



Charles Sturt  
University

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# Terminology Guide

The Wiradjuri phrase *yindyamarra winhanganha* means the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in. This ethos rests at the foundation of Charles Sturt University and shapes this Terminology Guide. It is hoped that this Guide can support you in exploring and developing the strong and respectful relationships that rest at the roots of knowledge, and that it fosters your passion and curiosity.

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# Introduction

The language that we use and how we use it matters. The way we communicate holds power and carries weight. It can oppress or empower, it can recognise and respect, it can make things visible or invisible, it can be used to acknowledge, avoid or redirect. Exploring and questioning assumptions that rest behind the words, terms, concepts and constructs we use is an important practice for growing our abilities to hear others, understand different and diverse perspectives and build greater awareness of how societies operate.

Language is not neutral. It is used to describe our world and also profoundly shapes our lived experiences. Like humanity itself, language is complex, full of nuance, paradox, and a diversity of meanings and truths. The purpose of this guide is to encourage you to critically think about the power of words.

There is no rulebook when it comes to using appropriate terminology regarding First Nations Peoples of Australia and their experiences. The purpose of this Guide is to emphasise the importance of considering the terms we use, and the histories and assumptions that may be embedded within them. The aim is to encourage you to work towards developing and using language in a way that acknowledges the diversity of First Nations Peoples and the resilience and strengths within their experiences. It is also about recognising, acknowledging and challenging racial and cultural based inequalities that continue to exist in our societies and which can be reinforced through the use of language.

At Charles Sturt University we believe that wisdom is shared and that the connections we make with land and peoples of our regions can foster a world worth living in. We hope this guide fosters your passion and curiosity for traveling a path of respectfully knowing how to live well and how to build strong and beneficial relationships with others that may have different histories, knowledges, experiences and perspectives to your own.

**At the end of this document is a one-page check list to use when considering what terminology, you might consider using in your assessments.**

# Using Plurals

One way of acknowledging the diversity inherent in the histories, experiences, knowledges, and identities of those identified as part of the Australian First Nations population is to use plurals. For example, Australia's First Nations population does not have one culture, perspective, voice or position - there are many. Using the term 'peoples' rather than 'people', 'cultures' rather than 'culture', 'perspectives' rather than 'perspective', 'communities' rather than 'community' is a useful way of being inclusive through acknowledging and respecting difference and diversity within the Australian First Nations population.

When plurals are not used it essentialises a population. It carries an assumption that all First Nations Peoples are the same or implies that all First Nations Peoples should look, think, feel, behave, and agree on the same things. Essentialising results in thinking, speaking and acting in ways which promote stereotypical interpretations of individual differences. Essentialist language also supports 'this – or that' modes of thought, for example us/them, civilised/primitive, white/black. This kind of dualistic thinking has deep roots in Western ways of engaging with and understanding the world. Questioning essentialist thinking and ways of interpreting society is not an easy task, but it can support an acknowledgement of complexity and diversity within populations. Challenging essentialism opens up capacities to explore different ways of being, knowing and valuing the world.

When plurals are not used, assumptions of cultural homogenisation are reinforced. Reducing cultural richness to popularised (or tokenised) cultural symbols, objects, customs, ideas and values. First Nations peoples within Australia continue to maintain, affirm and defend their diverse cultural and social identities. Within all population groups there is a rich and diverse tapestry of individuals and communities.

## Population Terms

It is important to remember that First Nations Peoples should be provided with the opportunity to define themselves. Whenever possible it is strongly encouraged that you ask relevant First Nations stakeholders how they would like to be referred too. When given the opportunity people will often identify not in terms of the large population terms but rather in terms of their unique connections to specific language groups, communities or country. If it is not possible for such a discussion to take place, then be as specific as possible. Include appropriate language group(s), community(ies) or place/country names. By doing this you are recognising and reflecting the incredible richness of Australia's First Nations peoples and challenging damaging stereotypes maintained and reinforced through general or broad population terms and associated assumptions.

