



Guide – Truth-telling: Ways for Everyone to Participate

About this guide

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have tirelessly advocated for truth-telling as a crucial step on Australia's path to reconciliation. While truth-telling should always be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the actions and attitudes of non-Indigenous people have an important part to play.

'As a non-Indigenous person, it's very clear that it is our role to listen, not necessarily to solve or contribute unless that's asked for. But we are there to listen and action information that is given to us.'

This raises questions about how non-Indigenous people can best support the process:

What are the appropriate and respectful ways to be involved?

When should you step up or step back?

How can you turn truth-telling into meaningful action?

This guide offers a starting point for non-Indigenous community members who are keen to contribute to Australia's truth-telling journey. It draws on research commissioned by Reconciliation Australia which you can read in full [here](#). All unattributed quotes in this document come from that research.

What is truth-telling?

Truth-telling covers a diverse range of activities that engage with a fuller account of Australia's history and its ongoing impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

While truth-telling deals with colonial conflict, massacres and dispossession, it also promotes the strength, contributions and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

At a state, territory or national level it includes processes involving official apologies, inquiries and commissions, memorials, ceremonies and major arts and cultural projects. At the local level, communities can work together in a range of creative ways to tell a fuller history of that place, including through events, publications, renaming, signage, statues and public art.

Effective truth-telling:

- Is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities
- Is a shared responsibility of First Nations and non-Indigenous people
- Recognises the ongoing impacts of the past on First Nations peoples' lives today
- Ensures safety and prevents retraumatisation
- Prioritises trust building not speed
- Focuses on the process – constructive engagement rather than predetermined outcomes
- Is strengths focused, avoiding deficit language and negative stereotypes
- Is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event
- Aims to achieve change and improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Creates greater understanding, respect and connection within our communities.

Truth-telling

Truth-acting

Truth-listening

When thinking about the role of non-Indigenous people in the truth-telling process, it can help to break that process down into steps such as truth-telling, truth-listening and truth-acting.





Before you begin

Before you reach out to engage in any truth-telling process you will find it useful to:

Research and learn about the pre and post colonisation history of Australia. This will give important context to the specific history of your local community. Some good places to start are:

- Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia, 1788 to 1930 [map](#)
- Bringing Them Home, Stories of the Stolen Generations [here](#)
- History of truth-telling in Australia, ANTAR [website](#)
- Understanding Intergenerational Trauma, Healing Foundation [website](#)
- SBS On Demand – [Truth-telling collection](#)
- Curate a reading list, see [Magabala Books](#) or the [ANTAR shop](#)
- Whose Country do you live and work on? See [AIATSIS map](#).

Investigate the history of your local area. You can:

- Check your local government website. If the local history section does not include First Nations perspectives, ask your local council why.
- Visit your local museum, cultural centre, library, or historical society.
- Search online for information about the Traditional Owners of the land on which you live.

If you want to initiate/support a truth-telling process in your local area, your first step is to find out who the First Nations leaders and cultural authorities are for the Country you are on and talk to them.

A good place to start is to ask your:

- Local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Corporation
- Local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Land Council or Native Title body
- Local First Nations health and legal services
- Local government
- Local reconciliation group.



Truth-telling

A core principle of truth-telling is that it should be primarily led by First Nations peoples. This means the perspectives of First Nations peoples are prioritised and protected at every step of the process. First Nations peoples decide what history is shared, where, how and by whom.

The role of non-Indigenous people is to support the truth-tellers to deliver their knowledge and experiences in whatever way is helpful to them and their truth-telling aspirations.

You can ask if it would be helpful for you to:

- Help fund it as an individual or sponsor it as a business – one of the biggest obstacles to truth-telling initiatives getting off the ground is lack of material resources.
- Support logistics of planning and implementation – it can be helpful to let the organisers know what skills, time and resources you have to offer so they know they can draw on you as needed.
- Assist with sharing invitations/information, given to you by the organisers, with your networks. It can be helpful to encourage others to get involved, especially if they are unsure about how or whether to participate.

‘We say our truth... It’s hard for an Aboriginal person when everybody is putting their perceptions and discourse on to us.’



Truth-listening

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples report that how non-Indigenous people respond to truth-telling has a major impact on their willingness to share. Deep listening and empathy are essential to developing respectful relationships and trust in an ongoing process.

Be a safe audience

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples report that a significant barrier to participation in truth-telling is fear of how non-Indigenous people will respond.

You might hear things that:

- are distressing
- don't match what you have previously been taught
- challenge your beliefs.

If what you are hearing is distressing or uncomfortable, know that is likely to be more so for the truth-tellers, for whom that history is deeply personal.

Listen deeply

Deep listening is listening to hear, not to respond. It is quiet contemplation. When First Nations peoples share their histories, they are not simply conveying a list of facts, they are inviting you to understand their experience of that history and its impact on their lives.

Listening deeply is critical to fully appreciating the significance of what is being shared and allowing it to change you. It also shows respect for the intellectual and emotional labour of the truth-tellers.

A good truth-listener puts the wellbeing and emotional safety of the truth-teller first by:

- sitting with their own emotional and intellectual discomfort
- avoiding burdening truth-tellers with their own distress
- supporting other non-Indigenous listeners to manage their discomfort.

'As non-Indigenous people we need to have humility and understanding and openness and be in that discomfort to learn.'



Truth-acting

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples emphasise that the efforts of First Nations peoples to share the truth should generate action that advances justice and reconciliation.

Non-Indigenous people can help turn truth into action by:

Amplifying the truth you have been told

- Equip yourself with the facts
- Share the human impact of the history you have learned
- Speak up and correct misconceptions when you hear them
- Actively support and promote practical actions led by First Nations peoples.

When speaking up, be conscious to always use language that honours the strength and dignity of First Nations peoples. It is important to be careful not to perpetuate patronising or paternalistic stereotypes and ways of speaking.

For example, many standard descriptions of historical events, such as the 'discovery' of Australia, reinforce misperceptions that these lands did not have distinct nations nor sophisticated governance and that history only begins at the start of European settlement.

Making it personal

Explore your own family history in the context of what you now know was happening at the time and tell that story. Check out these examples of courageous truth-telling by non-Indigenous people about their own heritage:

- [Sam Carmody, ABC journalist](#)
- [Peter Sharp, descendant of Sir Alfred Deakin](#)
- [The Wyatt Trust](#)

'There needs to be significant energy into what comes as a result of understanding, rather than just sitting back.'

Taking action for change

You can use your improved understanding from truth-telling to:

- Critically examine the practices, processes and assumptions in your workplaces, families, and communities and think about how they impact/include First Nations peoples.
- Think about what you can do to support change to the status quo and use the power you have to make this happen. Check out the [story of Merri-bek City Council](#) where a local community worked together to make important change.

Aligning your actions

Your efforts for change will deliver maximum benefit if you first listen carefully to, and align your actions with, the aspirations of First Nations peoples. Avoid jumping to solutions or trying to 'fix' things before finding out what First Nations peoples want you to do. First Nations peoples understand their own lives and are best placed to lead the decision-making – self-determining their own futures.

You can help ensure your actions are aligned by:

- supporting any calls to action from the truth-telling process
- paying attention to policy developments at all tiers of government and amplifying and advocating for what First Nations peoples say their communities want
- connecting with Elders
- reading plans and strategies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- attending local First Nations events such as during NAIDOC week
- looking to what community leaders are saying about current issues.



reconciliation.org.au/truth-telling

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