

## Revised Criteria from *How To Tell The Difference*\*

Oyate.org is a great source of information about books and the portrayal of Native people. Below are some criteria from [Oyate's website](#) to use when thinking about Native Americans in texts. This list is originally in the book *How to Tell the Difference: A Guide for Evaluating Children's Books for Anti-Indian Bias* (\$5.50 at oyate.org), which we do recommend purchasing directly from oyate.org. You can also view it on their website under their Resources section. For this revised version, we have adapted wording, such as adding analogies, questions and tips, to further open conversations between parents, tribal advocates and teachers, administration and librarians.

-- North Carolina State Advisory Council on Indian Education

### **A) LOOK AT PICTURE BOOKS:**

#### **1) In ABC books, is “E” for “Eskimo” or “I” for Indian present?**

Analogy: Does the book also have “N” for “Negro” or “A” for “Asian”? Why not?

#### **2) In counting books, are “Indians” counted?**

Analogy: Does the book also count “Hispanics” or “Germans” or “African Americans”? Why not? Most items that are counted are *things* (balls, trains, etc.) or groups of people not based on race (“4 students” “3 friends” “6 children”). To count a race of people alongside *things* objectifies that group of people, equating and valuing the same as objects.

#### **3) Are children shown as “playing Indian”?**

Analogy: Are children shown “playing Blacks” or “playing Asian”? Why might playing a race of people be different from playing an occupation (playing cowboy or playing firefighter) or offensive to those of that culture?

#### **4) Are animals dressed as “Indians”?**

Thinking point: Are animals dressed as “Latinos” or “Asians”? If so, what is the purpose behind that? Is it to educate about that culture? To show diversity? Does it do that respectfully and accurately?

#### **5) Do “Indians” have ridiculous or invented names, like “Indian Two Feet,” “Running Deer” or “Little Chief”?**

Indian names are given or chosen respectfully and with personal reason. While they are many times beautiful, giving a character a name that ‘sounds Indian’ is neither respectful nor accurate and only serves to further stereotypes about Indians. Could you perhaps choose a book about real Indian people for students, and thereby give them access to real Indians’ names?

### **B. LOOK FOR STEREOTYPES:**

#### **1) Are Native peoples portrayed as savages, or primitive craftspeople, or simple**

**tribal people, now extinct?**

**Select Only Books** in which Native peoples are shown as human beings, members of highly defined and complex societies. Be sure to also select texts that portray the vibrant Native life that exists in contemporary society in order to counteract the stereotype that Indians are only a part of history. Bonus points for books that anchor the tribes they represent in a particular, stated time period and are tribally specific since this will help to counteract the stereotype of Indians existed in a generalized past.

**2) Are Native societies oversimplified and generalized? Are Native people all one color, one style? Does the book talk about 'Indians' (generalized) or the Seminole, the Chickasaw, the Micmac (tribally specific), for example?**

**Select Only Books** in which Native societies are presented as separate from each other, with each culture, language, religion, dress, unique. Bonus points for books that anchor the tribes they represent in a particular, stated time period and are tribally specific, since this will help to counteract the stereotype that Indians existed in a generalized past.

**3) Is the art a mishmash of "generic Indian" designs?**

**Select Only Books** which pay attention to accurate, appropriate design, and in which clothes, dress, and houses are depicted with careful attention to detail and accuracy. Bonus points for books that anchor the tribes they represent in a particular, stated time period, are tribally specific and depict lifestyle details with historical accuracy.

**C) LOOK FOR LOADED WORDS:**

**1) Are there insulting overtones to the language in the book?** Are racist adjectives, like "primitive," "pristine," "simple," "Injun" or "savage" or even falsely positive words such as "noble" used to refer to Indian peoples?

**Select Only Books** in which the language is respectful, and worthy of use in reference to any other technologically advanced person or group of people. Stereotypes, even 'positive' ones are harmful to self-identity and unhelpful ('Asians are good at math').

**D) LOOK FOR TOKENISM**

**1) Are Native people depicted as stereotypically alike, or do they look just like whites with darker faces?**

**Select Only Books** in which Native people are depicted as genuine individuals, having unique and complex qualities and characteristics.

**E) LOOK FOR DISTORTION OF HISTORY**

**1) Is there manipulation of words like "victory," "conquest," or "massacre" to justify Euro-American conquest of the Native homelands?** Are Native Nations presented as being responsible for their own "disappearance?" Is the U.S. government only "trying to help?"

