



Indigenous Terminology in Canada - a Quick Guide

According to Statistics Canada's 2016 Census, 1,673,780 people or 4.9% of the population identify as Aboriginal. Of those, the majority claim a single Aboriginal identity: 58.4% as First Nations people, 35.1% as Métis and 3.9% as Inuit.

Language is constantly developing to reflect Canadians' changing attitudes about our history and the First Peoples of the land. Many terms used to identify Indigenous Canadians are prime examples of language that is now considered offensive, yet these terms persist. Here is a review of current terminology that does not risk offence.

“First Nations”

In the 1970s “First Nations” was adopted to replace “Indian” to identify Indigenous peoples who are not Inuit or Métis. European explorers' erroneous identification of the people of the Americas as “Indians” persists in the updated 1985 version of the “Indian Act” of 1876, even though “Indian” is now considered a slur when used by people who are not Indigenous. “Indian” should be avoided unless it relates to the Indian Act (R.S.C., 1985, c. I-5) and related legal discussions.

“Inuit”

The First Peoples of Northern Canada residing in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Yukon, Northern Labrador, and Northern Quebec, are known as the Inuit. The word derives from the **Inuktitut** language and directly translates to “the people”. The word “Eskimo” was previously used to refer to the Indigenous People of the North, however, that word is now considered derogatory because it was a colonial term that did not come from the Inuit People. “Inuit” was adopted at the first International Circumpolar Conference in 1970.

“Métis”

The Métis were known as “the forgotten people” as they were not fully recognized until the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution in 1982. According to the [Metis Nation](#), the Métis People were formed from the “mixed offspring” of European fur traders from The Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company and First Nations women. The Métis formed the backbone of the fur trade economy and evolved into a distinct people and nation on the plains of what is today western Canada.



In 2002, The Métis National Council General Assembly adopted the following “National Definition”: *“Métis” means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation.*”

Aboriginal Peoples/First Peoples/Indigenous Peoples

These are “umbrella” terms used to collectively recognize the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada. The use of “Aboriginal” is opposed by more than 40 First Nations as it is an English word and should be avoided. As noted above, Statistics Canada continues to use “Aboriginal”, however “Indigenous” and “First Nations” are increasingly preferred as general terms. Indigenous is capitalized to indicate respect in the way that English and French are capitalized. “Native Canadians” has colonial origins and is no longer an accepted term. It is considered offensive if used by those who do not self-identify as Native.

In Conclusion

Choosing the most appropriate and accurate language to describe Indigenous Canadians may seem somewhat overwhelming at first, but the use of inclusive terminology is an important step toward healing and reconciliation. The Federal Government may be slow to drop outdated and offensive usage, but this is an area within which the public can show the way forward.

