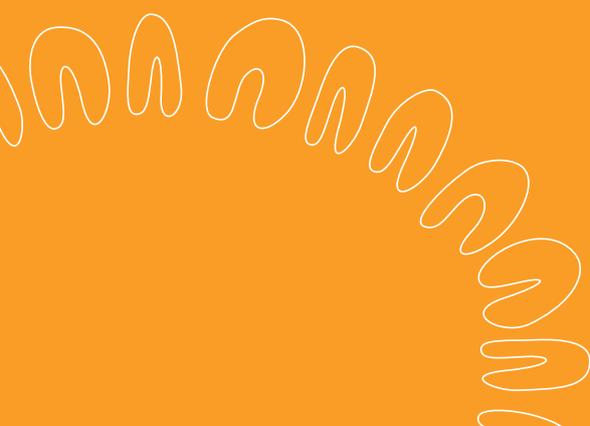




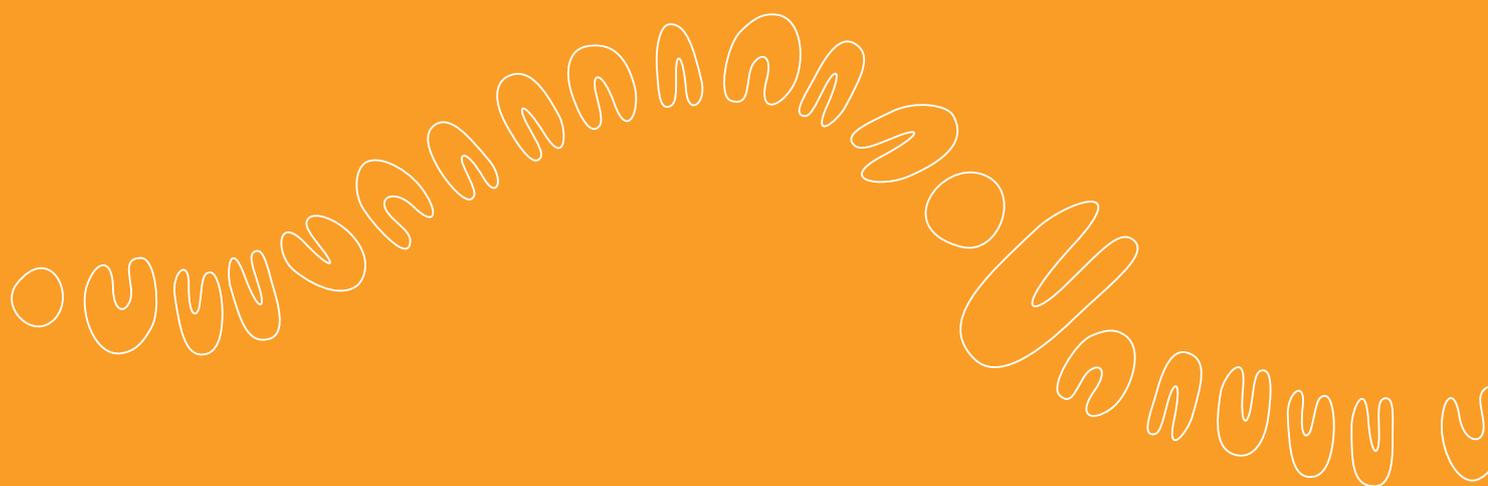
APA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols Guide



AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The APA acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.



CONTRIBUTORS

The APA wishes to acknowledge and recognise the invaluable contributions of the following individuals for their roles in creating this guide:

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Artwork created by Jakeob Watson, a proud Gomeri man with deep connections to Wonnarua Country after being born and raised on Country, in Maitland NSW.



PURPOSE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing is a key priority of the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA). This guide was developed to support APA staff and members in observing cultural protocols and promoting respectful communications with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and ensuring that the APA's work respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, customs, and practices.

This guide builds on the APA's vision for reconciliation, which is for all Australians to value and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledge, expertise, connections to land and sea and traditional ways of healing. The APA advocates for stronger relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians that are culturally safe, based on trust, respect, and free of racism.

Cultural safety is determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities, and involves an ongoing critical reflection of an individual's knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and power differentials in delivering safe, accessible and responsive healthcare¹ and other services.