**Select Only Books** in which history is put in the proper perspective: the Native struggle

for self-determination and sovereignty against the Euro-American drive for conquest and greed. Also select books that don't follow the format of the 'great white savior' - which means those of European heritage are in the role of saving or enlightening the poor Indians.

## F) LOOK FOR VICTIMIZATION

**1) Does the story encourage children to believe that Native peoples accepted defeats passively?**

**Select Only Books** that accurately show the ways in which Native people actively resisted the invaders or continue to work for self-determination and sovereignty today. Be prepared to do some searching for these books, since most books portray victimization.

**2) Are Native heroes limited to those who, in some way or another, are believed to have aided Europeans in the conquest of their own people (examples include some popular depictions of Pocahontas, or La Malinche)?**

**Select Only Books** in which Native heroes are admired because of what they do for their own people.

## G) LOOK AT THE LIFESTYLES

**1) Are Native cultures presented in a condescending manner?** Are there paternalistic distinctions between "them" and "us?" Are Native peoples depicted as needing aid from outsiders, and having no ability to govern their own land and people effectively?

**Select Only Books** which focus on respecting Native peoples and understanding of the sophistication and complexity of their societies. Also select books that don't follow the format of the 'great white savior' - which means those of European heritage are in the role of saving or enlightening the poor Indians.

**2) Are Native peoples discussed in the past tense only, supporting the "vanished Indian" myth?** Is the past unconnected to the present? Does the text leave Indians in the past, not portraying Indians in contemporary settings? (Be thorough – use of the past tense is a pervasive issue in books about Native peoples. Remember that any general reference to a tribe which is not explicit to historical events, should be written in the present tense. For example, the sentence "Many California tribes *used* acorn in their meals" should actually have been written in the PRESENT tense, as this is still a widely consumed food among many California Natives.)

**Select Only Books** in which the continuity of cultures is represented. Look for values, religions, and morals, as an outgrowth of the past, connected to the present, and taking the people into the future. Be sure to also select texts that portray the vibrant Native life that exists in contemporary society in order to counteract the stereotype that Indians are only a part of history.

**3) Is a society portrayed in a distorted or limited way?** Are religions described as "superstitions," with backward or primitive connotations?

**Select Only Books** in which Indian religions and traditions are described accurately, in the context of their civilizations, and commanding as much recognition and legitimacy as any practice or belief in the Christian or any other major religion. And again, if this is not a text that refers explicitly to a stated time period, it should accurately bring the reader to the facts about religion in contemporary Indian life.

**4) Is there an ethnocentric Western focus on material objects, such as baskets, pottery, rugs?** Examples include depicting these objects strictly as “art,” or as a means to trade with Euro-Americans.

**Select Only Books** in which the writer shows an understanding of the relationship between material and non-material aspects of life.

**5) Are Native peoples shown as “relentlessly ecological”?**

Books should not play into the stereotype of the Mother Earth-loving, ritualistic Indian.

**Select Only Books** in which Native societies are described as coexisting with nature, having achieved such delicate balance as a result of their advanced understanding of Earth systems, scientific process, and principles of sustainability.

## H) LOOK AT DIALOG

**1) Do the people speak in either a sort of “early jawbreaker,” broken English, or in the oratorical style of the “noble savage”?**

Books should not play into the stereotype of Natives speaking halting, monosyllabic English. Thinking point: Why are there no stereotypes of the few colonists who cared to learn various tribal languages speaking in halting, broken tribal languages?

**Select Only Books** in which the people use language with the consummate and articulate skill of those who come from an oral tradition.

## I) LOOK FOR STANDARDS OF SUCCESS

**1) Are Indian people portrayed as childlike and helpless?** Does a white authority figure – pastor, social worker, teacher – know better than Native people themselves what is “good for them?” Are Indian children “better off” away from their families?

**Select Only Books** in which Native adults are portrayed as knowledgeable, mature individuals who work hard and make decisions and sacrifices in order to take care of their families, and for the well-being of the people.

**2) Do Native people and their communities contrast unfavorably with the “norm” of white middle-class suburbia?**

**Select Only Books** in which Native people and their communities are seen as their own cultural norm. White culture should not be assumed to be the ‘norm’ by which other cultures are measured (and found lacking and thereby in need of enlightenment).