When you are required to refer to the whole population it is important that you build your awareness around the use of different terminology. It is important to consider where the word came from, who did the defining and what assumptions might be attached to it. Using the term First Nations Peoples of Australia is encouraged. While this remains a generic term, it is a growing preference due to it encompassing an acknowledgement of diversity. While having its roots in Canada it is a term that First Nations' peoples have used to define themselves rather than a term that colonial 'others' have placed on them.

Indigenous Australian Peoples and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples are terms often used and considered appropriate. Both these terms are situated in a history of First Nations Peoples being defined by others. They are colonial terms (definitions developed and used for purposes of controlling others) and continue to carry this baggage and associated assumptions with them. When using the terms Indigenous or First Nations it is important to include Australian as the terms by themselves refer to many different and diverse peoples throughout the world. When referring to the whole First Nations population in Australia and using the term Aboriginal it is respectful and appropriate to always include 'and/or Torres Strait Islander' Peoples. If you do not do this, you are excluding all Torres Strait Islander peoples or those with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities.

It is important to always capitalise Indigenous, as the use of lower case refers to indigenous plants, animals and peoples worldwide. Similarly, capitalisation is important for all population terms (First Nations Peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples), without capitalisation these terms remain common nouns and this is incorrect grammar.

# Colonisation and Colonialism

The terms 'settlement' and 'colonisation' have been used through various discussions to describe the arrival of Europeans (predominantly British peoples) in Australia. The term 'settlement' is problematic as it does not acknowledge the violence that occurs when First Nations peoples are dispossessed and disenfranchised from their lands. Many members of First Nations communities use the term 'invasion' as it reflects these long term violent and oppressive consequences. Avoiding the term 'settlement' is therefore encouraged. The preference is for using either 'colonisation' or 'invasion'.

A key consideration when using the term 'colonisation' is to question and be specific about the places, timeframes, events or processes to which you are actually referring. For example, colonisation does not simply refer to the arrival of Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet on 26 January 1788. This is one event or action among many that is representative of processes associated with migrants settling among and establishing control over First Nations peoples on the continent now known as Australia. The initial frontier of colonisation moved through the continent at different times and in different ways. For example, what is often referred to as the frontier wars or the initial and peak period of colonial violence and unclear rule occurred in New South Wales over the period 1788-1900, in Tasmania primarily during 1820-30 and in the Northern Territory and top end of Australia into the 1960s. According to research by University of Newcastle historians, massacres of Indigenous peoples intensified between 1860-1930. These were typically co-ordinated by government officials and police.

Being specific about events, places and timeframes allows for the diversity of First Nations Peoples' histories and ongoing experiences of colonisation to be acknowledged. There is no event, date or time that is widely recognised as the end of colonisation. Therefore, it is important not to assume or suggest that the term refers to a specific event in the past nor to a clearly defined period. As such try to avoid referring broadly to colonisation using past tense.

Colonialism refers to the policies of a country seeking to extend or retain its authority over other peoples and territories, generally with the aim of economic dominance. As with the broad term 'colonisation', 'colonialism' can refer to initial or frontier colonial policies and also all policies that follow with either an explicit or implicit agenda of asserting, maintaining or reinstating colonial authority over First Nations Peoples and their territories.

Settler colonialism is an ongoing process rather than an event. It is a concept used to describe the process of large-scale population movements and modes of social organisation where the migrants maintain strong links with their families and ancestors' former country (in Australia predominantly the United Kingdom) and gain significant privileges over the other inhabitants (First Nations Peoples and other migrants) of the territory.

As with the term colonisation, colonialism and settler colonialism are words used to help describe complex processes that have involved the dispossession and disenfranchisement of First Nations peoples and the gaining of, maintenance and operations of power by colonial systems and authorities. When discussing or using these terms it is important to consider not only historical events but also contemporary manifestations of these processes. By doing this you build your ability to hear and listen to the diverse and numerous voices of First Nations peoples speaking and sharing knowledge today.

