

Indigenous Peoples Respectful Language Guide for VCHRI

The words we choose to use are important. They have energy and power as they reflect who we are and what we believe and feel. Words have the power to heal and harm, and that power can impact others in ways we cannot predict. We are responsible for the impact our words have and must take them seriously. Colonizers have used language and terminology as another oppressive and violent force of erasure, such as forbidding Indigenous language use and imposing European language and names, changing the pronunciation and spelling of Indigenous words, and using language to separate and to make Indigenous Peoples the “other.” When building a relationship with Indigenous Peoples, it is important to be aware of the power our words have and to take the time to select our words with care.

The VCHRI Indigenous Health Research Unit has put together this short resource to assist researchers when writing about or with Indigenous Peoples.

Key Terms for Indigenous Peoples

Below are some important words and terms that are used regularly when speaking or writing about and with Indigenous Peoples. This is not an exhaustive list, so we encourage you to explore the additional resources at the end of this guide for more information. Please note that communities and individual preferences for these words will vary, and some words that are acceptable in one setting may not be in another. Additionally, there are legal terms the federal government has assigned to Indigenous Peoples, but they may not be the preferred term by community members. If you are unsure, ask the Peoples you are collaborating with what words and terms are appropriate, and we encourage you to explore the suggested resources on terminology.

- **A note on capitalizations:** Although there are some institutions and publications that do not capitalize certain terms, it is generally preferred to capitalize terms such as “First Nations” and “Métis”. Historically “Indigenous peoples” has been used, but it is more respectful and appropriate to capitalize both terms to “Indigenous Peoples.” The term “Elder” is capitalized when referring to Elders recognized as such by their respective communities.
- **Indigenous:** A term gaining more acceptance and use, Indigenous refers collectively to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples. It is important to capitalize this in all contexts when referring to Indigenous Peoples, similar to how one would always capitalize “German” or “Canadian.”
- **Aboriginal:** A now less used but still seen term which also refers collectively to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples and should be capitalized. Some Indigenous Peoples prefer to avoid this term for a few reasons, so unless it is used in a specific context it is better to use “Indigenous.”
- **First Nations:** One of the three Indigenous groups in Canada who are the first caretakers of the land and are distinct from the Métis and Inuit Peoples. This includes Status and non-Status First Nations, and both on and off reserve First Nations Peoples. In the United States, First Nations are referred to as Native Americans.
- **Métis:** The Métis are descendants of historic unions of First Nations women and European men in the 18th century. They developed their own culture, language (michif), and way of life. Métis are a distinct Indigenous people in Canada who are legally recognized as one of three Indigenous

groups in the country. A Métis person is someone who self-identifies as Métis, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry, and is accepted by the Métis Nation. The term **métis** may sometimes be used more loosely to describe someone of mixed Indigenous/Canadian heritage.

- **Inuit:** Literally meaning “the people” in Inuktitut, Inuit are the Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic in Canada.
- **Peoples:** Using the plural form of this word challenges the notion that all Indigenous Peoples have a singular culture or way of knowing and being and acknowledges the many distinct Nations and communities that exist. (e.g. Métis Peoples, Indigenous Peoples)

Key Terms for Indigenous Communities

- **Urban:** Usually refers to Indigenous Peoples living in urban settings, and those living away from their home territory. Some Indigenous Peoples live away from their home Nation for various reasons including employment, displacement, access to health care or other supports, travel and visiting relatives, and more.
- **Community:** There is no singular Indigenous community, nor is there a singular definition of Indigenous community as it is defined by the community itself. It can refer to a group of people living in the same geographic area, but it can also refer to a group with shared ancestry and culture.
- **Band:** A band or Indian band is a governing unit of First Nations as defined by the Indian Act. Some bands prefer to refer to themselves as First Nations. Although band members live on their home reserve, many live off reserve for various reasons. The federal government still holds most of the authority over how bands function.
- **Tribal Council:** A group of two or more bands may unite to form a tribal council. Tribal councils have their power delegated by member bands, and services they provide are guided by the member bands as well. For example, in Syilx territory, there are seven bands that have formed the Okanagan Nation Alliance.
- **Nation:** This term is often used by First Nations to describe their community and their inherent right to self-governance and sovereignty. It is worth noting that in the United States, Native Americans use the term *tribes*, but this is not the case in Canada.
- **Our/Canada’s Indigenous Peoples:** This phrase must be avoided. It implies ownership of Indigenous Peoples and a hierarchy where Indigenous Peoples are possessions rather than sovereign Nations. Indigenous Peoples have lived on this land prior to the existence of so-called Canada and are not owned by the government or any other group or individual.

