



Culturally Appropriate Language Guide

Supporting Engagement Efforts
with Indigenous Communities



Introduction

This guide is designed as an educational resource to support individuals and organizations in using language that promotes respect, inclusion, and cultural safety when engaging with Indigenous communities¹. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and applying culturally appropriate terminology, avoiding harmful language, and fostering respectful communication.

How the document can be used

- **Self-Reflection Tool:** Individuals can use the guide to reflect on their own use of language and adjust to ensure respectful and inclusive communication.
- **Organizational Training Resource:** Organizations can integrate the guide into their training programs to promote cultural safety and understanding among staff, especially when engaging with Indigenous partners or communities.
- **Policy and Document Review:** The guide can serve as a reference when developing or reviewing documents, ensuring that language used in policies, reports, and communications is culturally appropriate and sensitive.
- **Continuous Improvement:** It encourages ongoing learning and adaptation by providing examples and insights that help individuals and organizations foster better relationships with Indigenous communities through language.



¹ For the purpose of this guide, Indigenous communities refer to First Nation, Inuit, and Métis individuals, First Nations, as well as Indigenous organizations such as IPHCOs, MNO, TI, ONWA, OFIFC, PTOs, and local entities

Preferred Terminology

- **Indigenous:** Refers collectively to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. It is the most inclusive and widely accepted term in Canada².
- **First Nations:** Refers to the original inhabitants of the land now known as Canada, excluding Inuit and Métis. There are over 600 First Nations across the country.
- **Inuit:** Refers to the Indigenous peoples primarily inhabiting the Arctic regions of Canada, including Nunavut, Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories), Nunatsiavut (Labrador), and Nunavik (Northern Quebec).
- **Métis:** Refers to a distinct Indigenous group that arose from the unions between First Nations and European settlers, primarily in the Prairie provinces, with a unique culture and history.

Avoidance of Terms

- Avoid **Aboriginal:** Though used in legal contexts, this term has fallen out of favour and is considered outdated.
- Avoid **Indian:** This term is offensive and should only be used in a legal context (e.g., Indian Act) when necessary.
- Avoid **Native:** While still in use, this term is increasingly viewed as imprecise or dated.
- Avoid **Stakeholders:** This term can be problematic, as it evokes colonial and economic connotations. Use **partners** or **community members** instead.

Culturally Safe Language for Organizations

- **Two-Spirit:** A term used by some Indigenous peoples to describe their gender, sexual, or spiritual identity. It is important to recognize that this is a culturally specific term and should not be used to describe non-Indigenous people.
- **Traditional Knowledge Keepers/Holders:** Use to refer to individuals who hold deep knowledge of Indigenous practices, values, and histories. *Caution on using the term Elder unless you have received guidance on its use³.*



² Refer to Appendix A: Understanding the Nuances of Using 'Indigenous' for more information

³ Refer to Appendix B: Additional Terms and Titles for Traditional Roles and Positions

Terms to Avoid in Context

- **Avoid Assimilation Language:** Avoid phrases that imply Indigenous peoples need to adapt to mainstream norms or integrate. Instead, use language that centers Indigenous rights, self-determination, and cultural continuity.
- **Avoid Discovery or Founding:** When referring to history, avoid colonial framing like discovered by Europeans or founding of Canada. Acknowledge that Indigenous peoples have lived on the land for thousands of years before European contact.
- **Avoid Western as a Default:** When talking about health, education, or governance systems, avoid centering Western frameworks as the standard. Be open to discussing and acknowledging Indigenous knowledge systems.

Respectful Phrases for Cultural Practices

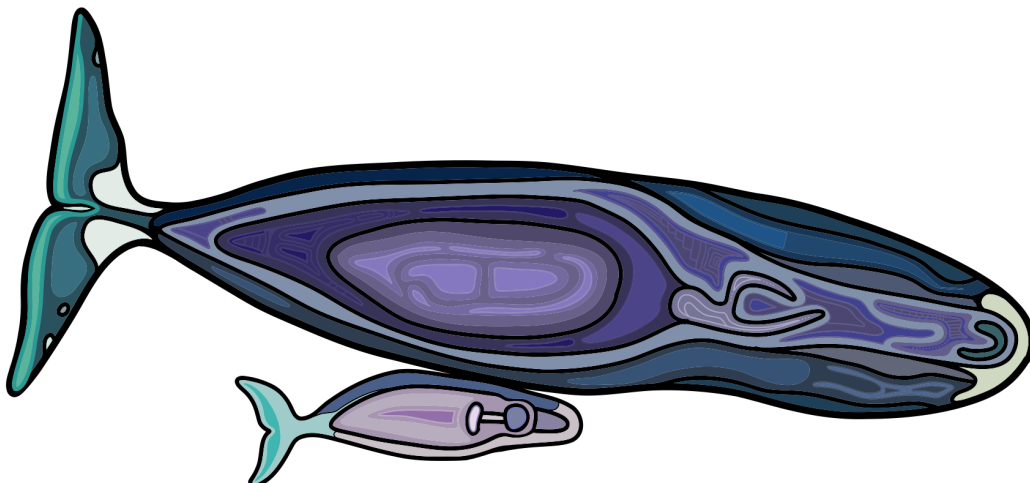
- **Ceremonial Use of Tobacco:** Acknowledge the significance of tobacco in many Indigenous cultures, where it is used in ceremonies, not merely as a recreational substance.
- **Smudging:** Be aware of the cultural and spiritual significance of smudging, a practice using traditional medicines like sage or sweetgrass. Avoid referring to it as simply burning herbs or air purification.
- **Sacred Medicines:** Recognize the role of sacred medicines such as sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco in Indigenous healing and ceremonial practices. Do not trivialize or commodify these items.

