

# More Than Personal Communication Templates For Citing Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Lorisia MacLeod

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Article abstract

In this project report, I introduce the citation templates for Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers that I created in partnership with the staff of the NorQuest Indigenous Student Centre. These citation templates have been adopted/linked to by twenty-five institutions across Canada and the United States. They represent an attempt to formalize something that Indigenous scholars have been doing for decades: fighting to find a better way to acknowledge our voices and knowledges within academia. I outline how the project was developed, highlighting the importance of stable, respectful relationships, before delving into some of the literature and personal experiences that provided the reasoning for why more culturally responsive citation is needed. Part of the background is acknowledging my own experiences as an Indigenous scholar, but I also draw on literature from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to illustrate the interdisciplinary need for these templates. I provide in-depth explanations of each element in the new citation templates to explain the reasoning behind and/or importance of each element. For example, I outline why including the individual's nation/community is important for breaking down the pan-Indigenous stereotype and helping scholars to recognize the variation of knowledge across the hundreds of unique Indigenous communities. While the main focus of this paper will be these specific citation templates, I hope that it will also empower, inspire, and provide a case study of how academia can make small changes to improve the respectful recognition of Indigenous knowledges and voices. Given the recent focus in educational institutions on being more inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing, I think it is only right that we also look at reconsidering how we treat things like Indigenous oral knowledge in academia and whether there are systems in place that implicitly prioritize written knowledge over oral knowledge in a form of ongoing colonialism.

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## PROJECT REPORT

# More Than Personal Communication: Templates for Citing Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Lorisia MacLeod

James Smith Cree Nation

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In this project report, I introduce the citation templates for Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers that I created in partnership with the staff of the NorQuest Indigenous Student Centre. These citation templates have been adopted/linked to by twenty-five institutions across Canada and the United States. They represent an attempt to formalize something that Indigenous scholars have been doing for decades: fighting to find a better way to acknowledge our voices and knowledges within academia. I outline how the project was developed, highlighting the importance of stable, respectful relationships, before delving into some of the literature and personal experiences that provided the reasoning for why more culturally responsive citation is needed. Part of the background is acknowledging my own experiences as an Indigenous scholar, but I also draw on literature from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to illustrate the interdisciplinary need for these templates. I provide in-depth explanations of each element in the new citation templates to explain the reasoning behind and/or importance of each element. For example, I outline why including the individual's nation/community is important for breaking down the pan-Indigenous stereotype and helping scholars to recognize the variation of knowledge across the hundreds of unique Indigenous communities. While the main focus of this paper will be these specific citation templates, I hope that it will also empower, inspire, and provide a case study of how academia can make small changes to improve the respectful recognition of Indigenous knowledges and voices. Given the recent focus in educational institutions on being more inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing, I think it is only right that we also look at reconsidering how we treat things like Indigenous oral knowledge in academia and whether there are systems in place that implicitly prioritize written knowledge over oral knowledge in a form of ongoing colonialism.

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**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledges; oral teachings; citations; Elders; Knowledge Keepers

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2018, NorQuest College created and published templates for how to cite Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in their APA and MLA citation guides.<sup>1</sup> These templates were done only for APA and MLA because those were the two citation styles used at NorQuest; however, work is currently underway at Xwi7x̱wa Library (at the University of British Columbia) to adapt these templates for Chicago style as well. I developed these templates alongside the amazing staff at the Indigenous Student Centre, who provided guidance about and perspectives on what citation guides lacked when it came to citing Indigenous oral traditions. This project in part sprouted from the frustration I felt during my undergraduate degree

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<sup>1</sup> While these templates are usable in their current format, I fully intend that improvements will be made in the future as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars use these templates and provide feedback. If APA and MLA can have multiple editions, it seems only fair that the first attempts to integrate a standard for Elders and Knowledge Keepers be given the same courtesy to evolve and be refined through use.

when I saw anthropologists who were trying to do culturally connected and respectful work limited by how they could cite unrecorded oral teachings. At that time, I complained about the unequal treatment of Indigenous knowledges but was not in a position to recommend changes until I completed my master of library and information studies. In most institutions, it is library staff (or, in some cases, the writing centre staffed by those with an MLIS) who answer student questions about citation, maintain citation guides, and generally serve as the entire support system for citation. This places libraries in a uniquely powerful position to implement and promote changes that align with our field's core value of social justice, such as improving the treatment of Indigenous voices in citation guides.

