

ABORIGINAL PROTOCOLS: TIPS AND FACTS

- Always use capital first letters for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous in written documentation. In NSW, there is a preference for using “Aboriginal” only - the use of the term “Indigenous” (which was introduced by the Australian Government years ago), is generally only acceptable when referring verbatim to documents, programs etc that already use this term.

There are always exceptions, and these terms can often appear interchangeably used by various government and non-government organisations.

- Don’t use acronyms or abbreviations, such as TSI, TI, ATSI, ‘Abo’ and Aborigine. Whilst appearing as simply an abbreviation, many of these have been historically used in derogatory or racist contexts.
- Avoid talking about Aboriginal culture as a thing of the past. It is alive, adaptive and living today.
- Central and Northern Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are best referred to as ‘traditional’ people, not ‘tribal’.
- Terms such as ‘coloured’, ‘half-caste’ and ‘full-bloods’ are unacceptable to Aboriginal people and immediately demonstrates a lack of cultural awareness. Attempting to categorise Aboriginal people by using terms such as “Half caste”, “One eighth”, “Quarter caste” or “Full blood” is deeply offensive to most Aboriginal people.

These are European concepts and are only one aspect in the loss of

identity and culture that Aboriginal people are dealing with today.

- Never refer to or ask an Aboriginal person what percentage they are or refer to them as a ‘part Aboriginal’ (consider: “which ‘part’ of me is Aboriginal and which isn’t?”) – someone is either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal; it is their option to formally identify.
- Don’t be confused when fair skinned, blue eyed and blonde-haired people identify as Aboriginal – the explanation is a simple case of genetics i.e. dominant and recessive genes (just like blue eyes/brown eyes). Think of Aboriginal identity as being like a cup of tea or coffee – no matter how much milk you put in and change its colour, it’s still tea or coffee! Being Aboriginal is not the colour of your skin or eyes or how broad your nose is. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart.
- In practice it is preferred that terms like ‘Aboriginal people’ rather than ‘Aborigines’ be used.
- ‘Artefacts’ instead of ‘arts and crafts’ of the Aboriginal people.
- Traditional Aboriginal culture is not primitive, stone age or simple. Aboriginal people are contemporary people. Their culture is best viewed as different or alternative to the Western culture, NOT somehow inferior. It can be described as complex, stable, law abiding, rewarding and conserving the environment.
- Aboriginal people were not nomads or free wanderers. Each group had it’s own clearly defined territory



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with well-established seasonal movement schedule. Trade took place between groups. Do not use the term “walkabout”.

- Aboriginal Dreaming Stories are true accurate records to Aboriginal people. They are not myths and legends. Avoid the use of ‘Dreamtime’.
- While many Australian people refer to the “settlement” of Australia, many Aboriginal people refer to the “invasion”.
- When talking with Aboriginal people remember that they have come from 600 nations and are just as multicultural as the wider community. What suits one group or applies to one group may not apply to all.

DISCLAIMER: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of publication. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the user’s independent advisor.