## Policies

The field of policies developed and implemented by the Australian Commonwealth, State and Local governments in relation to Indigenous Australians is dense and complicated. While it has been common for policies of (settler) colonialism to be grouped into several categories (see below) the reality is that various and numerous forms and versions of policies have existed and remain in different formats.

The language used in policy documents can be very powerful and the assumptions supported or challenged by policy language is something to always think critically and carefully about. Try to avoid unconsciously reproducing government or institutional 'catch phrases' in your writing. When you become aware of problematic language issues, you might find that certain terms or words are commonplace within policy discourse. It is recommended that you consider possible ways in which they may challenge or reinforce hegemonic assumptions embedded in policy construction.

*Protectionist policies* were developed by individual states (at different times) as a response to ongoing frontier violence. These forms of policy enabled police and other colonial authorities to intervene in the lives of Australian First Nations Peoples and relocate them forcibly to missions and reserves. Segregation was often a by-product of these policies. There are also less formal practices of segregation that have occurred in different forms and at different times throughout Australian history.

*Assimilation policies* were constructed by state governments throughout Australia from approximately the 1920s to the 1960s when they began to be gradually phased out. The underpinning premise was that First Nations peoples and communities throughout Australia should be integrated with other communities. Embedded within these policies were many colonial assumptions about the nature and form of integration which were shaped by stereotypical (often derogatory) understandings and expectations of First Nations Peoples.

While impacted significantly by the various and numerous forms of these policies, many Australian First Nations Peoples continued to resist, fight and challenge colonial controls and advocate for rights. In the 1950s their opposition to assimilation was strengthening and a civil rights movement was growing under the banner of self-determination. Many non-Indigenous peoples have also challenged settler colonial policies and practices throughout history. In 1972 the term self-determination was chosen by the Commonwealth Government of Australia to describe an official approach to Indigenous affairs. Self-Determination policies included many positive directions but negotiating them was also a very complex and challenging experience for many First Nations Peoples and communities. Significant differences between what was understood as 'self-determination' and how to enact it existed between First Nations communities and Government. This policy era is now often discussed as 'Self-Management' to acknowledge the dominant position of Government in determining and controlling how self-determination was understood and operationalised. In 1996 this raft of policies was disbanded by the Commonwealth Government.

Many forms of National, State and Local government policies continue to be directed at and/or inclusive of First Nations Peoples. In the 1990s the term reconciliation began to take root in policy spheres and in 1997 the findings of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families were released. This report highlighted that there was not one Stolen Generation but rather many Stolen Generations and it is recommended that the plural (Generations) is always used. In 2008 the principal Commonwealth Government Strategy in terms of Australian First Nations policy was described as "Closing the Gap" and this policy framework continues.

## Avoiding Past Tense, Deficit and Dichotomous Language

In Australia's First Nations communities, cultures, practices and knowledges remain pertinent and current. It is important to avoid relegating peoples and cultures of the present to the past through the use of past tense. While many elements of life for First Nations Peoples have been and continue to be impacted by processes of colonisation and settler colonialism, it is not correct to say that First Nations Peoples have "lost their culture" or "lost their traditional lands." The word 'lost' erases the role of the colonisers in impacting First Nations Peoples' cultures. Many, if not most, First Nations peoples remain embedded in their evolving cultures and continue to have connections to their traditional countries. Past tense statements suggest static representations of peoples and cultures and do not acknowledge continuing contribution and current presence and significance. Similarly, it is important to not go too far towards



idealism, processes of glorifying First Nations cultures can be detrimental as they work to make invisible or avoid an acknowledgment of the continuing challenges faced by First Nations peoples existing and operating within settler colonial systems.

Often intertwined with assumptions about 'loss' are assumptions that First Nations Peoples are somehow empty or lacking, are not as 'good' or as 'full' as the colonisers. Deficit discourse refers to disempowering patterns of language and practice that represent people in terms of deficiencies and failures. These kinds of discourses remain common, they have a long history and come in many forms. They have a tendency to emphasise disadvantage and focus on the provision of benevolent help by dominant society. For example, they are 'in need' of being 'saved' and we should do things 'for them' or 'to them.'

