

Words First

An Evolving Terminology Relating to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

**Communications Branch
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada**

October 2002

Please note that the provisions of the *Indian Act*, its regulations, other federal statutes and their interpretation by the courts take precedence over the content of this terminology guide.

The purpose of *Words First: An Evolving Terminology Relating to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* is to provide writers with background information and guidance on appropriate word usage and style issues. *Words First* is not a legal document.

This evolving terminology helps answer specific questions on language usage that writers may encounter. Sample sentences are given to assist in clarifying these questions.

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Introduction

Aboriginal peoples have occupied the territory now called Canada for thousands of years. Many diverse and autonomous peoples lived in this territory and had distinct languages, cultures, religious beliefs and political systems. Each community or culture had its own name for its people and names for the peoples around them.

When Columbus arrived in North America, he gave the name "Indian" to the people he encountered. This misnomer was based on the mistaken notion that he had landed in India.

Today, terms to describe Aboriginal peoples are continually evolving. Understanding the distinctions among these words and to whom they apply can be a challenge for writers.

This lexicon of words describes or relates to Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It was created by the Communications Branch at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to help departmental staff with terminology usage. Although it was written with INAC staff in mind, the guide will also be useful to anyone who wants to write or learn about Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Guidelines:

1. Readers should keep in mind that there is no single lexicon to describe Aboriginal peoples. For example, there isn't a sole agreed-upon name for the original peoples that inhabited North America before European settlers arrived. In Canada, "Aboriginal peoples" is often used. In the United States, "American Indian" or "Native American" are commonly used. United Nations documents and organizations (and some Aboriginal scholars and advocates) use the term "Indigenous people." While the term Inuit is used for the Canada Aboriginal inhabitants north of the tree line, many in the U.S. still use the term Eskimo.

This guide gives the recommended usage for the employees of INAC and the Government of Canada. Regardless of the lexicon you choose to follow, try to use terms correctly and consistently.

2. The authors of this guide have tried to use current names and terminology selected by Aboriginal peoples themselves. However, some of the terms listed here have strict legal definitions. They may seem outdated, but they are still necessary in certain contexts explained later in the guide.

3. This guide does not list the many and varied names of individual Aboriginal nations. Rather, it provides inclusive terms that describe them collectively. Whenever possible, try to characterize Aboriginal people through their specific identities (e.g., a Haida painter, a Mohawk school, a Blackfoot publication). These types of identifications more accurately capture the unique aspects of the people or things you are describing.

4. If you are unsure about names and terms, try contacting the Aboriginal people you are writing about to learn which terms they prefer. Also note that many Aboriginal people are using English transliterations of terms from their own languages to identify themselves; e.g., the Mohawk Nation is also called "Kanien" "kehá:ka"; the Blackfoot, "Siksika"; the Chippewas, "Anishinabeg"; and the Swampy Cree, "Mushkegowuk."

Organization of *Words First*

The terms in this guide are arranged alphabetically. This makes it easy to find a particular term when you know what you are looking for. When you are unsure of the appropriate term, however, a thematic organization can be helpful. Here, then, is a breakdown of the terms in this guide according to various themes.

Collective names to describe the original peoples of North America and their descendants:

- Aboriginal people(s)
- First Peoples
- Indigenous people(s)
- Native people(s)
- Native American
- American Indian

More narrowly defined groups of Aboriginal people:

- First Nation
- Indian
- Innu
- Metis
- Eskimo
- Inuit

Terms associated with communities and community organization:

- among First Nations:
 - band
 - tribal council
 - tribe
 - reservation
 - reserve
- among Inuit:
 - Inuit communities
 - Inuit regions

American usage:

- American Indian
- Native American
- Eskimo
- reservation
- tribe

Aboriginal people(s)

"Aboriginal people" is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. The Canadian Constitution (*the Constitution Act, 1982*) recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples — Indians, Métis and Inuit. These are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

Please note the following uses:

Aboriginal people

When you are referring to "Aboriginal people," you are referring to all the Aboriginal people in Canada collectively, without regard to their separate origins and identities. Or, you are simply referring to more than one Aboriginal person.

Aboriginal peoples

By adding the "s" to people, you are emphasizing that there is a diversity of people within the group known as Aboriginal people.

