



The Native American Journalists Association empowers journalists by creating and cultivating resources for Native and mainstream media. Through programs that support diversity and defend challenges to free press, speech and expression, NAJA promotes accurate and ethical media coverage of Indian Country. NAJA supports all newsrooms in maintaining the highest ethical standards when reporting on Native people, communities and tribes, and offers these style guides for use in tribal and mainstream newsrooms.

Indigenous Capitalize in reference to a distinct, historical and pre-colonial culture, society or people. Capitalize the words “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” to identify unique, ethnic communities with political representation and international presence. Extend the same treatment as other identity-based descriptors such as Hispanic, Nordic or African-American. The words also reflect changing attitudes toward the term “Indian” – which is always capitalized – by academics, legal scholars, writers and Indigenous communities. These factors make the words “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” identities, not adjectives, and failing to capitalize these terms can lead to confusion over the difference between indigenous plants and animals and Indigenous human beings. **See Indians.**

Tribe, Tribal Refers to a sovereign political entity, communities sharing a common ancestry, culture or language, and a social group of linked families who may be part of a larger ethnic group. Identify tribes by the political identity specified by the tribe, nation or community (e.g., the Apache Tribe of Oklahoma, the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, or the Cherokee Nation). **See Indians.**

Reporters should identify Indigenous people by their specific tribe(s), nations or communities. Headlines and text should also refer to tribes by their proper names, not with a catch-all phrase such as “Oklahoma Native American Tribe” or “Native American group.” Failing to use the proper name of the tribe is neither accurate, fair or thorough and erases the tribe’s identity.

Indians The terms “American Indian” and “Native American” are generally acceptable and can be used interchangeably, although individuals may have a preference. However, the terms should only be used to describe groups of two or more individuals of different tribal affiliations. Journalists should identify people by their specific tribal affiliation when reporting on individuals or individual tribes. Reporters unsure of names and terms should determine which words are preferred, or access tribal government websites for correct nomenclature.

Identity Ensure that sources attributed as Native American are actually Native American. While millions of people in the United States identify as American Indian, that does not necessarily make them American Indian in the eyes of tribes or governments. The federal government considers someone American Indian if he or she belongs to a state or federally recognized tribe, and tribes have the exclusive right to determine their own membership or citizenship as sovereign nations.

Mascots NAJA advises media professionals to discontinue any use of racial epithets and images when reporting on sports teams. A growing body of scientific research has shown that the use of American Indian mascots, symbols and images has a negative effect on both Native and non-Native students. Sports reporters and media organizations should adopt a policy that refers to teams by city name and league only, while eliminating the use of terms and imagery that perpetuate racial stereotypes and bias. If, after editorial consideration, the use of racial terms is necessary, the term should be placed in quotes.



Blood Quantum Avoid quantifying how “Indian” a person is, especially when referring to blood quantum of tribal members. Genetic markers may not be consistent with cultural identity or tribal citizenship, and to link the two diminishes the political identity and rights of the person. While many tribal governments use blood quantum to determine membership, others use ancestral descent to determine citizenship. Rather than stating that a person is two percent Cherokee, state the person is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. Instead of describing a person as one sixty-fourth Choctaw, report that they are a Choctaw tribal member.

Native The term “Native” can be used as an adjective to describe styles; For instance, Native fashion, Native music or Native art. Journalists should exercise caution when using the word, though, as it is primarily used as slang.

Indian Country A legal term used in Title 18 of the U.S. Code. It broadly defines federal and tribal jurisdiction in crimes affecting American Indians on reservations. However, it also has popular usage, describing reservations, lands held within tribal jurisdictions and areas with American Indian populations

Sovereignty Tribes possess the sovereign right to govern their territory and internal affairs. The status of tribes as self-governing nations is affirmed and upheld by treaties, case law and the U.S. Constitution.

Legal scholars explain that tribes are inherently sovereign, meaning they do not trace their existence to the United States. In the 1800s, a series of Supreme Court rulings recognized the right of American Indian tribes to self-govern and manage their internal affairs as “domestic, dependent nations.” The rulings keep states from interfering with that right while allowing Congress to override a tribal nation’s authority.

Treaties From 1777 to 1871, U.S. relations with tribal nations were negotiated through legally-binding agreements called treaties. These treaties, or agreements, between tribal governments and the United States transferred and created property rights as well as service obligations. Treaties often promised protection, goods, services, self-governing rights, health care and homelands to tribes in exchange for cooperation and vast tracts of land. Although the government stopped entering into treaties with tribes in 1872, the Constitution holds treaties as “the supreme law of the land.” Once signed, a treaty stays in effect unless superseded by acts of Congress or other treaties.

Trust Responsibility The federal Indian trust responsibility is considered one of the more important principles in federal Indian law. It is a legally enforceable fiduciary obligation by the United States to protect tribal lands, assets, resources and treaty rights. Supreme Court rulings suggest that trust responsibility entails legal as well as moral duties.

