

Writing a Land (and Collections) Acknowledgement, for Colleges and Institutions

In the past decade, the regular use of land acknowledgments has risen in museums, libraries, universities, and related spaces. The land acknowledgement for this exhibit is an attempt to rewrite the narrative that acknowledgements have taken recently; namely that many are presented as a formality rooted in the past and read like a history lesson of names and dates, not future-facing documents with intent behind them.

In an effort to work against that, we included more than an acknowledgement of the land in which our institution is sat upon, but also a discussion of the collections of the Clements library, specifically of those used in this project. In this guide, which also includes links to other land acknowledgement guides, we would like to foster a discussion about the efficacy of that.

Questions to consider during drafting:

- Why are we writing this acknowledgement? What has pushed us to do this now?
- How do we acknowledge the present and avoid locking Indigenous people in the past? Do we speak about how the past is connected to current oppression?
- What verb tenses are used? Are verbs active or passive, conjugated in the past, present, or future tenses?
- What are current issues facing Indigenous communities, and how are they related to our institution?
- What tribes should we research and/or reach out to when writing this acknowledgement?
 - For colleges/universities— is there a Native American Student group to contact?
 - Consider local tribes as well as tribes that were removed from the land you are now occupying.
 - Consider Indigenous people worldwide whose objects and knowledge are housed by your institution.
- What are we going to do beyond this land acknowledgement to reconcile with history and how it has created the present moment?
- What are ways in which our institution continues to perpetuate colonialism?

Things to keep in mind:

- A wide range of individuals should be involved in creating the land acknowledgement. Consider making a committee, or having all employees contribute to drafts of acknowledgements if your institution or department is smaller.
- You should respectfully reach out to local tribes to better understand specific aspects of your institution's colonialism. *Building a relationship with local tribes is a great step past just writing a land acknowledgement.*
- It is better to take a longer period to draft an acknowledgement than to send out a meaningless statement.
- Acknowledgments are not one-size-fits-all—you may be able to make a brief statement that is agreed upon, but each use should be individualized for the context.

PURPOSE OF LAND AND COLLECTIONS ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land Acknowledgements **are:**

- Expressions of a willingness to listen to Natives, to be learn and respond appropriately, to reform, and to repatriate.
- More than listing treaties/dates/etc, they foster self and institutional reflection
- Unique to each project
- Made in conjunction with local Native people, to highlight the specific ways in which you and your institution have benefitted from their oppression on the land in which you are now standing and the collections you own.
- The first steps towards recognizing Indigenous rights and sovereignty
 - It is the beginning of a longer process.
 - Land Acknowledgements can express an intention and indicate the next step your institution will take.
- Statements that lead from the past into the present, with an eye toward the future.

Land Acknowledgements **are not:**

- Apologies
 - A land acknowledgment is not intended to alleviate settler or other guilt, nor is it a reward. It is never possible to apologize for the acts done against Indigenous people. You do not have the power to do that. There are no words to remediate those acts.
- Something that should be done only when exhibits, projects, buildings, etc. explicitly thematize Native people or land
 - All land is Native land.
 - All aspects of life under colonisation have benefitted from the oppression and exploitation of Native people and resources.
- Generic institution-wide statements
 - While the plot of physical land that an institution sits on might be consistent across projects, each project will have its own relationship to ongoing dispossession and its own tools to work against colonisation today.
 - Each project team should consider the ways that they specifically benefit from colonisation of Native people, land, and knowledge and consider that when drafting the acknowledgement.
- History lessons
 - Colonialism has not stopped, and the issues facing Indigenous people today are still being caused by settler colonialism.

Other Guides:

[Territory Acknowledgement](#) by Allison Jones

[Are you planning to do a Land Acknowledgement?](#) by Dr. Debbie Reese

[Beyond Territorial Acknowledgments](#) by Chelsea Vowel

Recommended Readings, for all audiences:

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang, "[Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.](#)" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society (1:1 2012)*, 1-40.

Recommended Readings, with a focus on museum studies and library sciences:

Elzi, Erin and Katherine M Crowe. "This is the Oppressor's Language Yet I Need It to Talk to You: Native American Name Authorities at the University of Denver." In *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control*, edited by J. Sandburg.

King, Lisa. *Legible Sovereignties: Rhetoric, Representations, and Native American Museums*. Oregon State UP, 2017.

Lonetree, Amy. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Wiggins, Jennifer. "Intellectual Property Rights: a Focus on Photography of Native Americans." *Nebraska Anthropologist (1: 1996)*, 1-6.

<p>Where is your institution?</p>	
<p>Using the website https://native-land.ca/ find what broad tribal group originally lived on the land now a part of your town.</p>	
<p>What specific tribes are in or near your town today?</p>	
<p>Who has been removed or relocated to your town historically? Searching something like “Southeast Michigan Indian Removal” will help find resources.</p>	
<p>Why?</p> <p>Who benefited from this?</p>	

<p>If people were removed from your town, where are they now?</p> <p>If people were relocated to your town, where did they come from?</p>	
<p>How should this history influence you land acknowledgement?</p>	
<p>Why has this time been chosen to write a land acknowledgement?</p>	
<p>Research current issues facing Native communities. What are some nationally and locally relevant?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •

For museums— What in your collection originally belonged to Native Americans? Are these objects from local tribes or from distant ones? Why?	
What objects are from other indigenous peoples worldwide?	
What is the specific exhibition/event/ect. that this land acknowledgement is being written for?	
How were these objects brought into the museum?	
How have local, national, and indigenous peoples worldwide been involved in the process	

<p>of collecting and exhibiting these objects?</p>	
<p>How have local and removed tribes been connected with to create a relationship between museums, the land and objects the museum stewards, and the original owners?</p>	
<p>What are goals your institution has beyond making a land acknowledgment?</p>	
<p>What are three actionable items, big or small, that your institution can do to help achieve these goals? What are the time frames to complete these?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •

