

Aboriginal Terms (Teacher Background Notes)

When talking with or about Aboriginal peoples, it is important to use terms that are respectful. It is also important that students understand which terms are respectful.

In the past, many different terms have been used to refer to Aboriginal peoples. The term "Indian," for example, is a famous misnomer, first used by Christopher Columbus to refer to the people of the Americas he encountered when he mistakenly thought he had crossed the Indian Ocean.

The following points provide guidance to the use of terms related to Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

- The three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada are referred to as the "First Nations," the "Inuit," and the "Métis," as recognized by the Constitution of 1982.
- Aboriginal peoples often identify themselves according to their language (e.g., Cree, Ojibway, Saulteaux, Dakota, Dene, Oji-Cree, Mitchif. . .).
- The name "Indian" is still used in certain contexts to refer to members of First Nations groups, because it has legal connotations and definitions in the treaties, in federal law, and in the recognition of native rights by the government (e.g., the federal Indian Act, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. . .).
- In Manitoba, the term "First Nation" is generally used instead of "Indian," as indicated by the term "Assembly of First Nations."
- The term "North American Indian" is still used in the United States; lands set aside for Aboriginal peoples in that country are called "Indian Reservations."
- Although the term "reserve" has been used to refer to lands set aside for First Nations peoples in Canada, the term is being used less frequently now, and is replaced by the name of the community (e.g., Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. . .). A list of every First Nation in Canada may be found at the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs website, at http://sdiproduct2.inac.gc.ca/FNProfiles/FNProfiles_Search.asp?Search=FN.
- Students may encounter the term "tribe" in some primary sources; the preferred term today is "First Nation," as "tribe" has come to have some pejorative connotations. "Tribe" is more closely associated with Tribal Councils, established to lobby for and/or deliver services to First Nation bands.
- "Band" is a legal term used in the Indian Act and is synonymous with tribe, which is more often used in the United States.
- The Métis people were not officially recognized as an Aboriginal people until 1982.
- In some primary sources, students may come across the word "half-breed" to refer to the Métis people. This term is no longer used because of its negative connotations.
- Some primary sources refer to the Inuit people by the term "Eskimo"; this term is still used in the United States to refer to the Aboriginal peoples of Alaska. However, this name is no longer used in Canada: it was a descriptor given to the Inuit by non-Aboriginal explorers.