First Nations – ethical and respectful style

Content for or about First Nations people must be culturally safe. When planning, writing or editing information about First Nations people and culture, carefully consider terms, language and style. All content must be respectful and culturally appropriate.

This guide has been developed for the Australian context, with advice from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Universities Australia Deputy Vice Chancellor / Pro Vice Chancellor Indigenous Committee.

This guide contains names of First Nations peoples.

Terminology and preferences vary across First Nations groups and can change over time. Consult relevant First Nations groups and follow their guidance wherever possible.

This guide respectfully uses the collective term 'First Nations people' to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

General tips

- Preferred collective terms vary across groups and individuals (e.g. *First Nations people* or *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*). Check with the group you're writing with or about and follow their preferences.
- Wherever possible, use specific nation names to recognise and respect the diversity of First Nations peoples.
- Ask individuals how they would like to be described and if they would like their title (e.g. Aunty, Uncle, Elder, Knowledge Holder) to be included.
- Capitalise *Country* when referring to the lands and waters of First Nations people.
- In most cases, capitalise titles and the names of Nations and language groups.
- When quoting directly in a First Nations language, attribute the Nation and language group, and speaker.
- Consider the sensitivity of certain themes, such as death and colonisation.

Titles

Titles such as Elder, Knowledge Holder, Aunty or Uncle are given within First Nations communities as a sign of respect. First Nations people who have these titles may only want the title used within their community. Always ask the person how they would like to be described in any content and if they would like their title to be included. Always capitalise the title if used.

Nations and regional groups

Many First Nations people identify themselves by their language group. Wherever possible, use specific Nation names to recognise and respect the diversity of First Nations people.

Example

Ngunnawal, Wiradjuri or *Yorta Yorta*

Gurindji man or *Gubbi woman*

People might refer to themselves and their community by the type of Country they live in.

Example

Saltwater people if they live on the coast, or *freshwater*, *desert* or *spinifex people* if they live on that Country

Torres Strait Islander people may prefer to use the name of their island to identify themselves to outsiders – for example, *Saibai man*

If possible, where a First Nations person is mentioned in text, include details of their Nation in parentheses after their name (at the first mention).

Example

'Detailed guidance has been developed by Danièle Hromek (Budawang/Yuin) and Sophie Herbert.'

Further guidance is available from the James Cook University APA 7th referencing guide.

There are also local terms for First Nations people from different parts of Australia. Take great care with these terms. A term that is accepted in one region usually isn't accepted in another. Always consult relevant First Nations groups and follow their preferences.

Example

- *Koori* (across southeastern Australia)
- *Murri* (in south and central Queensland)
- *Nunga* (in southern South Australia)
- *Noongar* (also Nyoongar, Nyungar; around Perth)
- *Yolŋu* (in Arnhem Land)
- *Aṉangu* (in central Australia)
- *Palawa* (in Tasmania)

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Map of Indigenous Australia* provides information about the diversity of First Nations, languages and social groups. However, this map was developed only from published sources. Some Nations are missing, and boundaries may not be accurate.

Writing about Country

First Nations people may refer to being or living *on Country*. *Country* (capitalised) is the First Nations concept of everything within a landscape, including:

- the land or sea itself
- the plants and animals within it
- the history, culture, law and traditions associated with it
- the connections between people and the environment.

Capitalising First Nations terms

Many First Nations people see capitalisation as a mark of respect. This is especially important when referring to people, language groups and nations. This is an important distinction from modern content styles, which often recommend using minimal capitalisation (for example, *government departments* and *company directors* rather than *Government Departments* and *Company Directors*).

Example

Elders, *Traditional Custodians* and *Traditional Owners* are capitalised.

Nations and language groups are capitalised, such as *Barkandji*, *Ngambri* and *Warlpiri*.

Country is capitalised (when referring to the lands and waters of First Nations people).

Other terms for concepts and items important to First Nations people may be capitalised, depending on the context and the preferences of the group.

Names of language groups, cultural objects and spiritual entities are often capitalised to show significance and respect.

Example

Nation, *Traditional Knowledges*, *Law* (or *Lore*), *Knowledge Holder* (or *Keeper*), *Dreaming*, *Songlines* and *Storylines*.

In some cases, lower case is preferred for specific terms and languages. In particular, the written form of palawa kani (translated as 'Tasmanian Aboriginal speak'), is titled in lower case and has only lower case words following a decision by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre to discontinue capitals. However, to show respect for the people and group, Palawa is capitalised when writing about the Palawa people. Place names in palawa kani can be capitalised or lower case, although it is becoming common practice to capitalise.