The APA encourages cultural bravery among staff and members in their various roles as health professionals, experts, researchers, educators, advocates, and collaborators. The APA is striving to become an industry leader in advancing reconciliation in Australia and support staff and members along their own reconciliation journeys, which in turn, supports broader collective efforts towards achieving reconciliation in Australia.

The guide presents important information to increase understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and their connection with family, Country, community, and culture, and outlines several common cultural practices. The guide is not a substitute for cultural learning activities and should be viewed as being complementary to them.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL PROTOCOLS?

Cultural protocols describe the customs, traditions, and accepted codes of behaviour of a specific cultural group. Cultural protocols provide a framework for ensuring that people interact and conduct their behaviour in an appropriate and respectful manner.² It is important for all Australians to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people come from many different Nations, each of which have unique cultural perspectives and traditions. Therefore, the protocols described in this document should be considered within, and adapted to, local contexts.



¹ Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), n.d. *National Scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety Strategy 2020-2025*, AHPRA, viewed 21 August 2024.

² St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, n.d. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocol*, viewed 5 August 2024.

WHY DO WE NEED CULTURAL PROTOCOLS?

Since colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced significant prejudice and discrimination and their interests, rights and concerns have often been dismissed or ignored.³ Introducing cultural protocols represents an important step to understanding, respecting, and valuing the worldviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to create culturally safe environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel welcome, respected, valued, and have positive experiences.

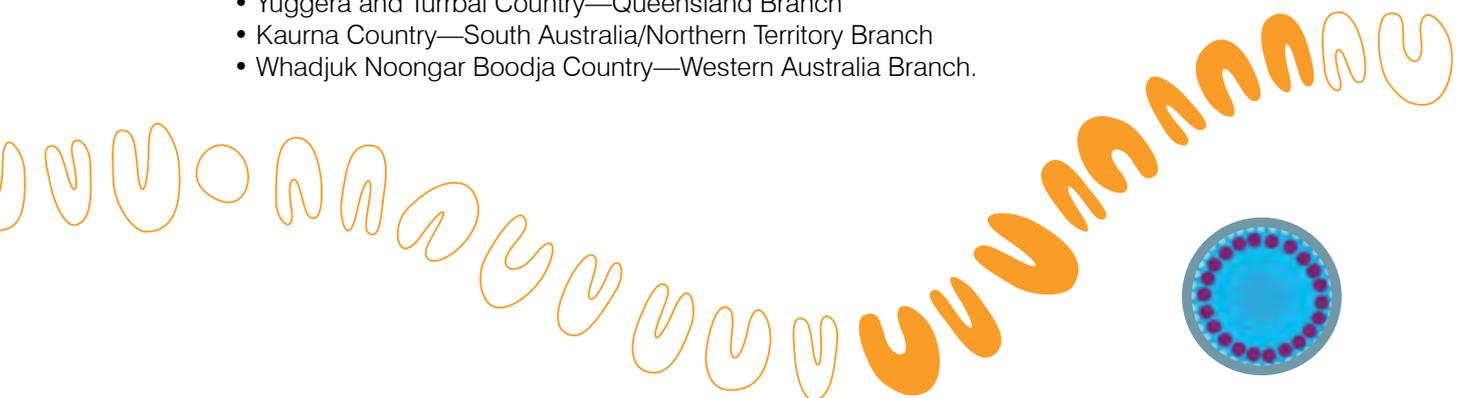
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HISTORIES AND CULTURES

Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is central to everything the APA does. The APA recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people of Australia, who have been the custodians of these lands and waters for more than 60,000 years. The APA also acknowledges the injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since colonisation, and their continuing impacts on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities today.⁴

While there is some commonality across many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, each community has its own unique identity and history. The term 'Aboriginal' refers to the original inhabitants of mainland Australia, Tasmania and other surrounding islands, and the term 'Torres Strait Islander' refers to the original inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands, located between Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea. Torres Strait Islander people have a unique linguistic and cultural identity which is significantly different to that of Aboriginal people.⁵

A useful tool for appreciating the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the Map of Indigenous Australia produced by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, which indicates the general location of different language or nation groups.⁶ APA offices across Australia are currently located on:

- Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country—National Office and Victoria and Tasmania Branch
- Wallumedegal Country—New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory Branch
- Yuggera and Turrbal Country—Queensland Branch
- Kaurna Country—South Australia/Northern Territory Branch
- Whadjuk Noongar Boodja Country—Western Australia Branch.