Reinforcing this kind of thinking is the tendency to primarily position First Nations Peoples as 'objects' of study, with the focus being on how to better understand and learn about 'them' and their culture. While there is great value in having a passion and curiosity to learn about the experiences of others and different ways of being and knowing, building respectful and safe relationships also involves critical reflections on self, and own ways of knowing and being. Building an awareness of the conditions under which First Nations peoples have been constructed as 'other' or different, (i.e. how they have been 'known' and by who), is equally as important. Such learning involves acknowledging that you may be looking at First Nations peoples through a particular kind of window and developing the courage to explore the details of this frame and how it might shape and limit your view.

Strengthening your cultural awareness and capabilities for inclusivity requires both inward and outward reflection. It involves awareness raising around not only the cultures of others but also of your own. By travelling along this learning pathway, you can begin to develop your understandings of how to identify and challenge the essentialising or deficit constructions of First Nations Peoples which occur through processes of objectification. You will simultaneously foster a strong foundation from which to build respectful relationships with peoples and regions.

Considering the use of dichotomous terms such as 'us, we, our' and 'them' and their potential influence on the development of mutually beneficial relationships is encouraged. If you do use these terms in your assessments it is important to critically reflect on who you might or might not be including in the notion of 'us', 'our', 'we' or 'them' and to be clear and as specific as possible about this. Also considering who you are including when using the term non-Indigenous is encouraged, this is a very broad population term that can also obscure diversity.

Deficit and dichotomous discourses are often firmly entrenched and difficult to challenge but the most important thing you can do is to continue to question the words/terms you come across, who has said them and how, and what assumptions might be associated with them. For example: when words like 'gap' (as in Close the Gap) are used, where is this 'gap' assumed to be located? One way to counter deficit discourses is to draw on empowering, strengths-based language that recognises and respects First Nations Peoples agency, aspirations, capabilities and capacities. For example, rather than saying non-Indigenous people need to empower First Nations Peoples consider First Nations Peoples are empowering themselves to overcome challenges. Rather than, disadvantaged First Nations Peoples, consider First Nations Peoples experiences of disadvantage include [...].

Another way to begin to counter deficit, essentialising and homogenising discourses is to expand your focus away from First Nations Peoples as the 'object' of study, or intervention and also include exploration on your own experiences and relationships with dominant social/cultural institutions or practices and interventions that may be of benefit here. This can help in terms of building your awareness about things that might shape how you know and relate to First Nations peoples and knowledges and can further establish your capacities to build respectful and inclusive relationships.

# Race and Privilege

Originating from Europe the concept of 'race' has a long and complex history. It has been used in various ways to understand differences between peoples and has operated as a means of social control and a system to maintain certain structures of power. During the initial periods of colonisation in Australia through to the assimilation era, race was believed to have a biological basis. Colonial officials tried to quantify the amount (blood quantum) of First Nations Peoples as a way of organising various oppressions and controls.

Today it is widely recognised that the concept of race has limited biological basis with little evidence to support the idea of genetically defined races. Therefore, it is no longer appropriate, nor evidence based to refer to the blood quantum or an assumed percentage associated with ethnicity. It is now more common to understand race as a social construct - meaning that it only exists in terms of what and how people think about it.

As a social construct, race has been used to categorise certain populations as either superior or inferior and to legitimise and justify the actions of those deemed to be superior over those positioned as inferior. Race has operated across different times and in different places as a tool to advantage some and disadvantage others. It is important to build awareness and explore how constructions of race and the assumptions that support them have operated as tools in the disenfranchisement, dispossession, control and oppression of certain populations, such as First Nations Peoples in Australia. Yet it is also important to reflect on the experiences of being advantaged by racialised systems. Having the courage to engage critically with both structures of advantage and disadvantage can help build capacities to see, hear and respond to different experiences, ways of knowing, doing and valuing. This can open up new insights and options for challenging inequalities within society.

