

Indigenous style principles

for writing and research



Nice to meet you.

I'm a writer & editor living on unceded Coast Salish lands in Vancouver, BC, and a member of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation in Treaty 6 (Saskatchewan).

- Editor, Indigenous-led conservation coverage at *The Narwhal*
- Contributing writer to *The Walrus*
- Contributing editor to *Maclean's*
- Recent bylines: *Chatelaine*, *The Globe & Mail*, *IndigiNews*, *The Tyee*
- Also: Master of Public Health (2011), UBC

Today's discussion

- Where to begin when working with Indigenous people & communities
- Thoughtful approaches
- Writing about Indigenous peoples — a few style notes
- Resources
- Questions!

Caveats

- I'm a nehiyaw iskwew & a member of the Vancouver urban Indigenous community
- Not an “Indigenous expert”, and also not a data expert.

Writing about Indigenous people

My approach

*“In narratives that hinge on proving our humanness,
Indigenous people sit stilled in the role of the described.
As the described, our words are pit against us.”*

Billy-Ray Belcourt

Begin with relationships

- Trust, reciprocity and understanding are foundational to doing good work.
- You cannot be an “objective” outsider. Storytelling is not a neutral act.
- Working from the outside in reproduces extractive and colonial relationships, and is fundamentally limiting.
- Showing up begins long before a project is initiated, and continues after the project ends.

How are you holding yourself accountable?

What are your intentions?

- What is your purpose?
- Why do you want to do this?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- Who are you in relationship with?
- What is the risk of harm?

You are responsible for your education, your conduct, and your impact.

Resist silos

- “Indigenous stories” and “non-Indigenous stories” is a false dichotomy.
- Are you framing Indigenous people as “others” in your approach?
- Where do Indigenous people show up in your work or writing?
- If they are absent, ask yourself why?

Reach outward

- Remember Indigenous communities are not monolithic — across or within
- Often the same few Indigenous people are used again and again when reporting on communities
- Follow protocol, but look beyond formal leadership when engaging with community: Elders, Youth, survivors
- Consider whose voices you are including, particularly in urban spaces & overlapping territories

Approach past research with care

- Building on a body of work that is colonial will reproduce colonial assumptions and harms
- Amplify the work done by Indigenous communities with consent
- Limitations, undercounting and biases are present in most major data sets we have
- Consider what has been left out of the written record, and why

Who is an “expert”? Who is an authority?

How is your work reproducing or challenging colonial assumptions?

Move beyond “inclusion” & “engagement”

- This isn't a value in and of itself!
- Indigenous participation should be active, equal, and woven throughout every stage.
- Don't include Indigenous people just to include them.
- Are you putting a burden on Indigenous people to decolonize your project through their presence?
- What value are you putting back into the communities you are working with?

Consider demands

- Indigenous people are underrepresented in most spaces.
- Consultation & inclusion can also create unsustainable burdens.
- How are you compensating people for time and expertise?
- How are you using their time?

Be respectful, flexible & expansive in your scheduling. Tight timelines can impede good work.

Consent & care

- Consider the power dynamic.
- Make data available: transcripts, notes, audio and video recordings.
- Mutual agreement on how information can be used.
- Active & ongoing consent to participate.
- Offer proactive explanations. Don't place the burden on subjects to ask the "right" questions.
- Don't disappear! Ensure communication continues past interviews & publication.

How can you mitigate the possibility of harm?

How will you address harm that you cause?

Trauma-informed interviewing

- Learn & follow cultural protocols
- Ensure adequate support— 1:1 interviews are not always appropriate.
- Make cultural supports available (Elders, smudging)
- Go at the pace of the interviewee
- Offer food, drinks, comfortable space
- Introduce yourself! Get personal.
- Share questions in advance, offer preparations, don't ambush, and take plenty of time.
- Don't focus on problems/trauma; you are looking at the whole person, culture, context.

Style principles

A few questions & best practices

Do you know what you're talking about?

- The “Turtle Island” fallacy.
- Don't default to generalized language, especially out of ignorance.
- Indigenous vs. First Nations, Metis, Inuit — these terms are not interchangeable.
- Interrogate your biases.

Resist the urge to make assumptions or reframe language.

Who are you speaking about?

- Define communities & nations.
- Ask subjects how they identify.
- Indigenous people are *nations*, not *ethnicities*.
 - This is also true for the Métis Nation.
- Avoid colonial possessives (we are not *Canada's Indigenous People*)
- Two-Spirit \neq queer

Whose lands are you on? How are they represented in your work?

Challenging colonial framing

- “Canada’s Indigenous Peoples”
- “Traditional territory”
- Be vigilant about past-tense and passive framing
- Recognize and affirm Indigenous sovereignty, rights, and laws
- But also, don’t sugarcoat: Indian, Aboriginal & Native are used in specific (often legal) contexts.
- Allow people to define their own identities

Avoid (traumatic) stereotypes

- Learn Duncan McCue's four D's
- Expand your thinking beyond awareness dates (June 21, September 30)
- Write about something other than trauma
- Don't project trauma onto Indigenous stories

Sovereign languages

- Use Indigenous language wherever possible.
- Translate with great care.
- Learn & apply style conventions. (For example, there are no capital letters in Cree!)
- Don't other through grammar conventions (italics, quotations, etc)

Don't be afraid to ask questions!

- Many people are terrified of this!
- Don't prioritize your discomfort over the integrity of your work.
- Better to be ignorant prior to publication.
- Remember: be skeptical of past research.
- Doing the groundwork to introduce yourself & build a relationship goes a long way here
- **Indigenous people are nice, I promise.**

Resources

- *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*
Gregory Younging, PhD
- *Decolonizing Journalism: A Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities*
Duncan McCue
- Reporting in Indigenous Communities: <https://riic.ca/>
- *The View from Somewhere Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*
Lewis Raven Wallace
- Your sylix Sisters — Trauma-informed & culturally sensitive communications
<https://www.yoursyilxsisters.com/>

Questions?

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Thank you!

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