

First Nations or Indigenous?

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First Nations

“First Nations” is used to describe Indigenous peoples in Canada who are neither Métis nor Inuit. It’s usually written in the plural according to the *Elements of Indigenous Style* by Gregory Younging, e.g., “First Nations person” or “she is First Nations”¹ You can also talk about one First Nation in particular, such as the Kahnawake First Nation. The expression became popular in the 1980s after the adoption of the name Assembly of First Nations (AFN) by the national advocacy organization for First Nations people in Canada. According to its website, the AFN represents more than 900,000 people living in 634 First Nations communities or reserves who speak languages from more than 50 distinct language groups.

Indigenous Peoples

According to the 2016 Census, there were 1,673,785 Indigenous people in Canada, accounting for 4.9% of the total population, up from 3.8% in 2006. In addition to approximately 60 languages, some Indigenous people speak English while others speak French because of either geography or history. Some Indigenous people in Quebec are more English-speaking than French-speaking like the Mohawk or Kanien'kehá:ka.

As a result of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, “Indigenous” has become a standard term. “Indigenous,” which comes from the Latin *indigena* and *-genus*, or born in the region, pertains to or is concerned with the Aboriginal inhabitants of a region. It is now used in Canada as an umbrella term to include First Nations, Métis and Inuit. According to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, First Nation is a Canadianism; Americans prefer to say American Indian or Amerindian. Indian is much more common in Canada than Amerindian.²

Although, we mainly see “Indigenous” these days, you may need to use “Aboriginal” or “Status Indian” in some contexts where the legislation hasn’t changed yet. The 141-year-old *Indian Act* is an anomaly. “Status Indian” is the legal designation given to individuals governed by the Act. Gregory Younging³ recommends that, because of the problematic nature of “Indian” in general, it is best to clarify by writing *Status Indian under the Indian Act*. The terminology used in legislation is subject to change.

1. Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style, A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, Brush Education Inc., 2018, pp. 63-64.
2. *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, edited by Katherine Barber, Oxford 2004, Amerindian p. 42 and Indigenous p. 770.
3. Gregory Younging, *supra*, p. 69.

*The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.