It is not appropriate to refer to First Nations Peoples as a 'race'. Using this term is acceptable and encouraged only in the context of exploring how, as a concept, it has been constructed and used to advantage some and disadvantage others. Similarly, try to avoid the use of the term 'racism' without explanation and/or exploration of how it is related to and entwined with social constructions of race and systems of power.

The concept of 'white' privilege or 'whiteness' is often used as a way of exploring and understanding the structures and experiences of advantage. The term white (like black) is not a static population category. Who is or is not considered 'white' and by whom has differed across time and place. In Australia, Whiteness is a concept that can be used to explore and critically think about what are considered the 'norms' within society, for example that which is not viewed, discussed, understood or constructed as culturally different. It is a concept that refers to the advantages and benefits that accrue to 'white' people by virtue of a system that is normed on their experiences and values. It is a useful concept for helping you to expand your gaze and reflect on the experiences of those who have the privilege of learning about racism rather than experiencing it.

The terms privilege and whiteness are increasingly being used as a way to shift and challenge deficit discourses with their focus on disadvantage towards more holistic understandings of how power operates and is maintained within societies. By better understanding processes of advantage, new insights are gained into the meanings and experiences of those classified or constructed as disadvantaged. You are encouraged in discussions and assessments to not only focus on First Nations Peoples experiences but also to critically reflect on how dominant societies operate and how you as an individual may be positioned in terms of structures and systems of power.

## Hegemony

Through the course of your studies, you may come across the term 'hegemony' or 'hegemonic', and it is a term that is useful to understand. These are terms used to identify, explore, describe and better comprehend the way that power functions in societies. Hegemony relates to the ways in which certain groups of people occupy positions of power in society – for example, often in western cultures, men will experience power, opportunities and privileges that may not

be as readily available to women. In Australia, through the policies discussed above, British colonisers have exerted their hegemony over First Nations Peoples.

Hegemony is asserted through the promotion of ideas and practices that keep certain people in positions of power and where the maintenance of this power involves the control, subjugation and/or exclusion of others. These processes of inclusion and exclusion are enacted repeatedly and become patterns built into social institutions and governance structures.

### Intersectionality

Another term you may encounter is 'intersectionality', which relates to multiple factors that shape a person's identity, worldview, and experiences. These include race, gender, nationality, religion, for example. This term is useful in helping you to explore the complexity of your own and other standpoints.

## Country, Connections and Communities

Many First Nations Peoples of Australia have complex and deeply significant relationships with the environment. They are often connected or related to specific tracks or areas of land and have associated stewardship responsibilities. Even though there may have been a historical separation from place, this physical relocation has not always diminished familial connections to country. These relationships to country are also interwoven with complex networks of family, both immediate and extended. These connections cross boundaries between local government areas and states and might be described as webs extending across and even beyond the Australian continent. Many of the terms that have been used to describe certain groups of First Nations peoples include assumptions of definite, inflexible boundaries, (i.e., lines on a map). The first step should always be to check preferences with relevant First Nations stakeholders, but caution should be taken when using terms such as, tribe, tribal group or clan. Referring to language groups is common and acceptable practice with the term Nation also becoming a preference. The important point to remember is that First Nations Peoples should be provided the opportunity to define themselves.

It is important to avoid making assumptions about the nature, look, or locations of Australian First Nations communities. If you wish to refer to First Nations communities in locations described as remote, it is important to be specific about this. The large majority of First Nations Peoples do not reside in remote locations but rather in regional and urban centers. Similarly, those who do reside in more remote locations often travel frequently to regional and urban places. There is no certain or singular image that captures the diversity of First Nations communities. If you have such an image in mind it is important to question and reflect on why this might be the case. Thinking critically about possible assumptions associated with the term 'traditional' is also recommended. Like with all cultures First Nations Peoples traditions are not static and continue to develop, adjust and evolve through time.

