



ABORIGINAL  
ARTS & STORIES

# Teachers' Kit: Learning Tool

*My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.*

— Louis Riel, July 4, 1885

The creative energy of Indigenous youth is vital for maintaining and nurturing Indigenous arts. The Aboriginal Arts & Stories contest provides an opportunity for Indigenous youth to explore the heritage, society and politics of Indigenous civilizations in Canada by reflecting on the meaningful cultural elements of their lives. The contest encourages youth to transform their stories and visions into a personal and original form of art. Self-expression through art and writing can offer Indigenous youth a means to reinterpret customs with fresh perspectives and insights.

The annual Aboriginal Arts & Stories deadline is March 31, though the contest accepts submissions year-round. Post-deadline, submissions will be considered for the following year's contest. The contest is open to Canadians of Indigenous ancestry (self-identified, Status, Non-Status, Inuit and Métis) between the ages of 9 and 29. We ask Indigenous youth to create a piece of writing (no longer than 1,000 words) or two-dimensional art that explores Indigenous heritage and culture. You may enter online at [our-story.ca](http://our-story.ca), or by mail.

**Aboriginal Arts & Stories** is a program of Historica Canada, the country's largest organization dedicated to enhancing awareness of Canadian history and citizenship.

## What is the purpose of this learning tool?

This learning tool is intended to help teachers support their students in the Aboriginal Arts & Stories competition. Using this guide, educators can assist Indigenous youth with the creative process of developing their art and writing. It offers suggestions for dealing with sensitive issues, for motivating Indigenous students, and for encouraging youth to reflect on culture, identity and expression.

The competition is an opportunity for students to express their views, and it provides a platform to highlight the often-marginalized Indigenous youth voice. Some students may be reluctant to explore their heritage or express themselves. This kit provides ideas for understanding why issues may get in the way, for creating safe spaces where students feel comfortable expressing themselves, and for activities that spark students' creativity. The guide refers to strategies for incorporating Indigenous content into the wider classroom setting. While the contest is open only to Indigenous youth, Historica Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the rich history of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

This Guide has been created to complement the **Junior and Senior Aboriginal Arts & Stories Learning Tools**, which offer activities designed to inspire art and writing projects for submission to the contest. The tools provide interactive classroom activities that aid in the research and creative process and encourage critical thinking. Each guide outlines four projects that explore cultural significance, identity and personal awareness. Examples and suggestions for submissions can also be found online at [our-story.ca](http://our-story.ca).



▲ *Little Yellow House*, Justice Jacinto, Surrey, BC, Sagkeeng First Nations, Age 17

◀ *Uvanga*, Harry Josephee, Cape Dorset, NU, Inuit, Age 15

## What are some issues facing Indigenous youth today?

Education on Indigenous issues and history is essential for creating a positive working relationship. The diversity of Indigenous youth makes a comprehensive understanding of the multiple issues difficult, but some foundational knowledge of concerns specific to Indigenous students will help educators work with them. This guide is not a definitive exploration of issues, but a starting point on a learning journey.

### A. Getting in Touch with History

Historic and current colonization affects all Canadians. Government policies and legislation (such as the *Indian Act* and the residential schools) have had devastating effects on Indigenous peoples, including the loss of lands, language, wealth and many cultural aspects. Compounding these problems is a history of misrepresentation of Canada's past, a history that ignored (and often continues to ignore) systemic inequalities, taught Canadians they were superior to Indigenous peoples, and justified colonization.

It is important to recognize that there is some good news. Indigenous civilizations and their cultural elements have survived despite years of persecution, denigration and suppression. We are living in a time of truth, reconciliation and Indigenous emancipation, as more and more Canadians learn about past wrongs and try to acknowledge and rectify them.

Indigenous youth are one of the fastest-growing segments of the Canadian population, and many are starting to take pride in their culture and heritage after years of assimilationist policies. We hope that encouraging participation in the Aboriginal Arts & Stories contest will help students continue this positive trend.

There are many resources available to add to your knowledge of Canada's past. Several **Heritage Minute videos** and accompanying **Learning Tools** offer useful historical context.

Se souvenir pour ne pas oublier...

