

Tips for Teachers: Developing Instructional Materials about American Indians

Prepared by Debbie Reese, (Nambé Owingeh) and Jean Mendoza (White)
American Indians in Children's Literature



As educators develop or adapt lesson plans to teach about Native peoples, we recommend attention to the following:

1. “American Indian” and “Native American” are broad terms that describe the Native Nations of peoples who have lived on North America for thousands of years. Recently, “Indigenous” has come into use, too (note: always use a capital letter for Indigenous). Many people use the three terms interchangeably but educationally, best practice is to teach about and use the name of a specific Native Nation.
2. There are over 500 sovereign Native Nations that have treaty or legal agreements with the United States. Like any sovereign nation in the world, they have systems of government with unique ways of selecting leaders, determining who their citizens are (also called tribal members), and exercising jurisdiction over their lands. That political status distinguishes Native peoples from other minority or underrepresented groups in the United States. Native peoples have cultures (this includes unique languages, stories, religions, etc.) specific to who they are, but their most important attribute is sovereignty. Best practice—educationally—is to begin with the sovereignty of Native Nations and then delve into unique cultural attributes (languages, religions, etc.)
3. There is a tendency to talk, speak, and write about Native peoples in the past tense, as if they no longer exist. You can help change that misconception by using present tense verbs in your lesson plans, and in your verbal instruction when you are teaching about Native peoples.
4. Another tendency is to treat Native creation and traditional stories like folklore or as writing prompts, or to use elements within them as the basis for art activities. Those stories are of religious significance to Native peoples and should be respected in the same ways that people respect Bible stories.
5. In many school districts, instruction and stories about Native peoples are limited to Columbus Day or November (Native American month) or Thanksgiving. Native peoples are Native all year long and information about them should be included year-round.
6. Native peoples of the 500+ sovereign nations have unique languages. A common mistake is to think that “papoose” is the Native word for baby and that “squaw” is the word for woman. In fact, each nation has its own word for baby and woman, and some words—like squaw—are considered derogatory. We also have unique clothing. Some use feathered headdresses; some do not.
7. To interrupt common misconceptions, develop instructional materials that focus on a specific nation—ideally—one in the area of the school where you teach. Look for that nation’s website and share it with your students. Teach them to view these websites as primary sources. Instead of starting instruction in the past, start with the present day concerns of that nation.
8. To gain an understanding of issues that are of importance to Native peoples, read Native news media like *Indian Country Today*, *Indianz*, and listen to radio programs like “Native America Calling.”
9. The National Congress of American Indians has free resources online that can help you become more knowledgeable. An especially helpful one is *Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction*, available here: <http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes>.
10. Share what you learn with your fellow teachers!