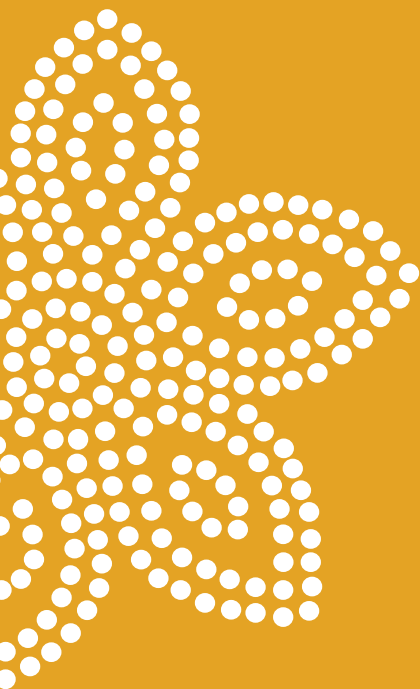


Indigenous Editors
ASSOCIATION

Reading with Respect: A Guide to Cultural Authenticity Reads

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Reading with Respect: A Guide to Cultural Authenticity Reads

The Indigenous Editors Association (IEA) developed this guide to support those seeking to conduct cultural authenticity reads—also known as sensitivity reads—of Indigenous content respectfully and effectively. Following a brief introduction, the guide outlines key elements that contribute to a well-executed authenticity read. It provides guidance on respectful collaboration, fair compensation, and editorial integration. At the end of the guide, you will find a practical checklist for reviewers.

Introduction

Cultural authenticity reads are editorial reviews that assess cultural accuracy and identify potentially harmful content to people from underrepresented communities. These reads are typically conducted by individuals with lived experience in the culture or community being represented. The goal of authenticity reads is not to censor content, but to enhance the quality and integrity of the text.

Authenticity reads can help authors avoid publishing disrespectful, inaccurate, or stereotypical portrayals. However, if treated as a last-minute formality, they risk becoming superficial exercises that fail to address deeper structural concerns. This is particularly true when they are requested late in the editorial process, such as at the proofreading stage. At that point, it is often too late to address systemic or structural issues within a manuscript, even if the reviewer identifies them. Emerging advice recommends that authenticity reads take place during the developmental or structural editing stage, when substantive revisions are still possible. Doing so integrates the read meaningfully into the editorial process rather than treating it as a cursory, box-ticking measure.

The goal of this guide is to support the integration of authenticity reads as a standard part of the publishing process. At the same time, we recognize that authenticity reads are not a substitute for inclusive authorship or content. Rather, they are one tool among many that can help make publishing a more equitable and reciprocal process—one that serves storytellers from all communities. This guide is intended for authors, publishers, and authenticity readers. Authors and publishers will gain a clearer

understanding of how and when to initiate meaningful reads, while authenticity readers will find guidance on respectful practices, expectations, and editorial considerations.

Key Elements of Cultural Authenticity Reads

Read for Context

- The reviewer begins by reading the manuscript and identifying the sections where their lived experience is relevant.
- They consider how the characters, plot, setting, language, values, and storyline reflect that cultural or community context.

Identify Harmful Content

- Harmful content can be subtle, and care must be taken to assess how elements identified in the previous step interact.
- While overt stereotypes, tropes, and microaggressions may be easier to identify, inaccuracies, omissions, and more nuanced character issues may require closer scrutiny.
- This stage also involves identifying or querying uses of Traditional Knowledge—particularly sacred or community-held knowledge.
 - For more information on extractive practices around community knowledge, see *Giving Back, Moving Forward: Practicing Reciprocity in Publishing*, a research report by the Indigenous Editors Association and Ravenspace Press.

Remain Accountable to Cultural Communities and Relationships

- The reviewer may need to consult with specific communities to confirm whether community protocols for sharing knowledge have been followed.

- If these protocols and values were not respected, the relevant content may need to be removed or revised.
- To provide assurance to readers, many of whom are aware of the sensitivities around Traditional Knowledge, it can be helpful for the author to include a note explaining how they consulted with Knowledge Keepers and Elders and which protocols were followed in sharing community stories.

Provide Constructive Feedback

- Rather than simply listing problems, reviewers should aim to offer options and alternatives to address concerns. Include affirming comments, where applicable.
- Use a collaborative tone to model respectful engagement with communities.
- While some feedback may be delivered through in-text comments, global or thematic concerns are often more effective when explained in an editorial report or summary notes.

Respect the Scope of Work

- Unless the cultural authenticity read is part of a broader developmental edit, reviewers should not be expected to act as developmental editors.
- Avoid placing additional unpaid responsibilities on the reviewer that go beyond the scope of an authenticity read.
- Their role is not to "fix" the manuscript but to identify concerns and reduce the risk of cultural harm in texts written from outside a community's perspective or by community members who do not recognize that they may not have followed community protocols or may have included inaccurate information.