³ Oxfam Australia, n.d. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols*, viewed 5 August 2024.

⁴ Australian Physiotherapy Association, 2023. *Statement from the Australian Physiotherapy Association on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament*, viewed 5 August 2024.

⁵ Dudgeon P, Wright M, Paradies Y, Garvey D & Walker I, 2014. 'Aboriginal Social, Cultural and Historical Contexts', in *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*, Telethon Kids Institute, viewed 5 August 2024

⁶ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, n.d. Map of Indigenous Australia, viewed 5 August 2024.



PROTOCOLS

1. Welcomes and Acknowledgements

Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country are cultural protocols that recognise the living culture and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whilst paying respect to their history and heritage. Such practices facilitate greater dialogue between the APA and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which is a vital first step towards reconciliation and self-determination.

Both reconciliation (strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people⁷) and self-determination (the fundamental right of people to shape their own lives⁸) have been recognised as key determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.⁹ As such, these practices can assist the APA in its mission to provide optimal health care for all Australians. Whilst there are some critics of Acknowledgments and Welcomes prior to official meetings and events, it is the APA's position that these practices are important because it reminds staff and members of the history of colonisation and its continued effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today, as well as promoting inclusion.

1.1 Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is a cultural practice performed by a Traditional Owner or Custodian of the local region to welcome visitors to their traditional land. It is a mark of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to welcome visitors onto their Country. **A Welcome to Country ceremony can only be delivered by a local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elder or community representative.**

The protocol for delivering and receiving a Welcome to Country has been adapted to contemporary circumstances, but the essential elements of welcoming visitors and offering them a safe passage remains unchanged. Practices will vary, however a Welcome to Country ceremony may usually consist of a speech, song, dance, smoking ceremony or other type of performance, and is normally selected by the local community. Establishing permission for and/or welcoming visitors to be on Country is a continuing cultural and spiritual practice that predates colonisation.

When should this be arranged?

Welcome to Country ceremonies should be arranged for large and/or significant APA events where the environment is appropriate (as decided by the group organising the event). This may include events such as conferences, launches, congress or symposia.

The organising group is responsible for researching the appropriate local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community organisation to approach for a Welcome to Country ceremony. There are several resources that can help:

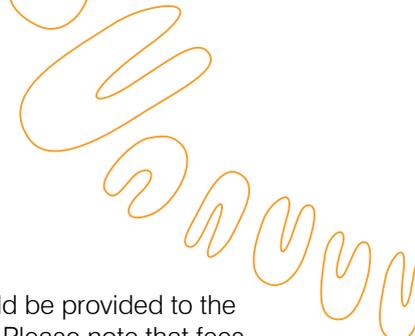
- Start with the website for the local government authority (the shire or municipal council). Many council websites include an acknowledgement of the local Traditional Owners—perhaps on the home page, or elsewhere.
- State and territory government websites also include information about Traditional Owners in their jurisdictions. In addition, several states and territories have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultative bodies, which themselves might offer advice.
- Land councils representing the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities can also provide some guidance.¹⁰

⁷ Reconciliation Australia. 2024, *What is reconciliation?*, viewed 27 August 2024.

⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d. *Self-determination*, viewed 27 August 2024.

⁹ Vickery J, Faulkhead S, Adams K & Clarke A. 2007, 'Chapter 2: Indigenous Insights into Oral History, Social Determinants and Decolonisation'. In Anderson I., Baum F. and Bentley M. (eds) 2007, *Beyond Band-aids: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health. Papers from the Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health Workshop, Adelaide 2004*. Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin.

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, n.d. *Whose Country am I on?*, viewed 5 August 2024.



When making arrangements for a Welcome to Country, details of the proposed event should be provided to the organisation, and the preferences of Traditional Owners or Custodians must be confirmed. Please note that fees are usually incurred for Welcome to Country services and will need to be considered within an event budget.

