

Demonstrating inclusive and respectful language

Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential component of reconciliation. The ways we *speak* about reconciliation are just as important as the ways we *act*. Language is itself active, and can impact on attitudes, understandings and relationships in a very real and active sense.

While they are guidelines only, below are some recommendations for using respectful and inclusive language and terminology throughout your RAP and other communications.

Seek guidance

Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities across Australia, you should always seek advice from your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders regarding preferences and protocols around terminology.

Please consider this resource alongside guidance from your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.

Referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Using 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is most often considered best practice.

- 'Aboriginal' alone is not inclusive of the diversity of cultures and identities across Australia, for which reason it should be accompanied by 'peoples' in the plural.
- Similarly, as a stand-alone term, 'Aboriginal' is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples, and reference to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be spelt out where necessary.
- Never abbreviate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 'ATSI' or 'A&TSI.'

First Nations and First Peoples

Other pluralised terms such as 'First Nations' or 'Australia's First Peoples' are also acceptable language, and respectfully encompass the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identities.

Acknowledging diversity

Pluralisation should extend to generalised reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'histories,' 'perspectives,' 'ways of being,' 'contributions,' and so forth. This acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not homogenous.

Indigenous

In some parts of the country, the term 'Indigenous' can be considered offensive. That is, it has scientific connotations that have been used historically to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of the 'flora/fauna' rather than the human population of Australia. It can be seen as a problematically universalising or homogenising label for what are highly diverse identities.

An exception for the term 'Indigenous' is considered in some situations, for example:

- If an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or organisation prefers and/or has approved the word 'Indigenous' to be used
- If an organisation has appropriately referred to a program or job title (e.g. "Indigenous Programs Unit" or "Indigenous Programs Manager")
- If the word 'Indigenous' has been appropriately embedded into an organisational policy e.g. Federal or State Governments, United Nations
- If referring to non-Indigenous (non-Aboriginal or non-Torres Strait Islander) Australians. Terms such as 'other Australians' or 'the wider community' may also be acceptable in this regard.

Unacceptable terms

Assimilationist terms such as 'full-blood,' 'half-caste' and 'quarter-caste' are extremely offensive and should never be used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Terms to avoid

Ensure that the following terms are avoided when describing/referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as they can perpetuate negative stereotypes:

- disadvantaged
- Aborigines
- native/native Australians
- lost (e.g. lost language, cultures).

Showing respect

Capitalisation

As capitalisation demonstrates respect, 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' should always be capitalised. Capitalisation conventions are often also considered appropriate to extend to terms such as:

- First Peoples/Nations/Australians
- Indigenous (if it is used at all)
- Elders
- Traditional Owners/Custodians
- Country (and corresponding terms such as 'Land,' when it is used in place of 'Country'), as well as the names of particular Language Groups or geo-cultural communities
- Acknowledgement of Country, Welcome to Country, and the names of other cultural practices (particularly if the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander meanings or perspectives behind the words used to describe the practices – such as 'acknowledge' or 'welcome' – may be distinct to their English definitions or connotations).

Do not capitalise the term ‘reconciliation,’ unless referring to the name of Reconciliation Australia, or the name of a formal program or document such as your Reconciliation Action Plan.

Avoiding deficit language

Acknowledging and addressing the historical – and often intergenerational – injustices and inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since colonisation is a critical component of reconciliation.

Nevertheless, it is simultaneously imperative to acknowledge the strengths and resilience shown by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and communities in the face of discrimination, and to celebrate the continued significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *contributions* in shaping a shared sense of national unity and identity.

It is important to draw on empowering, strengths-based language, and to be careful not to perpetuate patronising or paternalistic rhetoric.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures have survived across the Australian continent for tens of thousands of years and, as such, are not ‘in need’ of being ‘rescued’ or ‘saved.’

For example, there’s a difference between a more deficit approach such as “*helping disadvantaged* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students,” and a more strengths-based alternative such as “*providing meaningful opportunities* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students *to achieve at their full potential.*”

Avoiding language that divides

Reconciliation is about working *with* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their strengths, not doing things *for* them or *to* them.

Reconciliation processes and aspirations should not be described through dichotomous ‘us’ and ‘them’ language, but instead concentrate on promoting mutually respectful and genuine two-way relationships of shared significance.

Closing the gap

Use of the term ‘Closing the Gap’

The term ‘Closing the Gap’, is used frequently without much consideration. It is important to make the distinctions between the terms ‘closing the gap’ and the ‘Close the Gap’ campaign.

Closing the Gap: is a government strategy that aims to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement, and employment outcomes.

Close the Gap: Australia’s peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous health bodies, health professional bodies and human rights organisations operate the Close the Gap Campaign. The Campaign’s goal is to raise the health and life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to that of the non-Indigenous population within a generation: to close the gap by 2030. It aims to do this through the implementation of a human rights based approach set out by the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#).

Organisations that refer to this term, should briefly explain what role their organisation plays in Closing the Gap. Whether it be health, early childhood development, life expectancy, education, etc., it is important to specify how the organisation is/will be contributing to this initiative.

Something not clear?

Check with the RAP team

The above is a guide only and should not replace the advice from your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. If, after consultations you find a difference in preferred terminology from the recommendations above, please contact us at rap.team@reconciliation.org.au before submitting your RAP.