Compensation and Credit

- For many years, reviewers were expected to perform this work without compensation. Fortunately, the value of their contribution is now more widely recognized.
- Authenticity readers contribute intellectual, cultural, and emotional labour to the editorial process, and this must be acknowledged with fair compensation.

Cultural Authenticity Reads in Practice

Who should do cultural authenticity reads

Ideally, authenticity reads are conducted by people from the community represented in the manuscript. When this isn't possible, a person from the broader language or cultural group may be appropriate—provided they recognize the limits of their knowledge and consult with community members when needed. This requires humility and a strong awareness of what one does *not* know. When consultation occurs, it must follow proper protocol and include appropriate compensation for the community member's time and expertise.

When cultural authenticity reads should be done

As early in the writing process as possible. If a story includes significant Indigenous elements, a reader may be brought in during the planning stage. For most projects, the developmental edit or acquisitions stage is sufficient.

Reads must be completed before copyediting. These reviews may result in structural changes that could affect the entire manuscript, necessitating a second copyedit if done too late.

While cultural authenticity reads are most effective early in the process, they require their own time and focus. Unless the read is part of a developmental edit, it should not be conducted simultaneously with other editorial tasks. They are a unique process, and require different mindsets and emotional energy than editing.

Should authenticity reads be avoided if not initiated early? Not necessarily. Rather, we encourage authors and publishers to embed them earlier in the publishing cycle going forward. Achieving this will require ongoing advocacy and collaboration across the industry.

Including people from other cultures in stories

Stories that ignore cultural diversity risk creating flat, unrealistic worlds that aren't relatable to readers. Writing *for* diverse audiences means

moving beyond the default mainstream perspective. The role of the authenticity reader is to ensure that such inclusion is done respectfully and responsibly.

Indigenous-specific cultural authenticity reads

Authenticity reads for Indigenous content require careful attention to cultural accuracy, community accountability, and narrative responsibility. While it may be tempting to change all language and representation that appear problematic, that is not always the best course of action. *Elements of Indigenous Style* reminds us that language and syntax can reflect lived experience and, in some cases, should not be changed. Dialogue in historical fiction or quotes from historical documents may require language that has fallen out of favour, and the language used may be what was appropriate at the time. For example, while the term "Indian," is no longer widely used in Canada, some Indigenous authors continue to use it, and it may be appropriate in certain contexts.

It is also important to maintain non-standard English when the author is using speech patterns of their home community. One of the goals of authenticity reads is to ensure that Indigenous Peoples are not erased. This includes respecting culturally authentic language choices in the manuscript. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure the text does not unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or tropes.

The following examples of items to flag during an authenticity read are not exhaustive. If you have suggestions or additional insights, please contact us at info@indigenouseditorsassociation.ca so we can consider them for future updates to this guide.

Examining the story arc

- The story ends with all Indigenous Peoples being assimilated or dying. Indigenous Peoples should be included with the same nuance and variety as any other culture.

- An Indigenous character is central to the story but their voice is marginalized or erased rather than centred.
- Indigenous characters who do not experience joy, humor, and everyday life—but are rooted deep in trauma.

Stereotypes and tropes

- Indigenous Peoples spoken of only in the past tense.
- Indigenous Peoples romanticized as the "last of their kind."
- Characters portrayed without agency, complexity, or diversity.
- Indigenous characters that exist solely to help white characters experience personal transformation.
- The suggestion that every Indigenous person has a mystical connection to nature or the spirit world that provides them with magical abilities.
- Indigenous characters are depicted as primitive or unable to live in the "modern world."
- Urban Indigenous characters who only talk about Indigenous issues rather than living full multifaceted lives.
- Indigenous characters not fully integrated into everyday settings—they should not be set apart simply because of their identity.

Pan-Indigenous representation

- Indigenous cultures that are presented as a monolith. Recognize the wide diversity among Nations and name specific cultures where appropriate.
- Tropes such as the *noble savage*, *stoic Elder*, *drunken Indigenous person*, and *tragic half-breed*.
- Reserves (the "rez") are portrayed as uniformly impoverished or hopeless. Like any community, reserves are complex and varied.

Cultural protocols and community knowledge

- The author's relationship to the community is not made clear, nor are permissions granted to share stories or cultural knowledge.
- Community members, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers who contributed are not acknowledged.

- Traditional Knowledge included without explicit permission. Stories that transgress protocols or are shared without community consent should be flagged and removed if consent cannot be gained.
- Stories are changed, fictionalized, or reframed as legends or myths, without explicit permission to do so. If there is uncertainty about permissions, the author or reader must contact the community. Unapproved material may need to be removed, revised, or formally approved.
- Sacred knowledge, including ceremonies, is described in detail. Authors can imply the importance and impact of ceremonies rather than depict them explicitly (e.g., describing how a character feels after a ceremony without detailing the event).