If a Traditional Owner is not available to perform a Welcome to Country, an Acknowledgement of Country (as outlined below) can be delivered instead.

1.2 Acknowledgement of Country

An Acknowledgement of Country is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for Traditional Custodians and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Country.⁷

When should this be performed?

This procedure should be included in all meeting agendas, as the first item. An Acknowledgement of Country is to be performed as the first item at the following events:

- official meetings (including Board of Directors, National Advisory Council, Conference Advisory Committees, staff meetings etc.)
- national group and entity meetings
- professional development events (lectures, courses, seminars, workshops, etc.)
- presentations
- launches
- other formal staff and member events.

An Acknowledgement of Country should be conducted by the meeting Chair, or other person responsible for running or introducing the event. It should be done as close to the start of the event as possible.

Where an APA member will be performing an Acknowledgement of Country, the responsible staff member should ensure that the person conducting the meeting is aware of:

- the APA's position on performing an Acknowledgement of Country
- the importance of an Acknowledgement of Country to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- the use of appropriate language—they may choose to personalise their language and make it appropriate to the setting
- the name of the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the event is being held (ensuring that names are spelt and pronounced correctly).

What should I say?

There are no specifically prescribed words for an Acknowledgement of Country, however the APA provides the following example:

- *'I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, the people of the [name of nation] nation and pay my respects to Elders past and present. I'd also like to acknowledge any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.'*



Some other examples include:

- *'We acknowledge the [Traditional Custodians] people on whose country this meeting is taking place. We thank them for allowing us to meet on their country and acknowledge their Elders past and present.'*
- *'We acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the [Traditional Custodians] people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land. We acknowledge that they are of continuing importance to the [Traditional Owners] people living today.'*

A written Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians is part of the standard APA staff email signature and currently reads as:

- *'I respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the country on which I work.'*

RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have an oral culture with over 150 languages still being spoken throughout Australia.¹¹ It is important to remember that every community has their own local protocols which should guide the approach to communication. Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is an essential part of reconciliation and strengthening relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

2.1 Culturally appropriate language and terminology

When writing about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or when editing content written by, about or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the fundamental principles are respect, accuracy, and self-determination. It is essential to avoid culturally inappropriate and offensive terms, which have played a part in the historical and ongoing injustices and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.

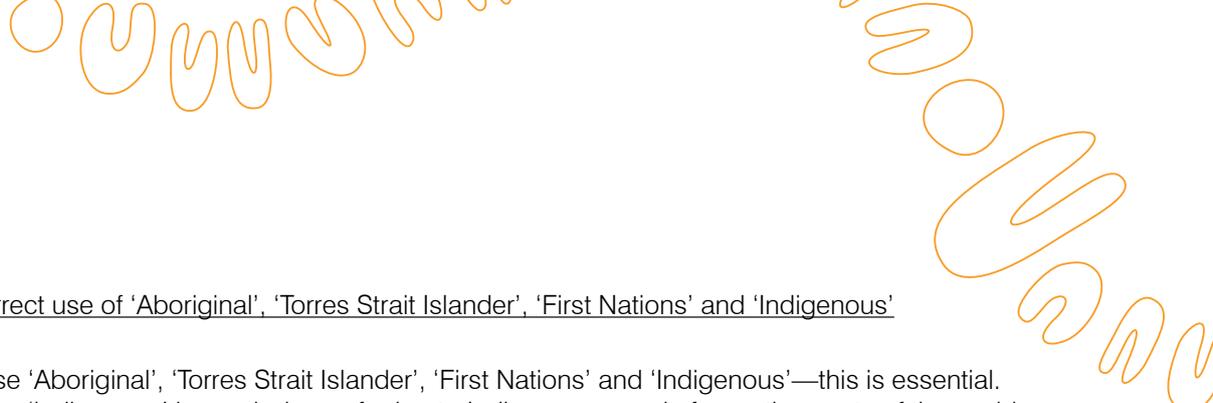
Using the Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet *Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology*¹² as a basis, some specific things to note include the following:

Preferred terms when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- There are a range of positions among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on the use of the word 'Indigenous' and the **preference is to primarily use the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'**, rather than 'Indigenous people'. The term 'Indigenous' is not specific, and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel the term diminishes their identity.
- The term **'First Nations'** is also an acceptable term that has become increasingly used over recent years, as it recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the sovereign people of this land. However, there are a range of positions among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on the use of this term, which is used extensively to refer to the First Peoples of North America.
- Whichever preferred term is used, ensure that it is used consistently throughout a document.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021, *Language Statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, ABS, viewed 5 August 2024.

