

The terminology of Aboriginal Australia

A number of teachers and Aboriginal parents have expressed concern about the correct way of referring to Aboriginal peoples in written text.

Protocol around the terminology of Aboriginal Australia has existed for many years, this protocol has not changed, and in some instances has been strengthened and is considered by many to be more important than ever.

A person is Aboriginal. Aboriginal people are recognised as the original inhabitants of Australia. The Indigenous people of Australia are the Aboriginal peoples and Torres Straight Islanders. Indigenous people are culturally diverse with different languages, customs, traditions, heritage and beliefs. Different Aboriginal groups are known as language groups, Nations, or communities, depending on the context. The people in different language groups are also the custodians and owners of the Lore and law of their communities. Lore is often the responsibility of Elders or Custodians who are the keepers of knowledge. In some areas Elders have the respectful title of Aunty or Uncle to indicate their role.

In NSW, Dreaming(s), Creation stories or Dreaming stories are the appropriate terms to use to describe Indigenous beliefs. Dreaming is used by many people to refer to the period of creation. These terms are not Aboriginal in origin, but are used to convey a non-Aboriginal understanding of Aboriginal beliefs. Individual Aboriginal communities will have their own beliefs and ways of referring to these. Dreaming establishes rules that govern relations between people, land and all known things.

The use of capital letters, as modelled above, conveys respect. Australians would not consider using the grammatically incorrect 'australian' and it is unlikely that they would refer to the Indigenous people of, for example Canada, as 'inuit'. The use of capital letters conveys respect and is grammatically correct.

More important than perhaps all of this is the view of Aboriginal people on the matter. One vital aspect is that non-Aboriginal people will spell names of

other ethnic groups of people, such as: English, Jews, Germans, Maori, Vietnamese, Greek, etc, with a capital letter. Aboriginal people need to be presented with the same degree of respect, if not, this can be seen by Aboriginal people as a 'put down' and possibly racist. It is also breaking another English language 'rule' and could be interpreted as purposefully disrespectful or discriminatory.

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A more detailed explanation can be found on p. 13–14 of the NSW DET publication *Aboriginal Education K–12: resource guide* available in all schools.

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