

STU Research Ethics Resource

Source: [Working Effectively With Indigenous Peoples Learning Centre](#)

By Bob Joseph, Jul 20, 2016

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES TERMINOLOGY GUIDELINES FOR USAGE

We've talked about the definition of [Indigenous Peoples](#) and the [constitutional](#) significance of [Indigenous or Aboriginal](#). In this article we drill down on guidelines for usage. Terms for Indigenous Peoples have evolved over time and are continuing to evolve. The First Peoples of this land now known as Canada formerly had unique communities with unique names - there wasn't a need for collective nouns or complicated terminology. With European contact and ensuing colonization, the government required people to be defined and labeled for ease of governing.

Aboriginal Peoples

The collective noun used in the Constitution Act 1982 and includes the Indian (or First Nations), Inuit and Metis Peoples so legally it will always have a place at the terminology table.

Can:

- Use interchangeably with First Peoples
- Use interchangeably with First Nations
- Use interchangeably with Indigenous Peoples

Caution:

- If using interchangeably with First Nations note that some First Nations prefer not to be called Aboriginal Peoples
- If using this, it should always be Aboriginal Peoples together as opposed to Aboriginal or Aborigines.

[Tweet: Is it Aboriginal or Aborigines Peoples? Learn more here. http://ctt.ec/8T67A+](#)

First Nation(s)

First Nation is a term used to identify Indigenous peoples of Canada who are neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s to replace the term "Indian" and "Indian band" which many find offensive. First Nations people includes both status and non-status Indians so there's a need to careful with its usage, especially if in reference to programs that are specifically for status-Indians.

There is no legal definition for First Nation and it is acceptable as both a noun and a modifier.

Can:

- Use to refer to a single band or the plural First Nations for many bands
- Use "First Nation community" is a respectful alternative phrase
- Use instead of "Indian" when referring to an individual

Caution:

- If using interchangeably with Aboriginal Peoples as some First Nations people don't like the term Aboriginal Peoples
- If using interchangeably with First Nations as some may have more preference for Indigenous Peoples, for example First Nation communities in Ontario have expressed publicly and politically that they prefer Indigenous Peoples

Indian

“Indian” is the legal identity of an Indigenous person who is registered under the Indian Act.

One story about the origin of the term “Indian” dates back to [Christopher Columbus](#), who mistakenly thought he had reached the East Indies, so referred to the people in the lands he visited as “indios” which is Spanish for Indian.

Can:

- Use in direct quotations
- Use when citing titles of books, works of art, etc.
- Use in discussions of history where necessary for clarity and accuracy
- Use in discussions of some legal/constitutional matters requiring precision in terminology
- Use in discussions of rights and benefits provided on the basis of "Indian" status
- Use in statistical information collected using these categories (e.g., the Census)" [1]

Caution:

- If using in front of individuals as some may deem it is derogatory and outdated and call you out on it.

There are categories of “Indian”:

Status Indians - are those who are registered under the [Indian Act](#)

**Non-status Indians* - are those who generally speaking have two distinct qualities: (1) they lack status under the *Indian Act*; and (2) they have Indian heritage; in other words, they have [lost their status](#) or whose ancestors were never registered or who lost their status under former or current provisions of the Indian Act

Treaty Indians - are those who are members of a community whose ancestors signed a [treaty](#) with the Crown and as a result are entitled to treaty benefits.

Indigenous Peoples

A collective noun for First Nations, Inuit Metis and growing in popularity in Canada. In [“Indigenous or Aboriginal - Which is correct”](#) we explore the difference.

Can:

- Use interchangeably with First Peoples
- Use interchangeably with First Nations
- Use interchangeably with Aboriginal Peoples

Caution:

- If using interchangeably with First Nations as some may have more preference for Indigenous Peoples, for example First Nation communities in Ontario have expressed publicly and politically that they prefer Indigenous Peoples

Inuit

Indigenous people in northern Canada, living mainly in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, northern Quebec and Labrador. Ontario has a very small Inuit population. Inuit are not covered by the *Indian Act*.

Can:

- Use Inuk when referring to an individual Inuit person
- Use Inuuk when referring to two people; for three or more people, it is Inuit
- Inuit People - in the Inuktitut language the term [Inuit](#) translates to "the people".

Caution:

- Eskimo as it is considered derogatory. Here's some more information on terminology related to [Inuit Peoples of the World](#)
- Inuit are not the same as Innu as Innu are an Indigenous group that primarily live in northeastern Quebec and southern Labrador

Métis Peoples

[Métis](#) Peoples are people of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. The Métis National Council adopted the following definition of "Métis" in 2002: "*Métis*" means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation." *Métis are now covered by the Indian Act.

Can:

- Use in reference to 'persons whose ancestors inhabited Canada and received land grants and/or [scrip](#)' [2]
- Use in reference to those who self-identify as Métis

Caution:

- Some people may refer to themselves as Metis but upon further research they might fit more into non-status Indian than Metis; for example, "Barbara" self-identifies as a Métis person but with some exploratory questions you discover she lost her status in 1981 upon marriage to a non-status Indian; Barbara doesn't meet the criteria as Métis person based upon the definition above

Native

An outdated collective term referring to Indians (Status, Non-status, Treaty), Métis, and Inuit but has largely been replaced by Indigenous. While some First Nations individuals refer to themselves as "Native" that doesn't give non-Indigenous people license to do so.

Can:

- Use when working with organizations such as the Native Women's Association of Canada
- Use when an individual self identifies using this term.

Caution:

- Use it sparingly as some see it as derogatory and outdated. The term was popular in the colonial and settler era.

A couple of notes on punctuation:

- Always [capitalize](#) Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nation, Inuit, Métis as a sign of respect the same way that English, French and Spanish etc. are capitalized.
- Avoid using possessive phrases like "Canada's Indigenous Peoples" or "our Indigenous Peoples" as that has connotations of ownership. Perhaps go with "Indigenous Peoples of Canada"
- We're not sure why, but the plural possessive for First Nations, Indigenous Peoples, Aboriginal Peoples does not generally use the apostrophe so you won't see, for example, "First Nations' land"

We harken back to our main terminology training tip here which is "always go with what people are calling themselves". It requires some research but it will be worth the effort. You can watch this [Vancouver Board of Trade video](#) here to get my pro tip for research on this topic. Hint: it's "call the community office after hours to listen to the recorded message."

* Non-status Indians and Métis historically were not covered by the Indian Act but as of the Supreme Court of Canada decision on April 14, 2016, they are now considered Indians; how this will affect their rights has not been determined at this time.

[1] Strategic Alliance for Broadcasters for Aboriginal Reflection

[2] Aboriginal Peoples: Terminology and Identity, Library of Parliament Research Publications