¹² Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, 2022, *The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander terminology*, viewed 5 August 2024.



Guidelines for the correct use of 'Aboriginal', 'Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous'

- Always capitalise 'Aboriginal', 'Torres Strait Islander', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous'—this is essential. The lowercase term 'indigenous' is used when referring to Indigenous people from other parts of the world.
- Be aware that 'Aboriginal' is not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people and 'Torres Strait Islander' is not inclusive of Aboriginal people. Use both when you're talking about both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people i.e. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'.
- 'Aboriginal' is an adjective. NEVER use 'Aboriginal' as a noun and NEVER use 'Aborigine' or any abbreviation of 'Aboriginal'—all are offensive.
- When referring to Torres Strait Islander people, use 'Torres Strait Islander' not 'Islander' on its own.
- Do not use acronyms when specifically referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a collective group (eg, ATSI people or A&TSI people)—this is offensive.

Guidelines for the use of terms associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities

- **'Traditional Owners/Custodians'** refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people directly descended from the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of a specific area, with a cultural connection to that land or Country. Capitalise these words.
- **'Country'** is a significant cultural concept based on family origins and associations and relationships with specific areas. Capitalise this word.
- **'Nation'** is a term that refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a culturally defined area of land or Country. It is important to note that the boundaries of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations cross over state boundaries, which has important implications for service delivery and provision, as well as negotiation processes.
- It is important to name specific Country and nations wherever possible—Australia is a continent, with many different nations, communities and language groups.
For example, an author might describe themselves as 'a proud Kamilaroi woman' or 'a proud Palawa man living and working on Ngunnawal/Ngambri Country'.
- A **'Clan'** is a local descent group, larger than a family but based on family links through a common ancestry. A 'clan' is a subset of a nation. It is important to understand that term 'clan' has specific meaning, which derives from non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, and may not be applicable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. If unsure about its use, seek guidance from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or organisations.
- An **'Elder'** is a highly respected person within an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community who is recognised as a custodian of cultural knowledge. An Elder is usually over a certain age, but it's important not to assume that age alone makes someone an Elder. Capitalise this word.
- **'Mob'** is an important term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as it is often used to describe who they are and where they are from. This term is generally used between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Therefore, it may not be appropriate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to use this term unless it is known to be acceptable.



- **Self-identifying terms**

It is important to recognise that Aboriginal people often use terms derived from languages and names used by Aboriginal people in specific areas, to identify themselves. For example:

- Murri (used by Aboriginal people in and from Queensland and north-west New South Wales)
- Goori (used by Aboriginal people in and from northern New South Wales coastal regions)
- Koori (used by Aboriginal people in and from parts of New South Wales and Victoria)
- Palawa (used by Aboriginal people in and from Tasmania)
- Nunga (used by Aboriginal people in and from South Australia)
- Yolngu (used by Aboriginal people in and from north-east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory)
- Anangu (used by Aboriginal people in and from Central Australia)
- Noongar (used by Aboriginal people in and from south-west Western Australia).

Where possible, identify and refer to people using local terms derived from their own languages. An Aboriginal person may choose to use self-identifying terms, but they should not be applied by non-Aboriginal people without expressed permission.

- **Variant spellings**

It is important to understand that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words have a range of different spellings, all of which are correct (eg, Gadigal/Cadigal/Caddiegal). When this occurs in English (eg, program/programme), the usual practice in a style guide is to choose one and use it consistently. In this case, however, we follow the principles of self-determination and respect by using whichever spelling is preferred by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in question (eg, the author of an article, a participant in a podcast, an interviewee or an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisation).

- **‘Sorry Business’** is a cultural practice surrounding the period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. Capitalise these words and be aware of cultural prohibitions in relation to naming the person who is deceased and/or displaying/broadcasting their face.