## Nikokom

J'aimerais savoir te parler  
j'aimerais savoir t'écouter

Tes mots coulent comme l'eau qui nourrit  
cette richesse toujours vivante

On entend son souffle encore  
son battement de coeur, le nôtre

La richesse pour laquelle on se battra  
une voix, que j'aimerais raconter

Si le temps le permet nikokom  
je pourrai m'asseoir près de toi

Partager avec toi cette eau que sont tes mots  
que même le feu ne peut étouffer

Prendre cet héritage que tu nous tends  
et s'en souvenir pour ne pas l'oublier

Nous sommes éloignées par ces réalités  
dans le violet de ma vie je te retrouve

On ferme nos yeux, nos coeurs se parlent  
et je te dis : mikwetic nikokom



◀ *Se souvenir pour ne pas oublier, Nikokom*, Sonia Basile-Martel, Trois-Rivières, QC, Atikamekw, Wemotaci, Age 23

## B. Consequences of Colonization

Many Indigenous people live with the consequences of colonization every day. Teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that numerous Indigenous students have experienced loss or grieving.

Some issues that may impact Indigenous youth include:

- Discrimination – Indigenous people frequently encounter discrimination on many fronts, whether overtly racist acts or systemic institutional discrimination.
- Intergenerational trauma – Youth may feel the effects of trauma resulting from the assaults on Indigenous civilizations. These consequences may be passed on from generation to generation.
- Violence – Some students may witness or experience violence in their lives. The violence may be within the family or the community and is often a result of intergenerational trauma, or it may be within mainstream society.
- Internalization of stereotypes – Youth may have internalized some of the negative stereotypes held about Indigenous people, which may result in negative self-image and feelings of anger, bitterness or resentment.
- Disconnection from Indigenous practice, characteristics, traits, and identity – Some students may not have grown up with strong cultural connections, while others may have rejected their cultural identity to avoid the negative aspects of historical legacies.

While this kit does not directly address these and related concerns, teachers should recognize that these issues exist, and be ready to provide support if problems arise when students are engaged in the contest activities. **Teachers should not require students who appear uncomfortable to participate in the contest.**

*The Bourke's, Melanie Jewell, Fort Smith, NT, Age 24 ▼*



## C. Indigenous Identity

We hope that the act of creating art or stories for this contest will help youth strengthen and sustain their individual Indigenous identities and investigate their cultural knowledge. Some may have a strong sense of their identity. Others may feel disconnected, have negative feelings about their heritage, or have dismissed their Indigenous identity all together.

Some students of Indigenous ancestry may feel they do not fit into a “traditional” Indigenous identity, and students may feel a range of connections with their culture and community. Many students have been bombarded by negative media stereotypes of Indigenous people, which can be damaging to the students’ ideas of what an Indigenous identity means.

Some youth, particularly urban residents, may feel a lack of Indigenous connectedness and identity because they have not experienced what might be considered a traditional (or reserve) lifestyle. Media stereotypes often portray living on the land as a “traditional” lifestyle, which suggests that other ways of life aren’t authentic and are disconnected from “real” Indigenous experiences. Conversely, some youth in urban centres may have had the opportunity to connect with culture and language programs to which their counterparts living in small towns or in reserve communities have not had access.

Teachers can help students realize that there is more than one kind of Indigenous identity, and that all Indigenous experiences can be authentic and valid. Teachers should stress that many qualities contribute to Indigenous identity. Some are visible; others are not.

Consider these discussion questions to explore Indigenous identity and encourage self-reflection in the classroom:

- How can identity and heritage inform youth self-image?
- What events, policies, situations and people have affected personal and group Indigenous identity, both positively and negatively? How?
- What obstacles stand in the way of youth having a positive Indigenous identity? What factors can foster a positive Indigenous identity?

Speaking confidently on these issues when you are actually uncertain may cause more harm than good. Always approach the teaching and discussion of identity issues with humility and deference to student perspectives.

Teachers can help students engage with their history, culture, and identity. Include Indigenous histories and perspectives as a core part of your course, not as an add-on or an extra activity. Including and comparing Indigenous perspectives in all facets of history and social studies curricula can help create an atmosphere in which inclusion comes more naturally and where students may feel more comfortable. Finding ways to connect with Indigenous movements can have a positive impact for Indigenous students while informing and inspiring all students.

## How can you create safe spaces for expression?

Students often feel more comfortable if they have a safe environment to openly discuss their ideas, to exercise their creativity, and to freely express themselves through their projects. Set the stage by establishing a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere in the classroom.

It is the teacher's responsibility to:

- Model openness by listening to a variety of opinions and exploring feelings and attitudes.
- Set the tone for the class.
- Be an effective moderator.
- Have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. However, it is important to acknowledge that these attitudes do exist. Have a conversation about what individuals and groups can do if confronted with these challenges.
- Set the precedent of what relationships in a safe (i.e., supportive) space mean.

