty benefits.

Native: Much like the term Indian, this is an outdated term usually used in a derogatory manner. Again, slightly different in an American context, but still better to avoid.

Métis: Distinct from other Indigenous Peoples, the Métis emerged through the union of European and Indigenous cultures. A person who is half First Nations and half European [is not automatically Métis](#), as a person’s ancestry must be linked to historic Métis settlements, be recognized and accepted by the Métis community, and identify as Métis in order to be Métis.

Inuit: Inuit, in the Inuktitut language, literally means “people” and so there is no need to say “Inuit people,” just Inuit. Inuit are specific groups of people generally living in the far north who are not considered “Indians” under Canadian law. Inuit, as a term, refers to the common cultural and linguistic (Inuktitut) identity of distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples whose

traditional territories are in the Arctic regions of Canada, Alaska, and Greenland. Inuit Peoples live primarily in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, northern Quebec and Labrador.

Two-Spirit: An umbrella term used to describe some Indigenous Peoples' sexual and/or gender identity. Refers to a person who identifies as having both feminine and masculine spirits. (Represents the 2S in the acronym 2SLGBTQIA+)

### **Concepts:**

Colonization: In a Canadian context, the arrival and subsequent settling of French and British people on sovereign Indigenous land beginning in the 1500's.

Settler Colonialism and Settler Colonial society: A term that best describes Canadian society today, as it should be thought of as an ongoing process/structure, not an event.

Eurocentrism: A worldview that belongs to the colonizer which views European history and values as normal, superior, and sophisticated when compared to the outside world, which is viewed as barbaric and inferior. (Not interchangeable with the synonym Orientalism, which is specific to the Middle East.)

Terra Nullius: The Latin term for land that is unoccupied. Critical to justifying the occupation of Indigenous land in Canada as Indigenous sovereignty and land claims were not recognized as legitimate by colonial society.

Indigeneity: The continued pride and resilience of Indigenous culture and identity.

Civilize/Civilized/Civilizing: A charitable interpretation of what the colonizer believes would happen during the process of colonialism. (Only appropriate when being talked about from this specific perspective of the colonizer, otherwise extremely offensive.)

Capitalization: Much like the recent discussion surrounding the capitalizing of the first letter of Black, the capitalizing of terms like Indigenous and First Nations is highly recommended, as it is comparable to Canadian or European. It is also recommended to capitalize the first letter of Peoples when referring to Indigenous Peoples as it suggests that there are multiple groups of Indigenous Nations.

People or Peoples: The word "people" is ambiguous. The everyday use of the word refers to any group of more than one individual, like "the people in the office." The word "people" may also refer to a single Nation or society, (Mohawk people or the Métis people.) When talking about more than one Indigenous Nation, as in the Indigenous Nations of Manitoba, the proper term is "peoples." Referring to multiple nations not as "peoples" but as "people" denies their legal and cultural identity as nations. (Although it may be a simple mistake, it is a very sensitive

issue as Canadian governance systems use the term “people” to delegitimize legal rights and land claims.)

Status: Is used in the context of Indian Status determined by the Indian act. Indian status is not necessarily an accurate measure of one’s identity as it is determined by the Canadian government in an extremely problematic manner. ([More information here](#))

## Historical events/legislation:

Royal proclamation: The Royal Proclamation created in 1763 is a document that set out guidelines for European settlement of Aboriginal territories in what is now North America. The Royal Proclamation is historically significant as it acknowledges that all land is considered Indigenous land until it is ceded by treaty.

Reservations: Land set aside under the [Indian Act](#) and treaty agreements for the exclusive use of an [Indian band](#). Band members possess the right to live on reserve lands, and band administrative and political structures are frequently located there. Reserve lands are not strictly “owned” by bands but are held in trust for bands by the Canadian government.

Residential School System: School system set up by the Federal Government to remove Indigenous children from their families and culture, in order to assimilate them into the dominant, colonial culture of Canada. Many children in the residential school system were emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. Numerous children died in, or shortly after, leaving the residential school system, and this has been found to have caused intergenerational trauma within families. The last residential school closed in 1996. The Truth and Reconciliation Report considers this system amounted to *cultural genocide*.

Sixties Scoop: Beginning in the 1960’s, there was a significant increase in the removal of Indigenous children from their families and they were forced into non-Indigenous families. Indigenous children had their heritage repressed and faced similar issues that occurred in residential schools. Unlike residential schools, such events are still occurring in Canada today.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: A document created to bring light to the tragic events of Residential Schools in Canada, sharing the truths of the survivors and the detrimental role the Canadian government played. The document is completed with "Calls to Action" which calls the Canadian government to make changes and address the ongoing impacts Residential Schools have on Indigenous Peoples.

## More Information:

- Grammatical Issues: <http://umanitoba.ca/student/indigenous/terminology.html>

- Using correct language: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEzjA5RoLv0>
- Indian status: 5 things you need to know:  
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indian-status-5-things-you-need-to-know-1.2744870>
- What is a Band? <https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/bands>
- Exploring Identity: Who are the Métis and what are their rights?  
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/metis-identity-history-rights-explainer-1.5098585>
- What are Indian Reserves?  
<https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/reserves/>
- What was the Sixties Scoop?  
[https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties\\_scoop/](https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties_scoop/)

## Courses:

Courses Offered at TMU:

- <https://www.torontomu.ca/chair-indigenous-governance/courses/>

Other:

- Indigenous Canada, University of Alberta: Free online course  
<https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html>
- Reconciliation Through Indigenous Education: Free online course  
[https://www.edx.org/course/reconciliation-through-indigenous-education?pid=304931&awc=3\\_1658241426\\_3bab476f64bd9140047e8e57010afb53](https://www.edx.org/course/reconciliation-through-indigenous-education?pid=304931&awc=3_1658241426_3bab476f64bd9140047e8e57010afb53)
- Aboriginal Worldviews and Education: Free online course  
[https://www.coursera.org/learn/aboriginal-education?action=enroll&irclickid=RHLwvz0FcxyNUMqzKwUmBUEhUkD1bS2HVyldX00&irgwc=1&utm\\_campaign=3316547&utm\\_content=b2c&utm\\_medium=partners&utm\\_source=impact](https://www.coursera.org/learn/aboriginal-education?action=enroll&irclickid=RHLwvz0FcxyNUMqzKwUmBUEhUkD1bS2HVyldX00&irgwc=1&utm_campaign=3316547&utm_content=b2c&utm_medium=partners&utm_source=impact)