### **But Why?**

Some scholars might question the need to create these templates when both APA and MLA style guides have a format for citing personal communications and have traditionally encouraged the use of that format to cite any oral communication without a written or audio recording. This is a fair question, especially for those scholars who have never attempted to integrate oral teachings into their academic writing. To put it simply, to use the template for personal communication is to place an Indigenous oral teaching on the same footing as a quick phone call, giving it only a short in-text citation (as is the standard with personal communication citations) while even tweets are given a reference citation. Some oral teachings have survived since time immemorial and deserve the same respect that we afford the great stories and minds of the Western world: a proper citation. Peter M. Whiteley (2002) points out the damage that viewing Indigenous oral teachings as lesser than Western written materials has had within anthropology:

Scholarly denial of validity to oral histories has effaced them, producing a sense that they really do not exist—they are, again, just “myth.” The result is that, in anthropological discourse, oral tradition is for the most part ruled out as a historical source; if it's not written down, or manifestly encoded in the material record, it's not history. (406)

A common concern from non-Indigenous academics is that, because oral teachings are not written down, they lack consistency and objectivity. In reality, however, oral teachings are “densely coded and do speak simultaneously in a variety of cultural registers (cognitive, natural-historical, psychological, religious) as well as the directly historical” and many of the primary sources that scholars hold in high regard, “such as diaries, journals, even official reports, are certainly no less interpretively problematic, as historians currently recognize” (Whiteley 2002, 408). In fact, to claim that communities do not engage in critical evaluations of their own oral teachings is to allow the clouds to obscure one's view from the ivory tower. As Whiteley (2002) points out:

Scientific archaeologists may protest that their explanations are distinguished from oral traditions by criteria of testability or falsifiability. But in my own experience, Pueblo oral historiography clearly attends to its own canons for evaluating truth-claims and appraising the plausibility of particular accounts of the past. (407)

Unfortunately, many of our professors, leaders, and highly regarded academics were trained in a Eurocentric, racist system that falsely asserted the superiority of written Western knowledge over Indigenous oral traditions and ways of knowing. This longstanding academic perspective has presented a barrier to including Indigenous knowledges for too long, and with many educational organizations undergoing Indigenization initiatives it is time to critically regard even our systems of citation to break down those barriers to respectful inclusion.

### **Background**

This is not a new problem, nor is my solution completely new—Indigenous scholars have always attempted to integrate their knowledge into academia. In some cases, this has involved getting permission from thesis committees or advisors to cite oral teachings in a different, more culturally appropriate manner than that recommended by official style guides (if they have provided a citation format at all). This important, righteous rebellion is what planted the seeds for these templates, and I thank these trailblazers.

There was one element of this situation that I felt I could do something about. Often, Indigenous scholars have struggled through degree(s) within colonial frameworks before they get to a point of academic agency (often their master's or doctoral program) to be in a position to advocate for this missing piece of education. So, one of the goals of creating these templates and making them publicly available was to bolster Indigenous

scholars' ability to advocate to include this type of knowledge earlier in these academic journeys. Any Indigenous scholar can pull up one of these templates and send it to their academic authority figure regardless of whether the template has formally been adopted at their institution. The benefit of having the templates live on an educational institution's page is that it gives Indigenous oral knowledge academic credibility by positioning it alongside the conventional forms of written scholarship privileged in Western academia, which is useful for students who are trying to convince supervisors who might feel uncomfortable about deviating from official standards and processes under the flag of diversity or decolonization.

Including these citation templates in institutional citation guides is a small anti-colonial action that can help improve the experiences of Indigenous students. It is true that there will likely be a small percentage of learners who use these templates, but it is also important for the learners who are not using Indigenous oral knowledge to see it presented as an equal and valid information format alongside familiar formats like books and journals. These templates are a small resource to support institutions looking for ways to actively incorporate anti-racism and anti-colonialism in scholarly writing.

## The Templates

### APA

Last name, First initial. Nation/Community. Treaty Territory if applicable. Where they live if applicable. Topic/subject of communication if applicable. personal communication. Month Date, Year.

For example:

Cardinal, D. Goodfish Lake Cree Nation. Treaty 6. Lives in Edmonton. Oral teaching. personal communication. April 4, 2004.

### MLA

Last name, First name. Nation/Community. Treaty Territory if applicable. City/Community they live in if applicable. Topic/subject of communication if applicable. Date Month Year.

For example:

Cardinal, Delores. Goodfish Lake Cree Nation. Treaty 6. Lives in Edmonton. Oral teaching. 4 April 2004.

