



The Impact of Words: A Guide When Teaching American Indian Art & Culture

It's important to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous people, culture, traditions, and languages. Each Native tribe, community, or nation has its own distinct viewpoint and experience. When presenting the art and culture of a particular tribe or nation, learning and using accurate terms specific to the community can prevent stereotypes and encourage cultural understanding and sensitivity among your students.

NATIVE The term *Native* is often used officially or unofficially to describe Indigenous peoples from the United States (Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Alaska Natives), but it can also serve as a specific descriptor (Native people, Native lands, Native traditions, etc.).

American Indian or Native American?

American Indian, *Indian*, *Native American*, or *Native* are acceptable and often used interchangeably in the United States; however, Native people often have individual preferences on how they would like to be addressed. When identifying or describing Native art and culture, use the terminology the artist or members of the community use to describe their art or themselves. There are also several terms used to refer to Native peoples in other regions of the Western Hemisphere. The Inuit, Yup'ik, and Aleut peoples in the Arctic see themselves as culturally separate from Indians. In Canada, people refer to themselves as First Nations, First Peoples, or Aboriginal. In Mexico, Central America, and South America, the direct translation for Indian can have negative connotations. As a result, they prefer the Spanish words *indígena* (Indigenous), *comunidad* (community), and *pueblo* (people).

Tribe or Nation, and Why So Many Names?

Tribe, nation, community, pueblo, ranchería, village, band—American Indian people describe their own cultures and the places they come from in many ways. The words *tribe* and *nation* are used interchangeably, but hold very different meanings for many Native people. Tribes often have more than one name because when Europeans arrived in the Americas, they rarely used a nation's own name; instead, settlers used inaccurate pronunciations of the tribal names or renamed the tribes with their own language or terms. Europeans also used names with negative connotations. For instance, the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota people were called Sioux, a French approximation of "little snakes"—the name they were called by their enemy, the Ojibwe.

MYTHS+STEREOTYPES

Terminology and word usage is particularly important when talking about American Indian history and culture. In our society, inaccurate, insensitive, and offensive use of words and labeling continue to dehumanize Native people and their life experiences. Even the more subtle examples perpetuate harmful stereotypes, such as this sentence found in a recent book: *The Iroquois called themselves the Haudenosaunee.*

This use of the past tense implies that the Haudenosaunee live in a frozen and unchanging past, perpetuating the ongoing myth of the "Vanishing Indian" and negating the Haudenosaunee experience as living people who actively participate in contemporary society.

For more resources on the Haudenosaunee, check out this [guide for educators!](https://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/HaudenosauneeGuide.pdf) [nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/HaudenosauneeGuide.pdf]

Which Words Continue To Be Harmful?

The use of "Indian princess" and "warrior" to describe Native women and men perpetuates negative stereotypes and implies a monolithic culture, ignoring the diverse roles and statuses of women and men from hundreds of different societies in North America. Similarly, the misuse of the terms "costume" and "chief's headdress" belittle significant, and sometimes sacred, customs and specific cultural practices that define a community's core identity. Different nations have different terminology, laws, and cultural practices for ceremonial dress, including donning a headdress. For example, Miccosukee and Seminole elders and religious leaders wear a turban during the annual Green Corn Dance, their most important gathering. For more examples of headdresses, explore the introduction to our [Infinity of Nations](https://nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/infinityofnations/introduction.html) website. [nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/infinityofnations/introduction.html]