<p>Aboriginal people; Aboriginal persons</p> <p> </p> <p> </p> <p> </p> <p>more than one Aboriginal person</p>	<p>Aboriginal people</p> <p> </p> <p> </p> <p> </p> <p>entire body of Aboriginal persons in Canada</p>	<p>Aboriginal peoples</p> <p> </p> <p>different groups of Aboriginal people with distinct cultures (often used when referring to different groups among different communities)</p>
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Because the term "Aboriginal people" generally applies to First Nations, Inuit and Metis, writers should take care in using this term. If they are describing a particular departmental program that is only for First Nations, like band funding, you should avoid using "Aboriginal people" which could cause misunderstanding.

non-Aboriginal people (*not* peoples)

Refers to anyone who is not an Aboriginal person. Note that the "non" stays lowercase.

Aboriginal nations

This term was used by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in its final report. RCAP defines Aboriginal nations as "a sizeable body of Aboriginal people with a shared sense of national identity that constitutes the predominant population in a certain territory or collection of territories." The term has gained currency among some Aboriginal groups, but it has not been used at INAC.

Suggested usage:

Capitalize. The Department capitalizes "Aboriginal" as it would other designations like "Francophone," "Arabic" or "Nordic."

Use as an adjective. Despite the wide use of "Aboriginal" as a proper noun by many Canadian and Aboriginal media, the Department uses the term only as a modifier.

✗ The government's new strategy will support increased business with Aboriginals.

✓ The government's new strategy will support increased business with Aboriginal people.

Avoid describing Aboriginal people as "belonging" to Canada. Use neutral terms instead.

✗ Canada's Aboriginal people have traditions and cultures that go back thousands of years.

✓ Aboriginal people in Canada have traditions and cultures that go back thousands of years.

Aboriginal rights

Rights that some Aboriginal peoples of Canada hold as a result of their ancestors' long-standing use and occupancy of the land. The rights of certain Aboriginal peoples to hunt, trap and fish on ancestral lands are examples of Aboriginal rights. Aboriginal rights vary from group to group depending on the customs, practices, traditions, treaties and agreements that have formed part of their distinctive cultures.

Aboriginal self-government

Governments designed, established and administered by Aboriginal peoples under the Canadian Constitution through a process of negotiation with Canada and, where applicable, the provincial government.

Aboriginal title

A legal term that recognizes an Aboriginal interest in the land. It is based on the long-standing use and occupancy of the land by today's Aboriginal peoples as the descendants of the original inhabitants of Canada.

American Indian

"American Indian" is a commonly used term in the United States to describe the descendants of the original peoples of North America (see also **Native Americans**). Some people are dissatisfied with this term, because it: (a) retains the misnomer "Indian" in its name, and (b) covers peoples who consider themselves distinct from Indian peoples, namely the Inuit, Yupik and Aleut peoples in Alaska. The term is not popular in Canada.

band

A band is a body of Indians for whose collective use and benefit lands have been set apart or money is held by the Crown, or declared to be a band for the purposes of the *Indian Act*. Each band has its own governing band council, usually consisting of one chief and several councillors. Community members choose the chief and councillors by election, or sometimes through custom. The members of a band generally share common values, traditions and practices rooted in their ancestral heritage. Today, many bands prefer to be known as First Nations (e.g., the Batchewana Band is now called the Batchewana First Nation).

- **band council**

This is the governing body for a band. It usually consists of a chief and councillors, who are elected for two or three-year terms (under the *Indian Act* or band custom) to carry out band business, which may include education; water, sewer and fire services; by-laws; community buildings; schools; roads; and other community businesses and services.

Suggested usage:

Capitalize "band" when used as part of a name. Unless you are naming a specific band (e.g., the Bonaparte Indian Band), the word "band" can remain lowercase.

Bill C-31

The pre-legislation name of the 1985 *Act to Amend the Indian Act*. This act eliminated certain discriminatory provisions of the *Indian Act*, including the section that resulted in Indian women losing their Indian status and membership when they married Non-Status men. Bill C-31 enabled people affected by the discriminatory provisions of the old *Indian Act* to apply to have their Indian status and membership restored.

custom

A traditional Aboriginal practice. For example, First Nations peoples sometimes marry or adopt children according to custom, rather than under Canadian family law. Band councils chosen "by custom" are elected or selected by traditional means, rather than by the election rules contained in the *Indian Act*.

Eskimo

"Eskimo" is the term once given to Inuit by European explorers and is now rarely used in Canada. It is derived from an Algonquin term meaning "raw meat eaters," and many people find the term offensive. The term is still frequently used in the United States in reference to Inuit in Alaska.

First Nation(s)

A term that came into common usage in the 1970s to replace the word "Indian," which some people found offensive. Although the term First Nation is widely used, no legal definition of it exists. Among its uses, the term "First Nations peoples" refers to the Indian peoples in Canada, both Status and Non-Status. Some Indian peoples have also adopted the term "First Nation" to replace the word "band" in the name of their community.