Other Key Terms

- **Colonialism:** The system and action of acquiring and controlling another country and its peoples, establishing colonies and dominance over the land and economy for the benefit of the settler population. Often colonizers force the existing population of peoples to work for them. This is sometimes referred to as exploitation colonialism.
- **Settler Colonialism:** Usually refers to a form of colonialism that involves the displacement, replacement, and even destruction of the existing, often Indigenous, population of peoples of the land by a settler population. Settlers then establish their own permanent society that privileges and legitimizes their actions.
- **Neo-colonialism:** The continuation of the colonial process through economic or cultural means by one country on another country, often a former colony.
- **Colonizer:** Someone who colonizes, and benefits from colonialism. This can include the descendants of colonizers.
- **Settler:** People who move to a new place to permanently reside and create their own communities. This may include immigrants, refugees, and people who were brought here against their will such as the descendants of enslaved peoples.
- **West/Western:** For the purposes of these modules, geographically the West refers to Western, Northern, and Southern Europe, as well as Canada and the United States. Western is used when referring to the values, ideas, norms etc. which originated from the people of the West (non-Indigenous in Canada and the US).

Terms to Avoid

Some terms have fallen out of use for various reasons. They often have problematic histories of origin and can be offensive and harmful to Indigenous Peoples. These terms should be avoided unless there is a specific reason to use them.

- **Eskimo:** Although previously widely used, this term is considered offensive and unacceptable by most Inuit. It is a term imposed by colonizers and ignores how Inuit refer to themselves.
- **Indian:** An imposed term used in specific legal and government situations to refer to the legal identity of First Nations under the *Indian Act* (e.g. Status Indian, non-Status Indian, Indian Band). Unless being used in these specific situations this word must be avoided as there are many negative connotations surrounding this word and it is often considered offensive.
- **Native:** Although it is a general term that can refer to both a person or thing that comes from a specific place, this term can hold negative connotations and should be avoided. There are some exceptions, such as when it is in the name of an organization (e.g. Urban Native Youth Association, Native Education Centre).

Additionally, there are many words that hold importance and meaning to Indigenous Peoples but have been misinterpreted and co-opted by non-Indigenous Peoples for their own purposes, such as for colloquial and business use. Sometimes it can seem harmless, or even an attempt to make a connection with Indigenous Peoples. However, given how much power is in our words, and how Indigenous languages have been erased and in some cases, even forbidden by the colonizers, mis-using words that hold significance to Indigenous Peoples is another act of ongoing colonization and a show of power.

- **Bottom/Top of the totem pole:** Often used to describe someone's position in a corporate or other hierarchy. "They're at the top of the totem pole!" This is usually based off a misinterpretation of what a totem pole is and overlays a colonial hierarchy that does not exist for Indigenous Peoples.
- **Powwow:** This term is used by non-Indigenous Peoples when referring to holding gatherings or meetings. For example, "We need to talk about this project. Let's hold a pow wow in the meeting room." This is based off a misunderstanding of what a powwow is and diminishes its significance to Indigenous Peoples.
- **Spirit Animal:** Historically Indigenous Peoples were forbidden from practicing or passing down their spiritual practices, with non-Indigenous peoples often viewing it as inferior, savage, or even aligned with the devil. Western popular culture has still been intrigued by Indigenous spirituality, with many people saying certain animals or even objects are their self-described spirit animal. This is an example of non-Indigenous peoples forbidding and diminishing Indigenous ways of knowing and being to maintain power and control, while also misinterpreting and co-opting Indigenous knowledge for their own purposes.

