

What's in a name? A note on terminology

Prepared by Sarah B. Shear and Meredith L. McCoy

Teachers often ask “what’s the correct term to use” when preparing lessons about Indigenous people. There are complex histories connected to each of the most common terms, and we offer a brief commentary here alongside additional resources to help teachers and students engage in meaningful discussion about the power of naming.¹

We encourage teachers to think deeply within their own practice and with students about the history and ramifications of naming, including terms such as:

Native American

Within what is currently the United States, the term [*Native American*](#) broadly refers to any person who is a citizen or descendent of a citizen of a [*Native nation*](#). This term, however, is contentious. Perhaps the most well-known and often-used naming phrase in education, *Native American* is dependent on an identity bound to the United States. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) note:

‘Native American’ is a term that arose after the civil rights movement in response to a need for unbiased terminology regarding historically maligned ethnic groups. While perhaps a step in the right direction, it still highlights a relationship of historic domination. (2016, p. 146)

The term [*America*](#) itself is a reference to Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian mapmaker, and constitutes an erasure of the many names Indigenous peoples have used to refer to their own homelands and territories. *Native American* is also criticized for its lack of specificity and propensity to be misused; anyone born in the United States might facetiously claim to be *native* to this place (Yellow Bird, 1999).

Indian & American Indian

Many federal policies and agencies use the term *Indian*. Think, for example, of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service, or the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education, among others. Despite its broad usage, Ojibwe scholar Anton Treuer (2012) has observed the problems underlying the term, writing that “The word *Indian* comes from a mistake: on his first voyage to the Americas, Columbus thought the Caribbean was the Indian Ocean and the people there were Indians” (emphasis in original, p. 7).

Like *Native American*, *American Indian* reifies the European-imposed naming of Indigenous territories and, as Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker (2016) have assessed, “qualifying the term

¹ The significance and use of the terms described here have varied significantly over time and by region. Though there are many similarities in terminology between the United States and Canada, the discussion below applies specifically to the United States context. For more on naming in Canada, see the resources list at the bottom of this page.

‘Indian’ with ‘American’ adds another layer of imposition by inferring the centrality of U.S. (‘American’) legal domination, a concept many Native people today still find highly offensive” (p. 146).

American Indian is additionally an incomplete term as it generally does not include Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian people.

Indigenous

The term *Indigenous* acknowledges the peoples and nations who have called these lands home since long before colonists imposed the names *America* or the *United States of America* upon them. *Indigenous* blends the boundaries between specific Native nations in ways that may problematically homogenize diverse communities; however, it also speaks to shared experiences with colonization, as Michael Yellow Bird (Sahnish and Hidatsa Nations) has written:

The terms indigenous and First Nations Peoples still generalize the identity of the more than 500 indigenous groups in the lower 48 and Alaska. However, I believe they are empowering ‘generalized’ descriptors because they accurately describe the political, cultural, and geographical identities, and struggles of all aboriginal peoples in the United States. I no longer use Indian, American Indian, or Native American because I consider them oppressive, counterfeit identities. (Quoted in [Pewewardy, 2000](#))

Use of the term *Indigenous* connects Indigenous peoples fighting colonialism around the globe. Indeed, *Indigenous* is the term employed by the United Nations, whose documents [“Who are indigenous peoples?”](#) and [“United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for indigenous adolescents”](#) may be useful classroom resources.

Tribe and Tribal

Tribe is a term with specific legal connotations, and it is closely related to the similar term *Native nation*. A tribe or Native nation is a legally distinct political entity. Each tribe has an inherent right to [self-governance](#), often referred to as *tribal sovereignty*. Myriad factors may impact a tribe’s legal status and relationship with local, state, and federal government offices, including histories of treaties, federal and/or state recognition, termination, and restoration.

