

A guide to writing and speaking about Indigenous People in Australia

Macquarie University prides itself on the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in its curriculum and is committed to producing graduates who value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges and the importance of these in our nation's history and future. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the Indigenous people of Australia. The terms "Aboriginal" and "Torres Strait Islander" are collective names that do not emphasise the diversity of languages, cultural practices, worldviews and experiences that exist across the continent now called Australia. Studying at Macquarie University you will have the opportunity to learn more about Indigenous people here in Australia and around the world. The Department of Indigenous Studies in the Faculty of Arts has developed this guide to assist you with the appropriate ways to write and speak about Indigenous people in Australia.

Maranadyi Maranama Dharug Ngurra
(Always was always will be Dharug Ngurra)

What is so important about language?

Language, or the way we choose to refer to people and places, or different communities and groups around the world, is inherently political.

Language can have profound and adverse effects on people and culture. Language can also be used as a means of resistance, or to address inequalities. The power of language lies partially in its ability to shape reality and make meaning. The acceptance of one term or name over other options is therefore partially constituted by the repetition of those terms or names.

One example of this is the debate around whether Australia was 'settled' or 'invaded'. These positions reflect very different perceptions, experiences, and narratives for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, though they refer to the same event or events in Australia's colonial history.

So what is nomenclature?

Nomenclature is a system of naming that is governed by regulations and social and cultural norms, used particularly in the sciences but arts and humanities appropriate many 'scientific' terms. A nomenclature is a device that provides guidelines for speaking of 'others' – in this instance Indigenous people, but in general, all 'others'.

Language is constantly changing, as it reflects social and cultural norms or societal consensus. While a term or phrase may be acceptable now, in ten years that phrase may be replaced by another. This is why language cannot be considered neutral. It can, and does, reinforce power hierarchies, and has the power to harm, offend, and insult

when used in a certain way. When selecting terms or names in your writing, it is therefore important you consider why that term is used, and what it suggests within the context of your work.

When referring to peoples and places, it is important to ask yourself: Who chose that name? What are the politics of that name? Are there other names or terms—perhaps more correct ones—that could be used instead?

Macquarie University is an inclusive place to study and work and does not support any form of racism, racial bias or discrimination and is therefore concerned with systems of naming – with nomenclature – and its potential for harm.

Unlearning objectification and possession

When writing about Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people avoid adding 'the' (e.g. The Aboriginal people...). This objectifies Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and does not recognise the diversity of nations across this continent. Instead just write – Aboriginal people. Likewise, avoid referring to 'Our' or 'Australia's' Aboriginal people as this implies ownership. We are people, not possessions.

Appropriate terminology

Do not use terms such as 'aborigines' 'Aborigines' 'black' 'Blacks' 'Coloured', 'Natives' and do not use terminology that follows blood-quantum. Terms such as 'part-Aborigine/Aboriginal', 'full-blood', 'half-caste', 'quarter-cast', 'octaroon', 'mulatto', or 'hybrid' are always inappropriate when referring to Indigenous people. These terms should only be used if you are critiquing them.



Instead, use terminology that accounts for the individuality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Terms and phrases such as: ‘Aboriginal person’, ‘Torres Strait Islander person’, ‘Indigenous peoples’, ‘Aboriginal peoples’ and ‘Torres Strait Islander peoples’ emphasise the distinct cultural and linguistic identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Always spell ‘Torres Strait Islander’ out in full. Do not use the terms ‘islanders’ or acronym such as ‘ATSI’.

The term ‘First Nations’ is a global term, increasingly in use across this continent, to describe a collective grouping of some, many, or all Indigenous Nations. ‘First Nations’ should always be capitalised as it either serves as short form for a proper noun (Aboriginal First Nations, First Nations of Australia), or in place of a proper noun (First Nations peoples from Wiradjuri country). When referring to the people who come from those Nations, it should always be followed by people, peoples, or the capitalised Peoples. (O’Sullivan 2019 p.98)

Additionally, if you know the specific nation group you are discussing, you can elect to use that in place of ‘Indigenous’ or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Being as specific as possible is generally the most respectful and correct way to refer to a group or person.

