



**Girra Maa**  
Indigenous Health Discipline  
Graduate School of Health  
University of Technology Sydney

**Dr Megan Williams**  
Megan.Williams@uts.edu.au  
M. +61 (0) 400 073 358  
Twitter: @MegBastard  
Insta: @girramaa

PO Box 123  
Broadway  
NSW 2007 Australia  
www.uts.edu.au

UTS CRICOS PROVIDER CODE 00099F

## Top 10 Tips for Terminology

One of the things we hear a lot is that people are concerned about using the wrong terminology or language, in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and culture.

There is so much diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and culture, and context, that there may not be one right way to use particular terms and language. Sometimes it is simply individual preference by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about which terms they choose to use.

As a non-Indigenous person, building understanding and confidence about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture and terminology is, and will always be, a lifelong journey. Ultimately, it is always about listening well, building respect and being respectful.

There are many wonderful resources to assist and you will see many of these referenced in footnotes throughout this resource, and we encourage you to do your own research too. This 'Top 10 Tips' resource gives a small insight into various terminology in use currently, how use of terminology may evolve over time, and what to think about when choosing terminology.

Girra Maa has a range of resources on our website to support learning, understanding and engagement.

***Indigenous people are not a homogeneous group and our views reflect this diversity.***

Celeste Liddle, Arrernte woman and social commentator<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Issues. An Introductory Resource for the Media. 2018, p.8, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58d105c9db29d660e47bb7d4/t/5b45ca1d575d1f79de7d9032/1531300386323/Reporting+on+Aboriginal+and+Torres+Strait+Islander+Peoples+and+Issues+Handbook+v2.pdf>

## Top 10 Tips for Terminology

The term...	What to think about...
What does Aboriginality mean?	Aboriginality is a holistic term that includes a combination of identity, language, cultural heritage, spirituality and an intrinsic connection with the land, sky and waterways of this country now known as Australia. <sup>2</sup>
Who can identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander? And how?	<p>Three criteria are used by community and government agencies as confirming Aboriginality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent</li> <li>- identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person</li> <li>- being accepted as such by the community in which you live, or formerly lived<sup>3</sup></li> </ul> <p>It is also important to highlight that there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who do not identify through this process for a variety of reasons.<sup>4</sup> These reasons can be deeply personal and therefore it is inappropriate to ask questions.</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may also identify themselves is by using the term, Traditional Owner, for example, Worimi Traditional Owner.</p> <p>It is not acceptable to make assumptions about whether someone is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander based on their skin colour or appearance in any way. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, individually and collectively, define themselves by their connection to culture and relationships, not by skin colour.<sup>5</sup></p>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.miromaa.org.au/home/about-us.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/finding-your-family/before-you-start/proof-aboriginality>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/research-and-evaluation/AA\\_SelfIdentification6\\_17Feb16.pdf](https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/research-and-evaluation/AA_SelfIdentification6_17Feb16.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal\\_and\\_Torres\\_Strait\\_Islander\\_Cultural\\_Capability\\_Respectful\\_Language\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal_and_Torres_Strait_Islander_Cultural_Capability_Respectful_Language_Guide.pdf)

	You might also like to explore UTS' eligibility criteria for identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander with regard to application for <a href="#">UTS Council Indigenous Scholarship</a> .
When should I use capitalisation?	Always capitalise key concepts and nouns, such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, Indigenous, Mob and Country.
When is it ok to use abbreviations, such as ATSI?	<p>For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there is never a time that is “ok” to abbreviate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander – including in charts, graphs and tables. This is because abbreviating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples perpetuates the invisibility, denial of personhood and marginalisation experienced through colonialism and is seen as offensive.</p> <p>Just as “Everyone knows that it’s not OK to abbreviate other nationalities. We wouldn’t call Japanese people ‘Japs’ but for some reason Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gets abbreviated because it’s long and ‘inconvenient’ (Anonymous).<sup>6</sup> Hence we ask you to reformat your document or chart so that you can refer to our peoples as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.<sup>7</sup></p> <p>It is acceptable to use other abbreviations in your communications when they have already been named in full and then form part of an acronym, or in a web address or an organisation - for instance e.g. AIATSIS, NAIDOC, www.atsi.org.au.<sup>8</sup></p>
When is the term ‘Indigenous’ used, including in the Australian context, and why?	The term Indigenous tends to be used when referring to First Nations Peoples internationally e.g. Indigenous People(s). From a national context, the term Indigenous is used when speaking about both Aboriginal <i>and</i> Torres Strait Islands peoples within Australia. <sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal\\_and\\_Torres\\_Strait\\_Islander\\_Cultural\\_Capability\\_Respectful\\_Language\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal_and_Torres_Strait_Islander_Cultural_Capability_Respectful_Language_Guide.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/gulanga-good-practice-guide-preferences-terminology-referring-to-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-peoples.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/gulanga-good-practice-guide-preferences-terminology-referring-to-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-peoples.pdf> (p.6).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.miromaa.org.au/our-way/aboriginal-terminology.html>

