

THE IMPACT OF WORDS AND TIPS FOR USING APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY

Am I using the right word?

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Avoid generalization.

Use conditional language instead! Instead of generalizing phrases like “all Native Americans,” use conditional language such as “most Native Americans” or “different Indigenous cultures.” There is no one “Indian” language, culture, or way of thinking. Generalizations negate the diversity of Native peoples and create an inaccurate understanding for students.

Whenever possible, have your students learn about specific individuals from a community.

Use present tense and contemporary examples.

Only using the past tense reinforces the myth of the “Vanishing Indian” and negates the experiences and the dynamic cultures of Native peoples today. If your curriculum teaches the history of Native Americans, also do some research on the community today. Teach your students about contemporary culture and topics. Use the present tense and make Native Americans relevant and contemporary.

Emphasize that Indigenous peoples have living cultures that change over time. If you do need to use the past tense, provide context by including dates. Otherwise, it may seem like Native cultures are no longer living.

Refrain from using terminology and phrases that perpetuate stereotypes

Common phrases like “Indian Princess,” “Low man on the totem pole,” “sitting Indian style,” etc. perpetuate stereotypes and imply a monolithic culture. If you are unsure about a phrase, do some research into its origins and think about its meaning and implications.

Diversity

It’s important to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous Peoples’ cultures, traditions, and languages throughout the Western Hemisphere. When teaching about a particular tribe or nation, learning and using accurate terms specific to the community can prevent stereotypes and encourage cultural understanding and sensitivity among your students.

American Indian or Native American?

American Indian, Indian, Native American, or Native are acceptable and often used interchangeably in the **United States**; however, Native Peoples often have individual preferences on how they would like to be addressed. **To find out which term is best, ask the person or group which term they prefer.** When talking about Native groups or people, use the terminology the members of the community use to describe themselves collectively. There are also several terms used to refer to Native Peoples in other regions of the Western Hemisphere. The *Inuit, Yup’ik, and Aleut* Peoples in the **Arctic** see themselves as culturally separate from Indians. In **Canada**, people refer to themselves as *First Nations, First Peoples, or Aboriginal*. In **Mexico, Central America, and South America**, the direct translation for Indian can have negative connotations. As a result, they prefer the Spanish words *indígena* (Indigenous), *comunidad* (community), and *pueblo* (people).

NATIVE

The term *Native* is often used officially or unofficially to describe indigenous peoples from the United States (Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Alaska Natives), but it can also serve as a specific descriptor (Native people, Native lands, Native traditions, etc.).

Tribe or Nation, and Why So Many Names?

American Indian people describe their own cultures and the places they come from in many ways. The words *tribe* and *nation* are used interchangeably but hold very different meanings for many Native people. Tribes often have more than one name because when Europeans arrived in the Americas, they used inaccurate pronunciations of the tribal names or renamed the tribes with European names. Today, many Native communities are switching back to their original names. Many tribal groups are known officially by names that include *nation*. Every community has a distinct perspective on how they describe themselves. Not all individuals from one community may agree on terminology. [There is no single American Indian culture or language.](#)

The best term is always what an individual person or tribal community uses to describe themselves. Replicate the terminology they use or ask what terms they prefer.