## Sovereignty, Self-Determination, Decolonisation

Sovereignty is a concept that relates closely to issues of control and power. It is imbued with complexity due to different assumptions and understandings regarding what ownership (of land particularly) means or implies. Rather than land being understood as a privately owned resource for exploitation, many First Nations Peoples have more complex relationships and connections with lands, country and regions. As such many First Nations Peoples emphasise that they have never ceded their sovereignty and a common phrase within activist and rights movements is 'always was always will be' First Nations lands.



It is always important to acknowledge the resilience of Australian First Nations Peoples. You are encouraged to engage with the histories of activism, commitment, endurance, strength, determination and generosity which exist within all Australian First Nations communities. Searching out and privileging the voices and stories shared by First Nations Peoples in Australia about their knowledges, experiences and aspirations is essential for challenging inequalities and structures of disadvantage. Becoming familiar with land rights movements from First Nations Peoples perspectives and the inherent challenges associated with these being positioned within western legal frameworks is encouraged. Often it takes many years or decades to reach Land or Native Title agreements with Traditional Custodians of land. Currently these legal rights do not equate to 'ownership' or sovereignty.

Data sovereignty (or Indigenous Data Sovereignty, sometimes referred to as ID-SOV) is related to intellectual property ownership. It often refers to Indigenous knowledge systems and who can access, utilise and benefit from information that is held within First Nations communities. It also relates to who has the opportunity and right to define, use and interpret data relating to First Nations communities. This data is often collected by non-Indigenous researchers, such as the census, and is used to inform policies, interventions and programs.

Self-determination is also a complex concept but essentially relates to processes which place the power over body and place back with the people, rather than imposed institutions. It is acknowledged as a human right and places emphasis on autonomy. It relates to opportunities for First Nations peoples to make decisions about their own lives, aspirations and directions. Sovereignty and self-determination are values which underpin the various facets of the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Decolonisation is the long process of shifting control from imperial foreign powers to the inhabitants of a land or state. In some cases, such as in Australia where a process of settler colonialism has taken place and the colonisers have become the majority population, it is extremely difficult to fully implement a process of decolonisation. It often happens in informal ways through organisations and institutions rather than at the government level. In other places, decolonisation happens through the handing over of power from foreign leadership to local – often First Nations - leadership.

Instead of using	Consider using	Reasoning for this
<b>indigenous, aboriginal or first nations</b>	First Nations Peoples of Australia or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples or Indigenous Australian Peoples	Capitalisation is correct grammar acknowledging that these terms are proper nouns. The plural Peoples rather than people acknowledges diversity.
<b>Aboriginal(s), Aborigines</b>	First Nations Peoples of Australia or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples or Indigenous Australian Peoples	These are much more inclusive terms which better acknowledge the diversities that exist within the population.
<b>ATSI</b>	First Nations Peoples of Australia or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples or Indigenous Australian Peoples.	While using this shortened form may seem a useful way to keep assessment word counts down it reduces diverse groups of peoples and individual experiences into an acronym.
<b>(Aboriginal or Indigenous) Race</b>	Peoples of First Nations identity, background or ethnicity	There is little evidence to support the idea of genetically defined races. Rather than a biological category of person, race is a social construct that works to advantage some and disadvantage others.
<b>Culture, language, history</b>	Plurals – cultures, languages, histories, identities, positions, perspectives	This helps you to avoid language that essentialises or homogenises population diversity
<b>All or The ‘First Nations Peoples’</b>	Many, Some, Several. Alternatively, be as specific as possible regarding who you are referring to)	This helps you to avoid language that essentialises or homogenises population diversity
<b>Settlement</b>	Colonisation or invasion	Settlement does not acknowledge the violence that occurs when First Nations peoples are dispossessed and disenfranchised from their land.
<b>Us, we, our or them, they</b>	Be specific. Who are you including or not including? Who are you talking for or about?	This helps to challenging binary and dichotomous assumptions.
<b>Past tense, Traditional, Lost (culture, land, identity)</b>	Present tense, Contemporary	This challenges static representations of peoples and cultures and acknowledges continuing contribution and current presence and significance.
<b>Community</b>	Be specific. Which Community?	Important for challenging assumptions that all communities are ‘remote’ or the same.