	<p>The word Indigenous is not used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for a range of reasons including that it risks reducing the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures into one homogenous group.</p> <p>Indigenous always has a capital I. Many newspapers and also spellcheck software use lower-case “i” and it was common in previous decades. Even if you see others use lower case, make sure you capitalise it as it is a proper noun.</p> <p>It is important to be respectful of the preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families, or communities, and allow them to define their name. For more information about use of language and many other dimensions about Aboriginality, go to <a href="#">Common Ground</a> and <a href="#">Miromaa</a>.</p>
<p>Which of these terms should non-Indigenous people use?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal</li> <li>• Aborigine</li> <li>• Aboriginal person</li> <li>• Aboriginal peoples</li> <li>• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples</li> </ul>	<p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, generally prefer these phrases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aboriginal person, people or peoples</li> <li>- Torres Strait Islander person, people or peoples</li> <li>- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, people or peoples.</li> </ul> <p>The word ‘people’ is plural, but ‘peoples’ is also often used. The use of ‘peoples’ acknowledges that there are distinct and unique cultures and communities and language groups, each with spiritual connections to land, differing environmental influences, families and kinship networks. Saying peoples emphasises this diversity.<sup>10</sup> It is not always needed, and is often used when referring to the general Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population very broadly.</p> <p>The words ‘Aborigine’ or ‘Aboriginal’ as a noun are both offensive to many Aboriginal people, because they negative colonial connotations and legal definitions that homogenised and marginalised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>11</sup></p>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal\\_and\\_Torres\\_Strait\\_Islander\\_Cultural\\_Capability\\_Respectful\\_Language\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal_and_Torres_Strait_Islander_Cultural_Capability_Respectful_Language_Guide.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/gulanga-good-practice-guide-preferences-terminology-referring-to-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-peoples.pdf>

	<p><i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a right to determine their own individual cultures and identities and how these are referred to. As such, there is the sense that overarching titles oversimplify the hundreds of nations that exist within Australia. This is why referring to specific language/clan/nations is often preferred.<sup>12</sup></i></p>
<p>What is the difference between:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Welcome to Country’ and,</li> <li>• ‘Acknowledgement of Country’?</li> </ul> <p>What is the significance of these protocols?</p>	<p>A <i>Welcome to Country</i> is only delivered by Traditional Owners of a particular place, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been given permission from Traditional Owners to welcome visitors to that Country. Protocols for welcoming visitors onto Country have been in place for thousands of years.</p> <p>An <i>Acknowledgement of Country</i> is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for Traditional Owners and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country. It can be given by both non-Indigenous people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.</p> <p>See <a href="#">UTS’ guiding principles</a> with regard to Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country. These guidelines have been developed with respect to agreed cultural protocols with the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation for the City Campus, and the Boorooberongal People of the Dharug Nation for the UTS Research Facility.<sup>13</sup></p> <p>Read the words of Wurundjeri Elder, Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin, as she describes the <a href="#">importance of Welcome to Country</a> to her (via Miromaa Aboriginal Language and Technology Centre NSW website).</p> <p>You might like to also see <a href="#">UTS’ Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, Acknowledgement of Country<sup>14</sup> to the Eora nation here.</a></p>