**3) Does it require Native people to adhere to “white” values and standards in order to get ahead or experience success?**

**Select Only Books** in which Native values including thinking in the 'we' instead of the 'I', cooperation, generosity, sharing, honesty, and courage are seen as integral to growth and development. White culture should not be assumed to be the 'norm' by which other cultures are measured (and found lacking and thereby in need of enlightenment).

#### J) LOOK AT THE ROLE OF WOMEN

**1) Are women completely subservient to men?** Do they do all the work, while the men loll around, waiting for the next hunt?

**Select Only Books** in which women are portrayed as the integral and respected part of Native societies that they really are.

#### K) LOOK AT THE ROLE OF ELDERS

**1) Are elders treated as a dispensable burden upon their people, to be abandoned in times of trouble or famine?** Are they portrayed as querulous, petulant, demanding, nagging, irritating, or boring?

**Select Only Books** in which elders are treated as loved and valued custodians of the people's history, culture, and lifeways. They should be depicted as active members of the community, whose contributions are valued and appreciated. They should be as cherished in the words of the writer as they were and are in the lives of the people depicted.

#### L) LOOK FOR THE EFFECTS ON A CHILD'S SELF-IMAGE

**1) Is there anything in the story that would embarrass or hurt a Native child?** Are there any explicit or implicit lessons that would be harmful if instilled upon a child, Native or non-Native? Would a Native child experience internal conflict at the messages, inferred or explicit, that the book imparts?

**Select Only Books** in which there are one or more positive role models with which a Native child can identify. Also select books that accurately reflect what a Native child knows or has experienced about their own culture. Children should feel empowered and inspired by the literature they read.

#### M) LOOK AT THE AUTHOR'S OR ILLUSTRATOR'S BACKGROUND

**1) Is the background of the author and illustrator devoid of qualities that enable them to write about Native peoples in an accurate, respectful manner?** Is there an ethnocentric bias that leads to distortions or omissions?

**Select Only Books** for which the author's and illustrator's background qualifies them to write about Native peoples. Their perspectives should strengthen the work.

#### N) LOOK FOR THE AUTHOR'S OR ILLUSTRATOR'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE STORY

**1) Does the author completely fabricate a story in the vague or generalized style of a Native legend?**

**Prioritize Books** in which the author situates the stories in the context of her own culture

and family.

**2) Does the author fail to acknowledge or pay tribute to the source of the story?**

**Prioritize Books** in which the author acknowledges and honors the source of the story.

**3) Does the author acknowledge a vague, unnamed “elder” to validate the story?**

**Prioritize Books** in which the author’s acknowledgment genuinely reflects her own relationship to the story or directly names a source.

**4) Is the illustrator culturally disconnected from the story?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the illustrator is genuinely connected to the story.

## **O) LOOK FOR THE AUTHOR’S OR ILLUSTRATOR’S UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY**

**1) Does the author attempt to portray a cultural outsider’s version as having importance beyond the children’s book that contains the particular story?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the author understands and relates the deep significance of the story.

**2) Does the author’s note obfuscate the origins of the story?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the author’s note clearly and distinctly tells the origins of the story.

**3) Does the author rationalize major changes to a story?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the author adheres to the original oral story.

**4) Does the author seek to justify a retelling from outside the culture by implying that the culture itself has disappeared?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the author honors the continuing existence of the culture and the life of the people from an insider perspective.

**5) Does the author’s own cultural belief system overlay the belief system of the people whose stories are being told?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the author’s own cultural belief system honors the belief system of the people whose story is being told and does not overlay it.

**6) Is the author’s “humor” an arrogant, insulting, offensive or mean-spirited portrayal of the people whose stories are allegedly being told?**

**Prioritize Books** for which the author’s humor reflects the culture from which both the author and the story originate.

**7) Is the author culturally disconnected from the story?** Does the author try to make parallels with European-based cultures that do not in fact exist?

**Prioritize Books** for which the author is genuinely connected to the story.

**8) Is the author a cultural outsider with no ties to the story**, other than having gone shopping or traveled?

***Prioritize Books*** for which the author is a cultural insider directly connected to the community being depicted.

**9) Does the author use the word “story” or “tale” or “myth” or “legend” to minimize the importance of traditional oral histories?**

***Prioritize Books*** for which the author accepts the validity of Native oral stories as true and legitimate tribal histories.

\*Original version of Criteria from How to Tell the Difference Here on oyate.org:  
<http://oyate.org/index.php/resources/41-resources/how-to-tell-the-difference> and  
<http://oyate.org/index.php/resources/42-resources/oyate-s-additional-criteria>