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Respectful language guide – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

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Overview

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the First Peoples of Australia and the world's oldest continuous culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are two distinct cultural groups, and within these groups there are more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

Identity

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage is something that is uniquely personal, and comes from ongoing connections ancestral groups, family, community, and connection to Country. Identity is often interlinked with kinship, spirituality, cultural beliefs, and values, and is not determined by physical appearance such as facial features or skin colour.

People do not require formal documentation to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and there is no national register of identity. Sometimes people may be asked to provide confirmation of their identity, when accessing Indigenous specific services such as grants, scholarships, or employment. In these cases, organisations or Government agencies will usually accept three 'criteria' as confirmation, with all criteria needing to apply. These are:

1. Being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent
2. Identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
3. Being accepted as such by the community in which the person lives, or formerly lived.

Some people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent may choose not to identify due to complex family, cultural or

historical reasons (including racism). Choosing not to identify is a personal choice and should be respected.

Key terms

There are a range of different terms used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, some more appropriate than others. This guide has been developed to provide helpful suggestions and clarify appropriate use of language. It is important to remember that given the diversity that exists within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there is no unanimous view on which word or phrase is 'best' – rather, there are a range of different words and phrases.

Aboriginal

Aboriginal is widely used to collectively define Aboriginal people within Australia, collectively grouping Traditional Nations of the mainland and most islands (excluding the Torres Strait Islands). When spelling Aboriginal it is important to always capitalise the 'A' as a sign of respect.





Australia Awards

Torres Strait Islander

Torres Strait Islander people are from the Torres Strait Islands, which are a group of over 200 islands, scattered from the tip of QLD towards the border of Papua New Guinea. When spelling Torres Strait Islander, it is important to always capitalise each word as a sign of respect. Please also note the difference between spelling 'Strait' (correct) and 'straight' (incorrect).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

This term is often used when referring to both groups, or when the audience isn't known/specific. It is important to note that some people identify as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Indigenous

The term 'Indigenous' collectively refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This term is commonly used, particularly by Governments or organisations. However, while some people find it acceptable and inclusive, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not like being referred to as Indigenous. This is often for two main reasons:

- Some people feel the word Indigenous can risk reducing two unique cultures into a homogenous group.
- The definition of 'Indigenous' also literally means 'belonging or occurring naturally in a particular place', which is used globally to refer to people as well as flora and fauna. Because of this some people feel the term Indigenous does not respect the unique and diverse cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

First Nations

'First Nations' refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectively. In recent years, the term 'First Nations' has emerged as an alternative to 'Indigenous'. First Nations can often be preferred, as it not only recognises both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but the term also acknowledges that we come from many culturally unique Nations.

First Australians

'First Australians' also refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectively, and can be used as an alternative to 'Indigenous' or 'First Nations'. Whilst this term is gaining popularity, it is not always preferred. Some people feel the term 'First Australians' disrespects sovereignty pre-colonisation. It can still be used respectfully, but it is best to assess the situation before use.

Local terms

Across the country, there are various local terms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may commonly use to describe themselves. Local terms often refer to people within a particular region, such as a state. Some examples of these are:

- Koori – Refers to Aboriginal people from NSW and parts of Victoria
- Goori – Refers to Aboriginal people from around the north coast of NSW
- Murrie – Refers to Aboriginal people from Queensland and some parts of very northern NSW

Identification by Nation

There are more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations, each with distinct languages, traditions, culture, songs, art and stories. While some Nations have similarities, each Nation is unique. For this reason, some people prefer to be known or introduced by their Nations (also informally referred to as 'mob'). A Nation (or Country) refers to ancestral lands and seas and opposed to where a person is physically living at the time. Some examples include:

- Rose is a proud Dharug woman who...
- Warlpiri/Arrernte woman, Rachel, co-facilitated the meeting...
- Adnyamathanha man Levi said...
- Australia Awards staff member Clint, is a proud Gumbaynggirr/Bundjalung man who attended...





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It is important to note that:

- People can be from one or multiple Nations
- Not all people know their Nation/s. This can stem from many causes but is often a result of the stolen generation, when the Australian Government forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families (mid 1800's – 1970's) and placed them in institutions or with non-Aboriginal families to assimilate. To be disconnected from your Country and not know your Nation can be incredibly painful and has lifelong impacts. It is important to be aware of these sensitivities.

Things to note

Use of terms

It is important to remember that there is no unanimous view on which word or phrase is best. There may be times when you are unsure of which term to use, or times when a term may not feel right for the situation. Ultimately, the best approach is to always communicate with honesty

and respect and ask for advice if you are unsure.

Spelling

First Nations languages have traditionally been oral-based languages. Over the past 200 years, there have been many attempts to document First Nations languages – some better than others. These attempts have often resulted in misrepresentations, inaccuracies, and disputed spellings. Oral sources are often most reliable, and it is recommended to follow the spellings that local Traditional Owners, Elders or community members use.

Capitalisation

Capitalisation demonstrates respect and so is commonly used for a range of terms across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. A few examples include:

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- First Nations/Indigenous/First Peoples
- Elders
- Country/Nation
- Traditional Owners/Custodians
- Names of cultural practices such as Welcome to Country/
Acknowledgement of Country.