- **First Nation**

"First Nation" has been adopted by some Indian communities to replace the term "Indian band." A band is defined as a body of Indians for whose collective use and benefit lands have been set apart or money is held by the Crown, or declared to be a band for the purposes of the *Indian Act*. Many Indian bands started to replace the word "band" in their name with "First Nation" in the 1980s. It is a matter of preference, and writers should follow the choice expressed by individual First Nations/bands.

Suggested usage:

Capitalize. The Department capitalizes "First Nation" as it would other designations like "Francophone," "Arabic" or "Nordic."

Use as a noun and a modifier. The term "First Nation" is acceptable as both. When using the term as a modifier, the question becomes whether to use "First Nation" or "First Nations." Note the different uses in the following examples.

(plural modifier, plural noun)

✓ The number of First Nations students enrolled at Canadian universities and colleges has soared over the past twenty years.

(singular modifier, plural noun)

✓The association assists female First Nation entrepreneurs interested in starting home businesses.

(plural modifier, singular noun)

✓ Containing recipes from across the country, the First Nations cookbook became an instant hit at church bazaars.

(singular modifier, singular noun)

✓ Many people have said that *North of 60* and *The Rez* were the only shows on television that depicted life in a First Nation community with any realism.

There is no clear right or wrong in this area, provided that writers are consistent about the way they choose to use modifiers.

- **First Nations people**
Many people today prefer to be called "First Nations" or "First Nations people" instead of "Indians." Generally, "First Nations people" is used to describe both Status and Non-Status Indians. The term is rarely used as a synonym for "Aboriginal peoples" because it usually doesn't include Inuit or Métis people.
- Because the term "First Nations people" generally applies to both Status and Non-Status Indians, writers should take care in using this term. If they are describing a departmental program that is for only Status Indian youth, for example, they should avoid using "First Nations youth," which could cause misunderstanding.

First Peoples

"First Peoples" is another collective term used to describe the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. It is used less frequently than terms like "Aboriginal peoples" and "Native peoples."

Indian

The term "Indian" collectively describes all the Indigenous people in Canada who are not Inuit or Métis. Indian peoples are one of three peoples recognized as Aboriginal in the *Constitution Act, 1982*. It specifies that Aboriginal people in Canada consist of the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples.

There are three categories of Indians in Canada: Status Indians, Non-Status Indians and Treaty Indians.

- **Status Indians**
Status Indians are people who are entitled to have their names included on the Indian Register, an official list maintained by the federal government. Certain criteria determine who can be registered as a Status Indian. Only Status Indians are recognized as Indians under the *Indian Act*, which defines an Indian as "a person who, pursuant to this Act, is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian." Status Indians are entitled to certain rights and benefits under the law.
- **Non-Status Indians**
Non-Status Indians are people who consider themselves Indians or members of a First Nation but whom the Government of Canada does not recognize as Indians under the *Indian Act*, either because they are unable to prove their status or have lost their status rights. Many Indian people in Canada, especially women, lost their Indian status through discriminatory practices in the past. Non-Status Indians are not entitled to the same rights and benefits available to Status Indians.
- **Treaty Indian**
A Status Indian who belongs to a First Nation that signed a treaty with the Crown.

The term "Indian" is considered outdated by many people, and there is much debate over whether to continue using this term. The Department, following popular usage, typically uses the term "First Nation" instead of "Indian," except in the following cases:

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

Suggested usage:

Capitalize. The Department capitalizes "Indian," "Status Indian," "Non-Status Indian," and "Treaty Indian" as it would other designations like "Francophone," "Arabic" or "Nordic."

Use as a noun and a modifier. The term is acceptable as both.

Indian Act

Canadian federal legislation, first passed in 1876, and amended several times since. It sets out certain federal government obligations and regulates the management of Indian reserve lands, Indian moneys and other resources. Among its many provisions, the *Indian Act* currently requires the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to manage certain moneys belonging to First Nations and Indian lands and to approve or disallow First Nations by-laws. In 2001, the national initiative *Communities First: First Nations Governance* was launched, to consult with First Nations peoples on the issues of governance under the *Indian Act*. The process will likely take two to three years before any new law is put in place.

Indian status

An individual's legal status as an Indian, as defined by the *Indian Act*.

indigenous/Indigenous

Indigenous means "native to the area." In this sense, Aboriginal people are indeed indigenous to North America. As a proper name for a people, the term is capitalized to form "Indigenous peoples." Its meaning is similar to "Aboriginal peoples," "Native peoples" or "First Peoples."