For more, see *Elements of Indigenous Style*, 2nd ed., Chapter 4, "The Cultural Rights of Indigenous Peoples," pp. 27-31.

Cultural and historical inaccuracies

- Non-Indigenous characters are given credit for historical Indigenous accomplishments.
- Colonial history and current realities are misrepresented or erased.
- Intergenerational trauma is downplayed or sensationalized.
- Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and strength are not acknowledged.
- Indigenous worldviews are ignored or replaced with a fictionalized pan-Indigenous belief system.

Trauma and victim narratives

- Narratives that focus solely on trauma and victimhood risk reducing Indigenous existence to pain and loss.
- While trauma is part of many Indigenous histories, it is not the sum of Indigenous life.
- Cultural trauma is deeply painful for many readers. It should not be used as a dramatic device or detailed unnecessarily.
- Authors should be clear about why they are including trauma and consider whether it can be implied rather than described.

Language Use

- Indigenous content that may be spelled, used, or translated not according to community preferences.
 - Respect community spelling conventions and confirm language accuracy with speakers when possible.
- Tokenistic or decorative use of Indigenous languages.

Microaggressions:

- Indigenous content is used for aesthetic reasons with no meaningful connection to culture.
- Indigenous characters are responsible for most of the violent acts or demeaning labour, implying they are inherently violent or primitive.
- Harmful or outdated language such as "war whoop," "Circle the wagons," and "red man," appears in non-historical settings.

Concluding Thoughts

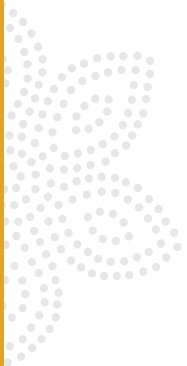
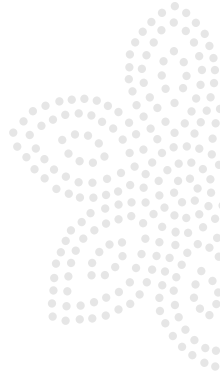
Authenticity reads are an evolving and increasingly important part of the editorial process, particularly as more Indigenous writers, stories, and perspectives enter publishing spaces. When approached with care, reciprocity, and accountability, these reads can help foster more respectful, accurate, and community-conscious storytelling. They are not intended to silence creativity, but to strengthen relationships, reduce harm, and support ethical engagement with Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and knowledge systems.

The Indigenous Editors Association recognizes that this area of editorial practice will continue to grow and be shaped by authenticity readers, Indigenous communities, authors, editors, and publishers alike. Ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and reflection will remain essential as the industry works toward more respectful and equitable publishing practices. Feedback and suggestions are welcome and support our goal of ensuring this guide remains timely, relevant, and useful.

Contributors

2025 Indigenous Editors Circle session, "Walking in Truth: A Journey Toward Indigenous Authenticity Reads in Publishing."

2024 webinar, "Indigenous Representation in Literature" panelists from Salt & Sage Books: Erin Olds, Jordan Merica, Ronkwahrhakónha D, and Hinahina Gray.



Cultural Authenticity Reads Checklist

Client Name: _____

Project Title: _____

Date Completed: _____

Representation of Indigenous Peoples

- Are Indigenous characters fully developed, with agency, complexity, and diversity?
- Are harmful tropes avoided (e.g., noble savage, tragic victim, vanishing people)?
- Are specific Nation-based identities used instead of pan-Indigenous representations?
- Is Indigeneity portrayed as a lived, relational identity—not as a costume or plot device?

Use of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Content

- Is Traditional Knowledge included with appropriate permissions and context?
- Are sacred or restricted practices treated with respect or omitted entirely?
- Are stories, ceremonies, and teachings accurately and respectfully represented?

Historical and Political Context

- Is colonial history and its present-day impact accurately represented?
- Is trauma contextualized, not sensationalized?
- Are Indigenous resistance, survival, and resurgence acknowledged?

Worldview and Voice

- Does the narrative reflect Indigenous worldviews (e.g., relationality, land-based knowledge)?
- Are values such as respect and reciprocity represented in the text?

Language Use

- Is Indigenous language used accurately and respectfully?
- Are spellings, translations, and usage consistent with community preferences?
- Is language contextualized—not decorative or tokenistic?

Community and Relational Accountability

- Has the author's relationship to the community been clearly stated?
- Have Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and collaborators been acknowledged?
- Was appropriate permission received for cultural content shared?

Extractive or Appropriative Practices

- Is Indigenous content included meaningfully—not for aesthetic or commercial effect?
- Is cultural knowledge treated with care and reciprocity?

Structural and Thematic Concerns

- Does the story avoid assimilation or erasure as its narrative endpoint?
- Are Indigenous characters present in everyday life, not only in trauma-based roles?
- Is the story balanced with joy, humour, and community resilience?

