



Gulanga  
Program

## Gulanga Good Practice Guides

These guides provide information on topics that aim to assist organisations implement and embed good practice when working and engaging with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly within the ACT and region. Each guide provides a general overview, which we hope will generate change and discussion within a workplace. Links are provided at the end of each guide for further information and research. Feedback on the guides can be directed to [gulanga@actcoss.org.au](mailto:gulanga@actcoss.org.au) or by phone to 02 6202 7200.

# Preferences in terminology when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples

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*For the purpose of this guide, communications can include various mediums used for internal and public distribution such as: promotional materials, flyers, posters and products, website content, video and sound recordings, slide presentations, publications, reports and newsletters.*

It is important to note that preferences in terminology will vary across Australia for individuals, communities, and agencies. Furthermore, these preferences can change over time.

When seeking good practice for your communications, we suggest you discuss preferences with staff, clients, stakeholders, the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community and their agencies. You can also research other agencies that have provided guidelines around terminology. We have provided some links at the end of this guide, for further information and research.

What may have seemed acceptable terminology in the past, can be considered extremely offensive today. Terms such as half-caste, full-blood, natives, blacks, darkies, blackfellas, and other more offensive terms were often communicated in a disparaging and racist manner. For many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, offensive terms can cause reactions such as distress, anger and resentment. Those terms also contribute to

reinforcing negative attitudes from the wider population toward Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As with many cultures and societies around the world, some of those terms are used by the people themselves as a way of reclaiming or reappropriating them in a less disparaging manner. For example, Redfern All Blacks and Brisbane Natives are rugby league clubs founded by Aboriginal people.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

**‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ (adjective)** is a term extensively used, and has wide acceptance throughout Australia when referring to Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, and related topics.

**‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ (plural)** is a preferred term used by some, to refer to the many Aboriginal groups and Torres Strait Islander groups within Australia. This can also be applied when referring to other topics such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures. By doing so, you are referencing two culturess rather than a joint ‘culture’.

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**‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person’** is a term used when referring to a person of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

## Indigenous

**‘Indigenous’ (capitalised)** is a term extensively used throughout Australia when referring to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, and related topics.

Be aware that some, if not many, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are dissatisfied with the term ‘Indigenous’. Reasons may include:

- It can detract from the preferred identity of the individual, or group of people
- Although the term is used for inclusiveness, Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are dissimilar in many ways, such as their identity, culture, traditions, language, beliefs, ethnicity, issues, protocols, continuity of existence, and history before and after the settlement of other peoples

- It is a generic term and does not adequately describe Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples
- The term is merely used for convenience, to alleviate repeating 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander'.

Taking this into consideration, you may prefer to articulate either Aboriginal, or Torres Strait Islander, or both.

**'Indigenous Australians'** is another term used to describe the indigenous peoples of Australia. Acceptance of this term varies.

**'indigenous' (adjective, lower case)** can refer to anything native to a particular region or country, such as flora or fauna. It is also used internationally to describe all indigenous peoples of the world. It is not appropriate to use the term 'indigenous' in lower case when referring to Australia's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**'non-Indigenous'** is a term used in Australia when providing two perspectives, the Australian Indigenous peoples, and the rest of the Australian population. As previously stated, there is some dissatisfaction with the usage of the term 'Indigenous'. There is also some dissatisfaction from the rest of the population with being labelled 'non-Indigenous'. You may prefer to rephrase your communications.

## Aboriginal

**'Aboriginal' (adjective, capitalised)** is a term extensively used and widely accepted throughout Australia when referring to Aboriginal peoples and topics. Aboriginal peoples are the first peoples of mainland Australia and many of its islands such as Tasmania, Groote Eylandt, Hinchinbrook Island and Fraser Island.

**'Aboriginal' (noun, capitalised)** is less preferred today. As an example, you may prefer to say, 'Matthew is an Aboriginal person from Yass', rather than 'Matthew is an Aboriginal from Yass'. You may hear a person say, 'I am Aboriginal' (where the word 'Aboriginal' is used as an adjective), rather than 'I am an Aboriginal person'. This is a personal preference expressed by the individual.

Some government and non-government agencies have asserted a preference to use the term 'Aboriginal' only in their communications. Reasons may include:

- Aboriginal peoples' dissatisfaction with being labelled 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander'
- Recognition that their core service group is Aboriginal peoples

- Recognition that their core business and issues predominantly relate to Aboriginal peoples
- Recognition and respect for the traditional custodians of the land they work on.

Furthermore, there are some agencies that are named to reflect Aboriginal peoples as their core service group, such as the NSW Aboriginal Land Council which was established in the late 1970s to assist in the fight for land rights for the Aboriginal people in NSW. Some agencies are also named in Aboriginal language.

If you are specifically referring to Aboriginal peoples or topics, your communications should reflect this. For example, 'The Aboriginal art exhibition opens today' refers to an exhibition of Aboriginal art. It would be incorrect to state, 'The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art exhibition opens today', when there is no Torres Strait Islander art included in the exhibition.

**'Aboriginal peoples' (plural)** is a preferred term used by some, to refer to the many Aboriginal groups within Australia. It is estimated that prior to colonisation there were over 500 groups.