The term is rarely used in the Department, and when it is used, it usually refers to Aboriginal people internationally. Outside the Department, the term is gaining currency, particularly among some Aboriginal scholars. The term is also used by the United Nations in its working groups and in its Decade of the World's Indigenous People (note that, in this instance, no "s" is placed at the end of "people").

Innu

Naskapi and Montagnais First Nations (Indian) peoples who live in Northern Quebec and Labrador. Not to be confused with Inuit.

Inuvialuit

Inuit who live in the western Arctic and who speak Inuvialuktun.

Inuit

Inuit are the Aboriginal people of Arctic Canada. Inuit live primarily in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and northern parts of Labrador and Quebec. They have traditionally lived above the treeline in the area bordered by the Mackenzie Delta in the west, the Labrador coast in the east, the southern point of Hudson Bay in the south, and the High Arctic islands in the north.

Inuit are not covered by the *Indian Act*. However, in 1939 the Supreme Court interpreted the federal government's power to make laws affecting "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians" as extending to Inuit.

The word "Inuit" means "the people" in Inuktitut, the Inuit language, and is the term by which Inuit refer to themselves. Avoid using the term "Inuit people" as the use of "people" is redundant. The term "Eskimo," applied to Inuit by European explorers, is no longer used in Canada.

Suggested usage:

Use as a noun and a modifier. The term is acceptable as both. According to the national organization Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the preferred use of "Inuit" as a noun is simply "Inuit," not "the Inuit" nor "Inuit people."

× As hunters, *the* Inuit led a seasonal existence, living according to nature's schedule.

× Contact between Inuit people and Europeans increased with the arrival of whaling ships in the 19th century.

✓ As hunters, Inuit led a seasonal existence, living according to nature's schedule.

✓ Contact between Inuit and Europeans increased with the arrival of whaling ships in the 19th century.

✓ With the birth of Nunavut in 1999, Inuit embarked on an exciting new era in their history.

Capitalize. The Department capitalizes "Inuit" as it would other designations like "Francophone," "Arabic" or "Nordic."

"Inuk" is the singular form of Inuit. Use "Inuk" when referring to one Inuit person.

Inuit communities

Inuit live in communities. They are referred to as communities in the Arctic, and more commonly as Inuit communities in southern Canada.

Inuit never lived on reserves. Therefore, the terms "on-reserve" and "off-reserve" do not apply to Inuit, only to First Nations. Wording that is supposed to cover all Aboriginal communities — for example, a reference to people "living on a reserve, off a reserve, or in urban areas" — must add in "Inuit communities" to be inclusive of Inuit living in the North.

Inuit regions

Inuit live in regions. They are referred to as regions in the Arctic, and more commonly in southern Canada

as Inuit regions .

There are four Inuit comprehensive land claims regions covering one-third of Canada: they are Inuvialuit (western Arctic, Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec) and Labrador. The Nunavut territory has three sub-regions — Kitikmeot, Kivalliq and Qikiqtaaluk — which are called regions.

Sometimes Inuit regions are called Inuit territories, or Inuit territory, individually or collectively.

land claims

In 1973, the federal government recognized two broad classes of claims — comprehensive and specific. **Comprehensive claims** are based on the assessment that there may be continuing Aboriginal rights to lands and natural resources. These kinds of claims come up in those parts of Canada where Aboriginal title has not previously been dealt with by treaty and other legal means. The claims are called "comprehensive" because of their wide scope. They include such things as land title, fishing and trapping rights and financial compensation. **Specific claims** deal with specific grievances that First Nations may have regarding the fulfilment of treaties. Specific claims also cover grievances relating to the administration of First Nations lands and assets under the *Indian Act*.

Métis

The word "Métis" is French for "mixed blood." The Canadian Constitution recognizes Métis people as one of the three Aboriginal peoples.

Historically, the term "Métis" applied to the children of French fur traders and Cree women in the Prairies, and of English and Scottish traders and Dene women in the North. Today, the term is used broadly to describe people with mixed First Nations and European ancestry who *identify* themselves as Métis, distinct from Indian people, Inuit, or non-Aboriginal people. (Many Canadians have mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry, but not all identify themselves as Métis.) Note that Métis organizations in Canada have differing criteria about who qualifies as a Métis person.

Suggested usage:

Capitalize. The Department capitalizes "Métis" as it would other designations like "Francophone," "Arabic" or "Nordic."