<sup>12</sup> Reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Issues. An Introductory Resource for the Media. 2018, p.4. Retrieved from: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58d105c9db29d660e47bb7d4/t/5b45ca1d575d1f79de7d9032/1531300386323/Reporting+on+Aboriginal+and+Torres+Strait+Islander+Peoples+and+Issues\\_Handbook+v2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58d105c9db29d660e47bb7d4/t/5b45ca1d575d1f79de7d9032/1531300386323/Reporting+on+Aboriginal+and+Torres+Strait+Islander+Peoples+and+Issues_Handbook+v2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Map: Locations of Aboriginal groups in the Sydney area, based on a map by J Goodrum in Mulvaney, D J and White, Peter, 1987, Australians to 1788, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney, p. 345., available at <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/aboriginal-people-and-place/>

<sup>14</sup> Remember to capitalise ‘Country’ to demonstrate that Country is a living being as well as a concept for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

	<p>Go to <a href="#">Reconciliation Australia</a> to learn more about these ancient protocols and why they remain important today.</p>
<p>Is Country and nation the same thing?</p>	<p>Miromaa notes that Country and nation are terms meaning the area of land, river and sea that is the traditional land of each Aboriginal language group or community.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes the terms are used slightly differently.</p> <p>The term nation tends to refer to the physical area or boundaries that define a people’s geographic location – soft boundaries negotiated with neighbours depending on needs – but largely marked by rivers, mountains, seas and other significant features.</p> <p>Being on Country tends to take on a larger, holistic description to links people, culture, nature, land, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods, medicines, stories and sacred places. Custodial responsibilities to care for Country are vital and may determine who can speak for particular Country.<sup>16</sup></p>
<p>Do I use ‘tribe’, ‘nation’, ‘clan’ or ‘Mob’?</p>	<p>Use the term nation to refer to a culturally distinct group of people from a culturally defined areas of land e.g. Eora nation, or Wiradjuri nation or Ngarrindjeri nation.<sup>17</sup></p> <p>There are differing perspectives on using ‘Mob’ if you are non-Indigenous.</p> <p><i>‘Mob is mostly a term used by and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but depending on the circumstances, it’s acceptable and even appreciated when non-Indigenous people ask an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person ‘who is your mob?’<sup>18</sup></i></p>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.miromaa.org.au/our-way/aboriginal-terminology.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-country>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/media/appropriate-terminology-for-aboriginal-topics>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal\\_and\\_Torres\\_Strait\\_Islander\\_Cultural\\_Capability\\_Respectful\\_Language\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.cofc.com.au/Media/Aboriginal_and_Torres_Strait_Islander_Cultural_Capability_Respectful_Language_Guide.pdf) (p.12).

	<p>Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not consider it acceptable for non-Aboriginal people to use Mob, unless it is already known to be acceptable to the Aboriginal people involved.<sup>19</sup> So if you don't know, look, listen and learn – or ask.</p> <p>'Tribe' is an English word that tends to impart Western preconceptions developed from colonial experiences and is therefore not encouraged, unless the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people you are among use it.<sup>20</sup></p> <p>Use of the word 'clan' appears to be acceptable by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and not others. On the one hand, 'clan' is an anthropological term that reflects Western paradigms, and therefore not appropriate to use by non-Aboriginal people.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the term clan is used by Aboriginal scholars to describe how nations, and clans and language groups fit together, such as in <a href="#">Barani, Sydney's Aboriginal History</a> on the City of Sydney website.<sup>22</sup></p>
<p>What's the difference between self-determination and sovereignty?</p>	<p>Sovereignty is about legal recognition of ownership of land and territory. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have never ceded their sovereignty over Australia.<sup>23</sup></p> <p>Implicit in sovereignty is the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-govern. This is stated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>24</sup> to which Australia is party.</p> <p>Self-determination is a more agile form of sovereignty and grew from the 1960s and 1970s resistance and realisation of inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Self-determination is about effective participation and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all decision-making that affects them.</p>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.miromaa.org.au/our-way/aboriginal-terminology.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/media/appropriate-terminology-for-aboriginal-topics>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/media/appropriate-terminology-for-aboriginal-topics>

<sup>22</sup> Anita Heiss & Melodie-Jane Gibson. Barani. Sydney's Aboriginal History. Retrieved from: <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/aboriginal-people-and-place/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.miromaa.org.au/our-way/aboriginal-terminology.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>

	<p>An early manifestation of self-determination for Indigenous Australians was the establishment of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations that are Aboriginal led, providing culturally safe and locally relevant services and support for Aboriginal families and communities. <sup>25</sup></p>
--	--

---

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.naccho.org.au/>