**'Aboriginal Australians'** is another term used to further describe the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Acceptance of this term varies.

**'non-Aboriginal'** is sometimes used when providing two perspectives, Aboriginal peoples, and the rest of the Australian population. There is some dissatisfaction from the rest of the population with being labelled 'non-Aboriginal'. You may prefer to rephrase your communications.

**'Aborigine' (capitalised) or 'aborigine' (lower case)** was used in Australia's recent history and is sometimes used by older Aboriginal persons who grew up in that era. This is now a lesser used term and not recommended. This may be due to the historical negative references associated with this term.

**'aboriginal' (adjective, lower case)** can describe any people living in any country at the earliest period and is not appropriate when referring to the Aboriginal peoples or topics today. Be aware there are some groups around the world who refer to themselves as 'aboriginal' or 'Aboriginal', such as in Canada and Taiwan.

**'part-Aboriginal' or 'half-Aboriginal'** is objectionable but more often considered offensive to an Aboriginal person. Many would say 'which half' or 'which part' of me/you is Aboriginal, and that they identify only as Aboriginal. We strongly discourage using these terms for your communications. An Aboriginal person may wish to acknowledge their blended heritage such as, 'I am part-Aboriginal and part-South Sea Islander'. This is a personal preference expressed by the individual. Your communications can be rephrased to include their

preference, such as, 'The exhibition will feature emerging artist, Tom Williams. Tom is of both Aboriginal and South Sea Islander descent.'

## Torres Strait Islander

**'Torres Strait Islander' (adjective, capitalised)** is the term extensively used throughout Australia when referring to Torres Strait Islander peoples and topics. Torres Strait Islander peoples are of Melanesian origin, and are the indigenous peoples of the Torres Strait Islands, located between Australia and Papua New Guinea. There are five traditional island clusters in the Torres Strait. More than half of the Torres Strait Islander peoples live on the mainland, with large populations residing in towns such as Cairns and Townsville.

Some government and non-government agencies have asserted a preference to use the term 'Torres Strait Islander' only. Reasons may include:

- Torres Strait Islander people's dissatisfaction with being labelled 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander'
- Recognition that their core service group is Torres Strait Islanders peoples
- Recognition that their core business and issues predominantly relate to Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Recognition and respect for the traditional custodians of the land they work on.

Furthermore, there are some agencies that are named to reflect Torres Strait Islander peoples as their core service group, such as the Torres Strait Regional Authority who has the responsibility for people in the Torres Strait region. Some agencies are named in Torres Strait Islander language.

If you are specifically referring to Torres Strait Islander peoples, your communications should reflect this. For example, 'The Torres Strait Islander dancers performed today', refers to a performance of Torres Strait Islander dance. It would be incorrect to state, 'The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers performed today', when there is no Aboriginal dance included in the performance.

**'TSI'** should not be used to describe Torres Strait Islander peoples and topics.

**'Islander(s)'** should not be used when referring to Torres Strait Islanders. This is also a generic term and does not adequately describe Torres Strait Islander peoples.

# First Australians, Australia's First Peoples and First Nations Australia

**'First Australians', 'Australia's First Peoples' and 'First Nations Australia'**

**(capitalised)**: these terms may be seen as growing in acceptance. You may wish to discuss preferences with staff, clients, stakeholders, the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community and their agencies in your region, to gauge general acceptance.

There are agencies in Australia that have been named accordingly, such as the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and the First Nations Australia Writers Network. You may also encounter usage of these terms in speeches such as a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country, media such as film (e.g. The First Australians) and within email acknowledgements.

## First Nations or First Peoples

**'First Nations' or 'First Peoples' (capitalised)** can refer to the peoples or nations of people who were there from the beginning, prior to the settlement of other peoples or nations. These terms have some general acceptance but can also be perceived as generic or not adequately describing the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

The term 'First Nations' is also used in Canada when referring to descendants of the original inhabitants of Canada such as the Mohawk and Cree.

## Acronyms or abbreviations

It is acceptable to use abbreviations in your communications when they form part of an acronym, a web address or an organisation (e.g. AIATSIS, NAIDOC, [www.atsi.org.au](http://www.atsi.org.au)).

Using an acronym or abbreviation to describe a race of people can be offensive and inappropriate.

Using abbreviations such as 'ATSI', 'AbI' or 'TSI' in communications such as tables, charts or surveys because you have limited space to insert 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' or 'Indigenous' is not advisable. We strongly suggest you consider reformatting and do not use abbreviations or acronyms.

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## Further information and research

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: Indigenous Australians - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

[www.aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/indigenous-australians-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/indigenous-australians-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people)

Creative Spirits: How to Name Aboriginal People

[www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/how-to-name-aboriginal-people](http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/how-to-name-aboriginal-people)

NSW Health: Communicating Positively, A Guide to Appropriate Aboriginal Terminology

[www.health.nsw.gov.au/aboriginal/Publications/pub-terminology.pdf](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/aboriginal/Publications/pub-terminology.pdf)

QLD Health: Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology

[www.health.qld.gov.au/atsihealth/documents/terminology.pdf](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/atsihealth/documents/terminology.pdf)

Torres Strait Regional Authority: The Torres Strait - Community Profiles

[www.tsra.gov.au](http://www.tsra.gov.au)