Community and Geographic Contexts

- **Be Specific with Nations:** When possible, refer to people by their specific Nation (e.g., Cree, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, etc.).
- **Local Territory Acknowledgements:** Make sure to learn about and correctly acknowledge the Indigenous lands you are working on or visiting. This shows respect and awareness of the historical and ongoing relationships Indigenous peoples have with the land.

Inclusive and Respectful Language

- **Self-Identification:** Allow individuals to identify themselves. Ask, "How would you like to be identified?" if unsure. Respect their choice of terms.
- **Avoid Deficit-Based Language:** Avoid language that implies Indigenous communities are primarily defined by negative experiences (e.g., poverty, addiction). Instead, emphasize resilience, strength, and contributions.



Appendix A: Understanding the Nuances of Using ‘Indigenous’

- **Generalization and Loss of Specificity**

The term Indigenous is a broad umbrella term that encompasses diverse groups of people with distinct languages, cultures, traditions, and histories. Using Indigenous can sometimes obscure these important distinctions. To address the issue of generalization, some prefer to use the term FNIM for First Nations, Inuit, Métis, as it enables distinction between the three groups.

- **Colonial Imposition of Identity**

The term Indigenous is a product of Western legal and political systems that categorized and grouped diverse peoples under one label for convenience. Some Indigenous people may feel that this term, while commonly accepted, is still a colonial construct that fails to fully honor their specific cultural and national identities.

- **Local Community Preferences**

Some Indigenous communities or individuals prefer more specific language in certain settings. They may choose to use their Nation’s name (e.g., Mohawk, Dene, or Mi’kmaq) rather than the broad term Indigenous. This choice reflects a desire for recognition of their specific Nation’s sovereignty, traditions, and unique cultural identity.

- **Preference for Self-Identification**

Many Indigenous peoples prefer to define themselves, and while Indigenous is widely accepted, it is still essential to ask individuals or communities how they prefer to be identified. The act of self-identification is deeply tied to sovereignty, self-determination, and respect.

- **Global vs. Local Contexts**

Indigenous is often used in global contexts to connect the shared experiences of colonization, land dispossession, and cultural suppression across the world’s many Indigenous populations. However, in more local or national contexts, there may be a desire to use language that reflects the unique experience of Indigenous peoples in that specific region.



Appendix B:

Additional Terms and Titles for Traditional Roles and Positions

When engaging with Indigenous communities, it is essential to recognize and use culturally appropriate terms that honor the roles and contributions of those who hold, protect, and transmit traditional knowledge. Using appropriate terminology is a sign of respect and acknowledges the distinct roles that individuals hold within their communities. Depending on the community and context, different terms may be preferred.

This appendix provides a list of alternative terms and titles that can be used respectfully, it is important to remember that no single term fits all contexts, and consultation with community members or representatives is key to ensuring respectful and culturally appropriate language is used.

Elder

An Elder is a respected individual within Indigenous communities who is recognized for their wisdom, life experience, and deep understanding of cultural traditions, teachings, and spirituality. Elders play an integral role in guiding and advising community members, providing mentorship, and preserving cultural knowledge and practices. They are often called upon to offer prayers and share stories. Being an Elder is not necessarily dependent on age but is based on the community's recognition of a person's knowledge, integrity, and leadership.

Traditional Healer

A Traditional Healer is a respected individual within Indigenous communities who takes a holistic approach to promote the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of individuals and communities. Traditional Healers are skilled in using traditional medicines, ceremonies, and healing practices that have been passed down through generations. They play a vital role in community health, addressing both individual and collective healing needs through culturally rooted practices.

Traditional Helper

A Traditional Helper plays a supportive role for a Traditional Healer by assisting in the preparation, facilitation, and follow-up of healing practices. Helpers are trusted individuals chosen by the Healer and are responsible for various tasks such as gathering sacred medicines, preparing ceremonial spaces, and offering logistical support during healing sessions. They may also help with coordinating community gatherings, maintaining cultural protocols, and providing emotional and spiritual support. Helpers ensure the smooth execution of ceremonies and uphold the cultural protocols that guide these practices.



Language Holder/Keeper

A Language Holder/Keeper is an individual who maintains, teaches, and revitalizes Indigenous languages, ensuring the transmission of language knowledge to younger generations. They play an important role in the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages, which are deeply tied to cultural identity and traditional knowledge.

Cultural/Traditional Practitioner

A Cultural/Traditional Practitioner is an individual who actively engages in and passes on culturally significant practices, such as rites of passage ceremonies, traditional arts, crafts, and other culturally rooted practices. They provide guidance and support to individuals and families through life transitions using culturally appropriate methods. Cultural Practitioners may work alongside healthcare providers to create culturally safe and responsive environments, ensuring that cultural identity and practices are respected in various settings.

Traditional Land-Based Programmer/Coordinator

A Traditional Land-Based Programmer/Coordinator is an individual responsible for planning, implementing, and overseeing programs that connect community members with traditional lands, cultural practices, and ecological knowledge. This role involves coordinating activities, facilitating educational experiences, and promoting cultural revitalization, environmental stewardship, and reconnection with traditional territories.