For instance:

“Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes that...”

“Macquarie University is built on the lands of the Wallumattagal clan of the Dharug nation”

The importance of capital letters

When writing about Indigenous and/or Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander people, you need to capitalise as you would when writing ‘Australia’, ‘Japan’, and ‘United Kingdom’. Similarly, you should capitalise nation group names (e.g. Dharug) as these are proper nouns.

This is not a case of ‘political correctness’, but just actual ‘correctness’. Proper nouns must be capitalised, this is a fundamental rule in English grammar.

Gender, sexuality and race

Although they are distinct, gender, sexuality and race are intersecting categories that result in complex experiences, especially for people in minority groups. Dominant ideas around gender and sexuality that exist in Australian society today are a direct result of British colonialism and Christian ideology. Indigenous people are still resisting violent actions and policies designed to damage and erase Indigenous identities, relationships and family structures that do not mimic heterosexual nuclear families. Therefore respecting and uplifting Indigenous Queer people and challenging colonial conceptualisations of gender and sexuality is at the heart of anti-racist and anti-colonial work.

Language is very important when it comes to respecting not only someone’s cultural identity but also their gender or sexual identity (and these may not be mutually exclusive).

When researching, writing and citing authors, consider using gender neutral language. That is, language that does not gender people, attributes or behaviours. Pronoun use is also important (she, he, they). It is good practice to use terms like ‘they’ and ‘them’ unless the author or individual has made their gender or preferred pronouns clear in the text. It is also important to be critical of any source or text that makes reductive claims about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women.

In Indigenous Studies, you may see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors refer to ‘LGBTQIA+ mob’. LGBTQIA+ is an acronym standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Asexual. The ‘+’ extends the acronym to all people who identify as diverse in terms of their sex, gender or sexuality. Mob is an inclusive term that is interchangeable with ‘community’. Indigenous people, including those who are LGBTQIA+, have our own terms of identification coming from a diverse range of languages, communities, cultures and connections to place (Farrell, 2020). Some umbrella terms like Sistergirl and Brotherboy are in use nationally to refer to transgender women and men. They are also used by people of varying genders and sexualities because of their relational nature (Sullivan and Day 2019).

For more information on the topics above please refer to the following:

Carlson, B. Berglund, J., Harris, M. & Poata-Smith, E. (2014). Four scholars speak to navigating the complexities of naming in Indigenous Studies. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 43: 58–72. Access here: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/australian-journal-of-indigenous-education/article/four-scholars-speak-to-navigating-the-complexities-of-naming-in-indigenous-studies/6B16DAFC51EAD24DA0AAA339C7141DE7>

Day, M. (2020) Indigenist Origins: Institutionalizing Indigenous Queer and Trans Studies in Australia. *Trans Studies Quarterly*. 1 August 2020; 7 (3): 367–373. Access here: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article/7/3/367/166950/Indigenisat-OriginsInstitutionalizing-Indigenous>

Farrell, A. (2020). Identity and Place. *Archer*, no. 13. Access here: archermagazine.com.au/2020/01/archer-magazine-issue-13-the-first-nations-issue/

McGloin, C. & Carlson, B. (2013). Indigenous Studies and the politics of language. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 10: 1–10. Access here: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1337&context=jutlp>

O’Sullivan, S. (2019). Practice Futures for Indigenous Agency: Our Gaps, Our Leaps. In J. Higgs, S. Cork, D. Horsfall (Eds.). *Challenging future practice possibilities*, Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Brill-Sense Publishers.

Sullivan, C.T. & Day, M. (2019). Queer(y)ing Indigenous Australian higher education student spaces. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*. Access here: <http://bit.ly/32cZcft>