

12 Ways To Better Choose Our Words When We Write About Indigenous Peoples

The process of de-colonization is long and on-going.

Language is one of the many ways that has been used to oppress Indigenous Peoples. By being aware of the ways in which implied colonialism lives in language, you can re-frame the narrative and de-colonize your words.

This guide is not intended to be a deep dive into the correct language and terms to use when writing about Indigenous Peoples; the authority on that topic is *Elements of Indigenous Style*, by *Gregory Younging*, published by *Brush Education*.

This guide is meant to help writers make better choices, and to equip them with a basic understanding on how not to repeat historically inaccurate terms, break Indigenous Protocols, or use offensive language.

1. Avoid using the past tense when you write about Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous Peoples are not a historical phenomenon; they have not been assimilated into Canadian culture and they have not lost their own rich, distinct cultures. Indigenous Peoples are *diverse, authentic, empowered and current*. Avoid the past tense: “they practiced ceremonies”. Instead, use the present tense: “they practice Ceremonies”.

2. Do not use language which props up the colonial idea that Indigenous Peoples are incapable of taking care of things themselves.

This manifests itself in language which implies that Indigenous Peoples had no agency. Avoid statements like “numbered treaties gave Canada’s First Nations reserves, education and health care”. Instead, write that “First Nations in Canada negotiated the numbered treaties to secure reserves, education and health care”.

3. Do not use the possessive when talking about the Indigenous Peoples who live in a country.

Canada doesn’t “own” the First Nations, Métis or Inuit Peoples who live in what is now called Canada. Avoid the phrase “Canada’s First Nations”. Instead, use “Indigenous People in Canada”, or “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples in Canada”.

4. Do not whitewash Indigenous Peoples out of history.

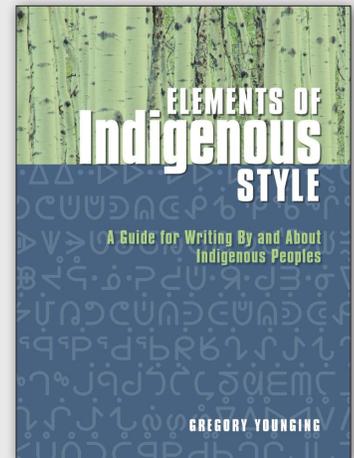
Be mindful of phrasing. The sentence “After a hike around Jasper, check out the Miette Hot Springs which have been around since the early 1900’s” doesn’t acknowledge that the hot springs have been an important site for the Indigenous Peoples of the area for thousands of years.

To place your work in context, look at the following text which acknowledges the history of the Indigenous Peoples in the area, and the colonial practice of removing them from their land. “The aquacourt at the Miette Hot Springs and road access were built in the 1930’s, however — prior to this — the springs were used by Indigenous Peoples as a source of healing and spirituality, and the land was an abundant area for hunting and gathering food. Nations including the Stoney First Nation and Keeseekoowenin Ojibwa were ousted from the area in the late 1880’s.”¹

5. Think about Indigenous Knowledge as holding its own copyright.

Give Oral Traditions and Traditional Knowledge the same weight and respect as printed texts. You need to ask for permission before reprinting Oral Traditions and Traditional Knowledge, exactly as you would with written texts.

¹<https://advantagegrp.ca/case-studies/2017/12/7/miette-hot-springs>



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Gregory Younging

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6. Be prepared for consultation to take time.

Be aware that no one person is able to give permission; if copyright is held by a Nation, then there needs to be a proper consultation practice about sharing.

7. Collaborate and seek permission when writing about Traditional Knowledge.

If you're writing about Indigenous People then contact them and discuss what you'd like to do. Be aware that Indigenous Protocols — which are more formal than "customs" — need to be adhered to, and often it may not be appropriate to write about matters which have sacred significance, or perhaps contain stories which may only be told by women, men, or at a particular time of the year.

8. Do not repeat inaccurate and offensive material.

Check your source material; if you're quoting or using books written by non-Indigenous People as a reference point, it's possible that you will be repeating inaccurate, possibly offensive accounts. It's also possible that stories and Traditional Knowledge in these books were printed without permission.

9. Always choose Indigenous Style over Canadian Press style.

Capitalization may not be where you'd expect to see it. Gregory Younging describes this as a "deliberate decision that redresses mainstream society's history of regarding Indigenous Peoples as having no legitimate national identities; government, social, spiritual or religious institutions; or collective rights." Instead of using Canadian Press style, use Indigenous style:

- ▶ Aboriginal
- ▶ First Nations
- ▶ Indigenous
- ▶ Elder
- ▶ Longhouse
- ▶ Clan
- ▶ Protocols
- ▶ Traditional Knowledge
- ▶ Indigenous Right
- ▶ Treaty Right

10. Respect Elders.

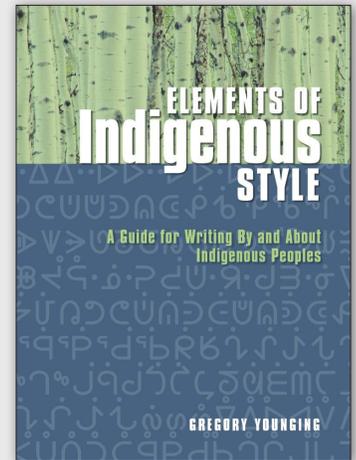
Be aware of the important role of Elders within Indigenous societies and their role as holders of Traditional Knowledge and as community advisors.

11. Recognize and respect distinct and diverse Indigenous Peoples.

The Indigenous population in Canada is made up of Inuit, Métis, and some 634 different First Nations. Each has their own distinct Traditional Knowledge, culture and heritage. Avoid writing about 'First Nations' as though they are a homogenous group; instead, be specific and ask for people's preferred self-declaration. If no self-declaration has been made, try to identify the name of their community or nation. If it is still not known, then use Indigenous group names, such as First Nation, Métis or Inuit.

12. Understand Indigenous cultures do not need to be static to be authentic.

Indigenous Peoples are currently engaged in a period of cultural reclamation and rejuvenation. Just because someone doesn't live in a teepee, doesn't mean that they are not an authentic Indigenous person. Indigenous cultures are dynamic and undergo natural change and adaptation, just like other cultures.



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