Accent or no accent? Many people and groups, particularly in the West and the North, have dropped the accent in Métis. Both spellings are acceptable in English, but the Department continues to use the accent. Regardless of your preference, it is a good idea to always check the names of individual Métis organizations before you publish them. For example, the Metis Council of Ontario and the Metis Association of the NWT do not take an accent; the Métis National Council does take an accent.

This Department is not involved with Metis issues. These are dealt with by the federal Interlocator's office at PCO.

Native

"Native" is a word similar in meaning to "Aboriginal." "Native peoples" is a collective term to describe the descendants of the original peoples of North America. The term is increasingly seen as outdated (particularly when used as a noun) and is starting to lose currency.

Native American

This is another commonly used term in the United States to describe the descendants of the original peoples of North America. The term has not caught on in Canada because of the apparent reference to U.S. citizenship. However, some Aboriginal peoples in Canada have argued that because they are descendants of the original peoples of the *Americas*, the term Native American should apply to them regardless of their citizenship.

the North vs. the north

Land in Canada located north of the 60th parallel. INAC's responsibilities for land and resources in the Canadian North relate only to the three territories Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon.

Capitalize: the "N" in North only when used in reference to the three territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon) as a geographical region.

- ✓ I look at different circumstances, having been up in the North and looked at the company that is building diamond mines in the Northwest Territories.
- ✓ Inuit reside in the North.
- ✓ I travelled to Thunder Bay to see the north.

Northerner(s) vs. northerner(s)

Capitalize: the "N" in Northerner(s) is capitalized only when referring to a person or persons living in one of the three territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories or Yukon).

- ✓ There are many Northerners living in Yukon.
- ✓ There are many northerners living in Cochrane.

Nunavut

The territory created in the Canadian North on April 1, 1999 when the former Northwest Territories was divided in two. Nunavut means "our land" in Inuktitut. Inuit, whose ancestors inhabited these lands for thousands of years, make up 85 percent of the population of Nunavut. The territory has its own public government.

off-reserve

A term used to describe people, services or objects that are not part of a reserve, but relate to First Nations.

oral history

Evidence taken from the spoken words of people who have knowledge of past events and traditions. This

oral history is often recorded on tape and then put in writing. It is used in history books and to document land claims.

reservation

A reservation is land set apart by the United States government for the use and occupation of a group of Native Americans. The term does not apply in Canada.

reserve

A reserve is tract of land, the legal title to which is held by the Crown, set apart for the use and benefit of an Indian band. Some bands have more than one reserve.

Many First Nations now prefer the term "First Nation community," and no longer use "reserve."

Suggested usage:

Capitalize "reserve" when used as part of a name. Unless you are naming a specific reserve, the word "reserve" can remain lowercase.

on-reserve/off-reserve

These terms are modifiers to qualify people or things that are or are not part of a reserve, e.g.,

- ✓ The government has announced a new approach to on-reserve housing.
- ✓ On-reserve businesses are eligible for the new training program.

However, sometimes people move the "on-reserve/off-reserve" modifier after the noun and remove the hyphen, so sentences read:

- ✗ The government has announced a new approach to housing on reserve.
- ✗ Businesses on reserve are eligible for the new training program.

Readers outside this Department may have trouble interpreting these sentences. They are either (a) ungrammatical or (b) suggest that we are talking about businesses and housing that have been set apart for future use (i.e., are in reserve). Please avoid this use and either leave the modifier before the noun or make the sentences grammatically complete:

- ✓ The government has announced a new approach to housing *on reserves*.
- ✓ Businesses *located on reserves* are eligible for the new training program.

Another common usage is "people who live on reserve" and "people who live off reserve."

- ✗ Students who live on reserve are eligible for the summer employment program.
- ✗ The Friendship Centre can be a welcome place for First Nations people who live off reserve.

Again, these sentences are not grammatically complete. Try

- ✓ Students *living on a reserve* are eligible for the summer employment program.
- ✓ The Friendship Centre can be a welcome place for First Nations people *living off a reserve*.
- ✓ The Friendship Centre can be a welcome place for First Nations people *who don't live on a reserve*.

surrender

A formal agreement by which a band consents to give up part or all of its rights and interests in a reserve. Reserve lands can be surrendered for sale or for lease, on certain conditions.

tribal council

A tribal council is a group made up of several bands that represents the interests of those bands and may administer funds or deliver common services to those bands. Membership in a tribal council tends to be organized around geographic, political, or cultural and linguistic lines.

tribe

A tribe is a group of Native Americans sharing a common language and culture. The term is used frequently in the United States, but only in a few areas of Canada (e.g., the Blood Tribe in Alberta).