

Guide to Including Respectful and Inclusive Language and Terminology

Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential component of reconciliation and strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community. The ways in which we speak about reconciliation are just as important as the ways in which we act towards it; language is itself active, and can impact on attitudes, understandings and relationships in a very real and active sense.

Acknowledging diversity

Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities across Australia, you should always seek advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your local school or early learning service community regarding preferences and protocols around terminology use. While they are guidelines only, below are some recommendations for using respectful and inclusive language and terminology. Please consider these guidelines, alongside guidance from your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, when preparing written messages such as your Vision for Reconciliation and Acknowledgement of Country statements, as well as in everyday communication.

Referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

It is often best practice to use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' when referring generally to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. 'Aboriginal' (and less commonly accepted variants such as 'Aboriginals' or 'Aborigines') alone is also not inclusive of the diversity of cultures and identities across Australia, for which reason it should be accompanied by 'peoples' in the plural.* Similarly, as a stand-alone term, 'Aboriginal' is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples, and reference to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be spelt out where the intention is to refer to all First Peoples of Australia. Pluralised reference terms such as 'First Peoples' or 'First Nations' are also acceptable language, and respectfully encompass the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities. Correspondingly, pluralisation should extend to generalised reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'histories,' 'perspectives,' 'ways of being,' 'contributions,' and so forth. In respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, it is important not to abbreviate 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander,' or to use the acronym 'ATSI.' Assimilationist terms such as 'full-blood,' 'half-caste' and 'quarter-caste' are extremely offensive and should never be used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is important to recognise that, in some parts of the country, the term 'Indigenous' can be considered offensive. That is, it has scientific connotations which have been used historically to describe Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of the 'flora/fauna' rather than the human population of Australia, and can be seen as a homogenising label for what are, in reality, highly diverse identities. An exception for the term 'Indigenous' is considered in some situations, for example:

- If an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person prefers and/or has approved the word 'Indigenous' to be used;
- If an organisation has appropriately referred to a program or job title (e.g. "Indigenous Programs Unit" or "Indigenous Programs Manager");
- If the word 'Indigenous' has been appropriately embedded into an organisational i.e. Federal Government, State Government and Local Government—policy.
- If referring to non-Indigenous (non-Aboriginal or non-Torres Strait Islander) Australians. Terms such as 'other Australians' or 'the wider community' may also be acceptable in this regard.

*To clarify the differing contexts of use between the terms "people" (singular) and "peoples" (plural):

- "people" (singular) can be used where reference is essentially being made to "Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individuals" (i.e. individual Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons). For example, one might make reference to "the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation," or to "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within our school community."
- "peoples" (plural) can be used where reference is being made to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities/geo-cultural community groups across Australia). For example, one might make reference to "the Ngunnawal, Ngambri and Ngarigo peoples of the wider Canberra area," or to "the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures connected to Lands across Australia".

Capitalisation

As capitalisation demonstrates respect, 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' should always be capitalised. Capitalisation conventions are often also considered appropriate to extend to terms such as:

- Indigenous (see the note about the use of the term 'Indigenous' in the paragraph above, however);
- First Peoples/Nations/Australians;
- Elders;
- Traditional Owners/Custodians;
- Country (when referring to an area of land, sea and sky that is associated with a distinct group of people or First Nations community). Capitalisation can also be extended to corresponding terms such as 'Land,' when it is used in place of 'Country'), as well as to the names of particular Language Groups or geo-cultural communities;
- Acknowledgement of Country, Welcome to Country, and the names of other cultural practices (particularly if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander meanings or perspectives behind the words used to describe the practices – such as 'acknowledge' or 'welcome' – may be distinct to their English definitions or connotations).

Note that it is not necessary to capitalise the term 'reconciliation,' unless making reference to the name of Reconciliation Australia as an organisation, or the name of a formal program or document such as your Reconciliation Action Plan.

Avoiding deficit and dichotomous language

Acknowledging and addressing the historical – and often intergenerational – injustices and inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since colonisation is a critical component of reconciliation. Nevertheless, it is simultaneously imperative to acknowledge the strengths and resilience shown by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and communities in the face of

discrimination, and to celebrate the continued significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions in shaping a shared sense of national unity and identity.

It is important to draw on empowering, strengths-based language, and to be careful not to perpetuate patronising or paternalistic rhetoric. Consider, for example, the difference between more deficit discourses such as “helping disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students,” and a more strengths-based alternative such as “providing meaningful opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve at their full potential.”

Remember that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures have survived across the Australian continent for tens of thousands of years and, as such, are not ‘in need’ of being ‘rescued’ or ‘saved.’ Reconciliation is about working collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their strengths, not doing things ‘for them’ or ‘to them’. Correspondingly, reconciliation processes and aspirations should not be described through dichotomous ‘us’ and ‘them’ language, and should instead concentrate on promoting mutually respectful and genuine two-way relationships of shared significance.

Recognising currency and continuity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are connected to the oldest continuing cultures on the planet. For this reason, it is important not to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures in the past tense alone, recognising that these are indeed ongoing today. Statements that relegate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to an “ancient past” were common in twentieth century education texts. However, such statements present static representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and contributions that do not honour their continuing and current presence and significance. These representations also tend to ignore the tens of thousands of years of active Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions and connections to Country prior to European colonisation, misleadingly perpetuating the legal fiction of ‘terra nullius’ (‘land belonging to nobody.’) Furthermore, in contrast to the longstanding presence and significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, the relative recentness of European colonisation (and the even more recent reconciliation movement) should be actively considered in acknowledging and addressing the ongoing impacts of Australia’s shared histories since colonisation.

Please remember that the above is a guide only, and should not replace the advice from your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. If, upon consulting with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, you find that the preferred terminology is different from the recommendations above, please contact us before submitting your RAP.