Native Hawaiian

Native Hawaiian is a term used to refer to Kanaka Maoli, the Indigenous people of Hawai’i. In 1893, the United States participated in a coup that overthrew the government of Queen Liliuokalani, in abrogation of previous treaties between the United States and the Republic of Hawai’i. Native Hawaiians [protested](#) the imposition of the new government, but the United States annexed Hawai’i as a state against their wishes. Though Congress issued a [formal apology](#) in 1993, Hawai’i remains occupied by the United States.

Alaska Native

Alaska Native is a [term](#) that refers to the Indigenous peoples whose lands and waters are currently known as Alaska. Russia first colonized their territories in the late 1700s; the United States then bought Alaska from Russia in 1867 without the consent of Alaska Native people. In 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act ([ANCSA](#)), a law that extinguished Alaska Natives' traditional title to their lands and created Alaska Native regional and village [corporations](#) to manage ANCSA-settled lands and funds. The term *Alaska Native* was not widely used until after ANCSA passed, and the long-term impact of the law continues to be debated today.

Names of specific nations

Individual Indigenous people frequently [prefer](#) their own nation's name when identifying themselves. Teachers should follow the lead of how Indigenous peoples and Native nations refer to themselves, including using the specific names of Native nations (e.g., Haudenosaunee instead of Iroquois; Diné instead of Navajo; etc.). Doing so recognizes each nation's political, cultural, geographic, linguistic, and religious distinctiveness. In addition, Michael Yellow Bird ([1999](#)) reminds us that:

It is also important to remember that many of the labels that are used to refer to Indigenous Peoples can be loaded and oppressive in one way or another. What may seem like respectful labels to one person could be regarded as disrespectful to others. In any case, it is always important to be open to an individual's or group's use of one label over another or use of a combination of labels. (pp. 17)

Educating ourselves and our students about the importance of naming, and responding to the preferences of individuals and their nations, is an act of respect and is the responsibility of each of us living on Indigenous lands today.

Resources to Support Additional Learning

Websites

First American Art Magazine's Style Guide:

<http://firstamericanartmagazine.com/submissions/faam-style-guide/#Capitalization>

→ See the sections on "capitalization" and "terms for indigenous peoples of the Americas."

The Native American Journalists Association's AP Style Guide:

<https://najanewsroom.com/ap-style-insert/>

The Native American Rights Fund's FAQ page:

<https://www.narf.org/frequently-asked-questions/>

Reese, D. (2012). "Are We 'People of Color'?" *American Indians in Children's Literature*,

<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/p/we-are-not-people-of-color.html>

Articles & Books

Dunbar-Ortiz, R. & Gilio-Whitaker, R. (2016). *“All the real Indians died off” and 20 other myths about Native Americans*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Dunbar-Ortiz, R., Mendoza, J., & Reese, D. (2019). *An Indigenous peoples’ history of the United States for young people*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Mihesuah, D. A. (2005). *So you want to write about American Indians?: A guide for writers, students, and scholars*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

→ See the preface and the chapter “Stereotypes and Other Mistakes” for a discussion of terminology.

Pewewardy, C. (2000). Renaming ourselves on our own terms: Race, tribal nations, and representation in education. *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal*, 1, 11-28

Treuer, A. (2012). *Everything you wanted to know about Indians but were afraid to ask*. St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books.

Yellow Bird, M. (1999). What we want to be called: Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on racial and ethnic identity labels. *American Indian Quarterly*, 23(2), 1–21.

With regard to naming in Canada:

Style Guide for Reporting on Indigenous People by the Indigenous Reporters Program at Journalists for Human Rights:

<http://www.jhr.ca/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/JHR2017-Style-Book-Indigenous-People.pdf>

University of Manitoba Indigenous Student Centre’s “Briefing Note on Terminology”:

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

Younging, G. (2018). *Elements of Indigenous style: A guide for writing by and about Indigenous peoples*. Edmonton: Brush Education.

→ Much of this text is Canada-specific, but the chapter on terminology is largely applicable in the United States context, as well.