2.2 Promote and empower the voices, perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Adopt a strength-based approach when writing about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—this is essential for eliminating racism and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and agency and fosters positive relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.¹³ Avoid a deficit discourse when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—this is language that is disempowering and harmful and can create or reinforce negative stereotypes.

Also refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture with the same respect that you would show for any other culture—eg, don’t write about European ‘religious beliefs’ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘myths’.

It is also important to consult, listen and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and not speak on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. For example, a non-Indigenous person should consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authorities before producing documents pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In addition to fundamental respect, this ensures much greater accuracy.

¹³ Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education n.d., *Terminology Guide*, Reconciliation Australia, viewed 5 August 2024.



2.3 Disrespectful terms

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people define themselves by their family lineage and culture—not their skin colour. The physical appearance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people does not determine their identity. It is highly inappropriate and offensive to question the authenticity, identity, genetic make-up and/or appearance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹²

Terms such as ‘half-caste’, ‘quarter-caste’, ‘full-blood’ and phrases such as ‘he/she doesn’t look Aboriginal’ are extremely disrespectful to the complex history and experiences of First Nations peoples. This terminology is offensive, unacceptable and should not be used. Other terms to avoid include native, mixed blood, part-Aboriginal, 25 per cent/50 per cent Aboriginal, them, them people, those people, those folk, you people, and Aborigine.¹²

3 Dates of cultural significance

Throughout the year, many events are hosted across the country to recognise and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. The APA encourages participation in these significant events.

- **13 February: Anniversary of National Apology Day**
On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the National Apology to Australia’s Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples for the injustices of past government policies, particularly to the Stolen Generations.
- **17 March: National Close the Gap Day**
National Close the Gap Day is an annual event that raises awareness and seeks to close the gap with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, educational and employment outcomes between Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and non-Indigenous Australians.
- **26 May: National Sorry Day**
National Sorry Day provides an opportunity for peoples to come together and share the journey towards healing for the Stolen Generations, their families and communities.
- **27 May: 1967 Referendum**
The 1967 Referendum was a landmark achievement following decades of activism by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples, where more than 90 percent of Australians voted in favour of amending two sections of the Australian Constitution.
- **27 May to 3 June: National Reconciliation Week**
National Reconciliation Week celebrations commemorate two significant milestones in the reconciliation journey—the anniversaries of the successful 1967 Referendum and the High Court Mabo Decision.
- **3 June: Mabo Day**
On 3 June 1992, the High Court of Australia overturned the principle of ‘terra nullius’ or ‘nobody’s land as claimed by the British when they first arrived in this country. The decision has paved the way for Native Title legislation.
- **1 July: Coming of the Light**
The Coming of the Light is celebrated annually by Torres Strait Islander peoples. It marks the adoption of Christianity through island communities during the late nineteenth century.
- **3 July to 10 July: NAIDOC Week**
NAIDOC Week celebrations are held across Australia to celebrate history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- **4 August: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day**
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children’s Day is an opportunity for all Australians to learn about the crucial impact that community, culture and family play in the life of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child.

- **9 August: International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples**

On this day, people from around the world are encouraged to spread the United Nation's message on the protection and promotion of the rights of Indigenous peoples.

- **1 September: Indigenous Literacy Day**

Indigenous Literacy Day is a national celebration of culture, stories, language and literacy. This day raises awareness of the disadvantages experienced in remote communities and advocates for more access to literacy resources.

- **13 September: Anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly on Thursday, 13 September 2007.

4 Additional resources

- Australian Bureau of Statistics – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples)
- Australian Human Rights Commission (humanrights.gov.au)
- Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet (healthinonet.ecu.edu.au)
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (aiatsis.gov.au)
- Close the Gap Campaign (closethegap.org.au)
- Deadly Story (deadlystory.com)
- Lowitja Institute (lowitja.org.au)
- NAIDOC (naidoc.org.au)
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap (closingthegap.gov.au)
- National Apology (nma.gov.au)
- National Indigenous Health Leadership Alliance (nihla.org.au)
- Reconciliation Australia (reconciliation.org.au)
- Supply Nation – Indigenous business directory (supplynation.org.au)
- Uluru statement from the heart (ulurustatement.org/the-statement)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf)



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