## An Explanation of the Elements Found in These Templates

### Name of the Elder or Knowledge Keeper

The individual's name(s). If it is a name that can be put in APA's standard format (last name, first initial) or MLA's standard format (last name, first name), then it can be formatted that way. If there is a title or status that the Knowledge Keeper would like included, then, following the same recommendations that APA gives for the Pope, that title or status can precede their name (Lee 2017). Additionally, if the name is written in an alphabet that is non-Latin script, that should be included (though if the work is going to be published, consider checking with the publisher to ensure that the name can be printed using the Indigenous language). If a name or title is written in non-Latin script, it will appear first in the list of references. This is contrary to APA's stance that non-Latin script must always be translated, but many of our names hold great importance, and with the International Decade of Indigenous Languages nearing it is a small but important act to include these names. The author will want to ask if the Knowledge Keeper would like to include a second, English name in addition, to enable non-fluent readers to attribute the knowledge to them more easily. The inclusion of both names facilitates citation if the non-Latin text is not replicable as well as aids text-to-speech learners since most text-to-speech software does not recognize Indigenous language scripts. If the reference does use Indigenous-language text, however, the preferred way to cite is to use that Indigenous-language text.

### Nation/Community

This element has been added to the seventh edition of the APA style guide, but only for a slightly modified personal communication in-text citation for Indigenous oral knowledge. This element is important because of the key importance of relationships when it comes to Indigenous knowledges and to recognize which nations hold which teachings. Many Indigenous folks have spoken to the importance of "who claims you and who do you claim" to Indigenous identity. The current best resource to understand the role of relationships in connection to Indigenous knowledges and identity would be Gregory Younging's book *Elements of*

*Indigenous Style.* The nation/community element of the citation not only recognizes the important relationship of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to their nation or community; it also helps avoid the trap of pan-Indigeneity and ensures that members of that community can find that work while searching for their nation in their library. Including this element allows scholars working with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers to celebrate the nuances between different community teachings instead of lumping all Indigenous people into one group.

### **Treaty Territory, If Applicable**

It is important to note that this element of the citation is only used if applicable; if not applicable, it is left out. For some individuals, or in relation to some teachings, it may be important for the Knowledge Keeper to acknowledge their relationship to a treaty. This may be particularly important regarding oral teachings about land or treaty rights.

### **City/Community They Live in, If Applicable**

Similarly, this element is only used if applicable. For many Indigenous people, they may live in places that differ from the origins of their knowledge, nation, or birthplace, and, in some cases, this may be an important relationship they want to recognize.

### **A Brief Description or Title of the Teaching**

This part of the citation is where information such as the familial provenance of the teaching could be included. For example, the citation might read: "Story about the sisters of the river as told to [Name of story keeper] by their grandmother [or the grandmother's name]." In use, this element might be best discussed with the Knowledge Keeper, a practice that creates the added benefit of opening the door for scholars to discuss with Knowledge Keepers how they would describe or classify the knowledge they are sharing.

### **Personal Communication**

This element is left in for the APA templates as a nod to the official APA classification of oral knowledge. It is purposefully left with a lower case *p* because that is how it would appear in the in-text citation. If a citation style were to integrate these templates, this element could be removed.

### **Date**

The date is placed after the *personal communication* element, just like in the citation format for personal communications. As exact a date as possible is preferred because the precision would help other scholars working with the same Knowledge Keeper to identify which teaching was being cited. This element can also be key if there are temporal or seasonal restrictions to knowledge, though the scholar should discuss that in depth with the Knowledge Keeper if they are considering including that knowledge in a publication that may be read at any time.

### **Conclusion**

If, as librarians, we claim that we serve our patrons' needs, then we should challenge standards like official citation styles when we see researchers, scholars, and users noting the limitations of these citation methods (Cook-Lynn 1996; Fixico 1996; Braun et al. 2014; Whiteley 2002). Whether it be in medicine, psychology, anthropology, archeology or other fields, our patrons have noted that Indigenous oral knowledge is underused or missing entirely, and we have a responsibility to acknowledge and improve that. These citation templates are only one way of supporting Indigenous learners looking to weave together their community knowledge with academic systems, but they serve to start moving beyond passively including Indigenous knowledges to actively dismantling colonial systems that mistreat Indigenous knowledges. These templates are necessary because we cannot call on academics (especially Indigenous academics) to commit to Indigenizing the academy without fearlessly addressing the mechanisms through which Indigenous knowledges has been excluded and consider new processes that are more respectful and inclusive.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and thank the staff at NorQuest College's Indigenous Student Centre who worked with me on the creation of these citation templates. The templates noted here can be found on NorQuest Library's citation LibGuides: <https://libguides.norquest.ca/apa/cite#IDG> and <https://libguides.norquest.ca/apa/cite#IDG>

norquest.ca/MLA/in\_text. These citation guides are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

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