The following terms should always be avoided when referring to or speaking with Indigenous Peoples as they are offensive. Some terms are used in popular culture today but have historically been weaponized against Indigenous Peoples, while others can be seen as a display of power and anti-Indigenous racism.

- **Brave:** This term, when used as a noun, has been used to refer to Indigenous men. Although non-Indigenous groups see it as a positive, it is a derogatory term that leans on the "noble savage" stereotype. It not only reinforces these stereotypes, but it also dehumanizes the individual.
- **Primitive:** This term suggests the people being described are simple, unevolved (as if evolution was linear), or backwards. This has been used since contact and reinforces the idea that Indigenous Peoples are not capable of managing their own affairs and so can be removed.
- **Savage:** A term often seen in popular culture today (e.g. "wow, that was savage!" to refer to an aggressive sports play or a verbal insult), but it has historically been weaponized against Indigenous Peoples and stems from the idea that Indigenous Peoples are not human.
- **Squaw:** This is a highly racist and misogynistic slur used against Indigenous women of North America and should never be used in any context.

Terms That Depend on Context

It is also important to consider the context in which we are using words as some may not carry the same connotations in one context compared to another. A word we may generally consider neutral can have an impact, depending on the situation. Other words that are used colloquially but have roots in war and other forms of violence can be very triggering to Indigenous Peoples and may cause Indigenous Peoples to be more guarded of your words and actions. We encourage you to reflect on the list below and explore your own relationship with them. Unless you are using them in the appropriate context, we suggest using caution or even avoiding these words in your communications.

- **Chief:** This is obviously very dependent on the situation. For example, it is problematic when speaking with a First Nations person and greeting them “Hey, Chief!” If this person is, in fact, the Chief of the Nation or band, it is more respectful to refer to them by their first or last name, with the title Chief before it. (e.g. Chief Wayne, or Chief Sparrow)
- **Civilization:** Defined as a stage of human development that is most advanced. It implies there is a hierarchy where urban and industrialized societies are better than more self-sufficient or rural societies. It has been used to frame Western and white peoples as superior or more evolved, and Indigenous Peoples as less advanced and so inferior.
- **Civilized:** Like above, this is defined as an “advanced stage” of development, implying that society follows a linear progression, with being civilized at the top of an imagined hierarchy. This also implies that being uncivilized is undesirable and less important or worthy.
- **Consult or Consultation:** We encourage caution when using this word. Although consultation with Indigenous Peoples sounds like a good thing, it has often been weaponized against Indigenous Peoples. The federal government has a “duty to consult” Indigenous Peoples, but this does not mean they have to listen. In many cases, they do not. It is important to consider the situation when using this word and be aware of how it has been used to bypass Indigenous sovereignty, as well as meaningful and respectful engagement.
- **Crown Lands:** Given that most of the province of BC is on unceded land and that Indigenous title was not erased or purchased by the Crown, it is inaccurate and disrespectful to use the term “Crown land.” Additionally, in the 1997 Delgamuukw Case the Supreme Court of Canada stated Aboriginal title is a constitutionally protected right.
- **Discovery:** Although there certainly can be new “discoveries” (e.g. new technology) for the most part we are *learning* through our research. This word holds power for the person doing the “discovering,” but this can be used to erase the agency and power of the one being “discovered.” For example, historically non-Indigenous peoples used an invented story of a non-Indigenous person “discovering” a “new” land to erase the fact that there were already Indigenous Peoples living on that land since time immemorial. In many cases, many medical “discoveries” were already well-known by Indigenous Peoples but went unacknowledged until written about by Western scholars.
- **Explore:** Similar to “discovery,” this word can imply that something is unfamiliar, when we really mean that it is unfamiliar to us. Early “explorers” were credited with “exploring” new lands, when there were already Indigenous Peoples there who were very familiar with them and often led early colonizers on their journeys.