Ask the relevant First Nations groups what terms should be capitalised or left lower case.

Sensitive themes

Take care to identify and address other sensitive language and cultural issues that may arise, such as:

- death. In many First Nations, the use of names, voices or images of deceased members of the community is avoided. You should follow appropriate social conventions or provide warnings for these audiences.
- **continuity**. Avoid language that refers to First Nations people, practices and culture in the past tense. First Nations people, practices and culture are all continuing and continuous.
- colonisation. Take care around the terms used for European arrival in Australia. The term 'settlement' ignores the dispossession and violence experienced by First Nations; many First Nations people prefer 'colonisation' or 'invasion'. Colonisation should be talked about as ongoing, rather than as a past event.

Collective terms

Each Nation may have different preferences about how they are referred to. Specific communities, groups and individuals within a nation may also have their own preferences. Some groups prefer the use of *peoples* rather than *people*, to indicate that there are many different First Nations and groups in Australia.

Where possible, check with the First Nations group you are writing with or about. If your organisation has specific guidance about First Nations terms, follow that guidance (any guidance should be developed together with relevant First Nations people).

Term	Description
First Nations or *First Nations people* or *peoples*	This term is accepted by many First Nations groups. Some First Nations people find the term inappropriate because it originated in North America.
First Peoples	This term is less common but is often accepted. Again, some First Nations people do not like the term because it originated in North America.
First Australians	This term is less common but is often accepted. Some First Nations people do not like the term because it accepts the premise of the 'Australian' nation, and does not recognise that First Nations sovereignty was not ceded. Some may also find that it erases their Nation identity.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or *peoples*	This term is often accepted. Some First Nations people do not like the term 'Aboriginal' because it can apply to First Peoples in any country. Some First Nations people do not like the term because it homogenises and recognises only 2 broad groups, rather than the diversity of nations within those groups.
Indigenous people or *peoples*	This term is often accepted. Some First Nations people do not like the term because it can apply to First Peoples in any country, as well as plants and animals belonging to a particular place. (Note: if you are writing about people, the term should be capitalised. If you are writing about plants and animals, the term should not be capitalised; for example, 'The fence is designed to protect indigenous species from predation by feral animals'.)

Term	Description
Traditional Owners and *Traditional Custodians*	Some First Nations people prefer the term *Traditional Owners*, to signify that sovereignty was never ceded. Some prefer *Traditional Custodians*, to signify that First Nations people are stewards rather than owners of land. Some use the 2 terms to signify 2 separate concepts (definitions from the State of the Environment report 2021): • *Traditional Owners* – First Nations owners of their traditional Country, as granted by government or as determined through the purchase of freehold or the native title process. • *Traditional Custodians* – First Nations people or nations who have responsibilities in caring for their Country.
Mob	Generally, *mob* would only be used by non-Indigenous Australians if they knew and lived or worked among First Nations people (see AIATSIS Guidelines for the ethical publishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and research from those communities for more information).
Community, Nation	It is usually fine for anyone to use the terms *Nation* and *community*. However, always consult First Nations groups and follow their preferences.
Tribe, clan	Check with the relevant First Nations group before using terms such as *tribe* and *clan*. *Tribe* tends to have a negative connotation in Australia, although the term has been used by some First Nations groups in their land claims. Likewise, some groups talk about *clans* in relationship to themselves.

Consult with relevant First Nations groups about their preferred use of these terms, and include explanations in the content where appropriate. The terms should be capitalised as above.

Whichever term is chosen, use it consistently throughout your content. You may wish to note in an introduction why the term was chosen, and acknowledge that there is no consensus on terminology and that you recognise some readers may not like the term you have used.

The following terms are patronising and offensive in the Australian context, and should not be used:

- Aborigines, the Aborigines, our Aborigines or our Islanders
- acronyms ATSI or TSI to refer to people at any time (for example, in emails or job titles)
- terms such as primitive, prehistoric and native when referring to people.

Some First Nations persons describe themselves as *Black;* some use *Blak* instead of *Black* to reclaim the negative connotations of the word *black* and to signify the Australian context. These terms can be considered offensive when used by non-Indigenous people.

Further guidance is available from:

- Australian Government Style Manual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Guidelines for ethical publishing
- Australians Together Language and terminology guide.