- **Evolved/Evolution:** Of course, in most contexts these words generally are not harmful as the theory of evolution itself is not the issue. However, Social Darwinists and other colonizers have attempted to interpret this theory to justify social, political, and economic views, believing there are stages of civilization and Indigenous Peoples are at a lower stage. These ideas have been used to justify eugenics, imperialism, and racism, and they still influence our culture (e.g. “Survival of the fittest,” a phrase incorrectly attributed to Darwin).
- **Healthy:** Although it may seem that this is a positive term, it is important to consider who is defining this term. Are Indigenous Peoples determining what is healthy for their own communities, or are they being told what is healthy?
- **Helping:** There have been many laws and policies designed to “help” Indigenous Peoples. Prior to colonization and the Indian Act, Indigenous Peoples were self-governing Nations and communities. The Indian Act stripped Indigenous Peoples of their land and ways of life, and created the issues Indigenous Peoples continue to face to this day including inadequate housing, underfunded education, and lack of access to safe healthcare. Colonial governments then attempted to “help” Indigenous Peoples with these issues by working to assimilate them into the dominant society. Although it may come from a genuine place of caring, Indigenous Peoples do not need “help.” They require their constitutionally protected rights and sovereignty to be respected.
- **Pipeline:** Given how damaging the oil and gas industry has been to many Indigenous communities in this country and in this province, it is best to avoid using this term. “We have a new project coming down the pipeline.”
- **Pre-history:** This implies that the history of Indigenous Peoples did not begin until contact with the colonizers. Of course, this is patently false as Indigenous Peoples have existed since time immemorial and have deep, rich histories and cultures that have been passed down through the generations.
- **Stakeholders:** A term often used in businesses to refer to individuals with a particular interest. However, Indigenous Peoples are not “stakeholders,” but rather hold title and constitutionally protected rights that have existed since time immemorial which were first recognized by the colonizers in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. “Communities of interest” can be an alternative.
- **Other terms that have problematic undertones:** Frontier, battle, combat, forefront, frontlines, hold down the fort, etc.

Helpful Resources

Below are some guides and resources from other institutions that provide additional helpful information.

Name	Link or Citation
Elements of Indigenous Style	Younging, G. (2018). Elements of indigenous style: A guide for writing by and about indigenous peoples. Brush Education.
Government of BC Writing Guide for Indigenous Content	https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/services-for-government/service-experience-digital-delivery/web-content-development-guides/web-style-guide/writing-guide-for-indigenous-content
Indigenous Foundations	https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/terminology/
Indigenous Peoples: Language Guidelines 3.0	https://brand.ubc.ca/indigenous-peoples-language-guide-now-available/
TCPS 2 Chapter 9: Section A.	https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/tcps2-eptc2_2022_chapter9-chapitre9.html

Visual Representation

It is worth mentioning, when designing communications or knowledge mobilization/translation materials, avoid using images, photos, graphics, and designs that are “Indigenous-inspired” or “Indigenous-looking.” Given how much of Indigenous culture has been stolen and misappropriated, it is critical to avoid supporting this kind of work. It not only undermines the hard work and time Indigenous Peoples and artists dedicate to their craft, but it also reinforces colonial narratives and practices. We encourage you to work with an Indigenous artist when possible.

Additionally, always get consent before using photos of Indigenous staff, faculty, and students. This needs to be done *each time* the photo is used, unless expressly permitted by the individual. Often images of Indigenous Peoples are used and re-used repeatedly and without consent in promotional or knowledge mobilization/translation materials. This reinforces the idea that Indigenous ways of knowing and being are interchangeable and frozen in time and ignores the individuals’ rights to consent.