It is important to give youth some responsibility and involve them in the creation of a safe environment. Together they can create guidelines for class discussions that will ensure respectful interactions, nurture openness, and help build community and a sense of belonging.

Teachers should facilitate a learning environment where diversity is respected and seen as an asset. In a safe space, diverse perspectives and experiences are appreciated, and underrepresented voices are heard. Keep in mind that students should talk about their own diversities only how and when they want to, and not by being forced to do so.

Explore with your class ways that diversity can be considered an asset.

- How do diverse identities create a richer society?
- How can sharing our individual experiences be mutually beneficial?
- How might acknowledging the benefits of diversity help us counter racism and stereotypes?
- How can understanding diversity make us more empathetic, understanding and creative?
- How can thinking about diversity help youth think about their values and beliefs?



## Safe Spaces for Expression

Draw a table like the example below on your board. Have a collaborative discussion with your class to establish the criteria for a safe space. To help start the discussion, here are some examples of what safe spaces might look/sound/feel like:

What does a safe space \_\_\_\_\_ like?

LOOK	SOUND	FEEL
Diverse representations displayed	Everyone's opinion is heard	Welcoming and accepting

## How can you handle sensitive issues?

Many of the suggested topics in the **Aboriginal Arts & Stories contest learning tools** can be sensitive. When students begin to explore these topics, some strong emotions may surface. These emotions may develop in a group discussion, or could emerge in the course of an individual student's work. How they are handled will depend on family backgrounds, age, level of maturity and privilege. In many cases (particularly with younger students), it may be appropriate to send a note home to let parents know that sensitive topics will be addressed, and that they can feel free to contact the teacher with any questions or concerns.

The role of teachers is crucial. They need to be sensitive to the needs of individuals and the group. Teachers act as facilitators, not necessarily experts. Remain non-judgmental and try to stay neutral, but remember that you may need to step in to ensure that no one feels disrespected or ashamed because of who they are.

Be prepared for sensitive issues to arise. Anticipate triggers that students may react to, and be ready to debrief strong emotions. Set ground rules for respectful discussions.

It is important to take the time needed to deal with concerns that arise. Sometimes this may mean deferring discussions to a later time, but make sure that you do come back to them. Whatever the concern, there should be some kind of closure for involved parties. In some situations, it may be helpful to involve other professionals.

## Understanding impacts on teachers

Students may confide in teachers when sensitive subjects are brought up. Revisit your school and school board policies on counselling, and be aware that it may be necessary to turn to external help (both for you and for your student) if a student confides in you. Explore the resources available to you and to students.

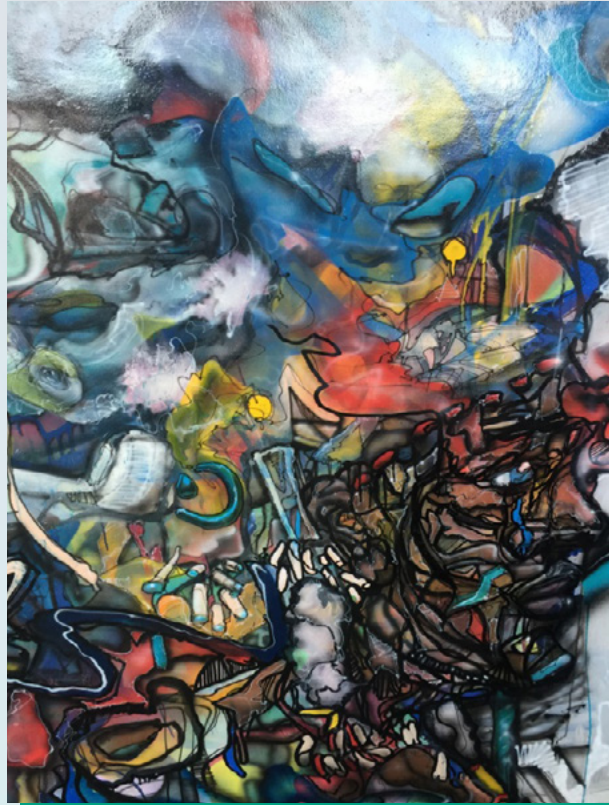
## How can you handle sensitive issues? (continued)

Teachers may need to point students to resources to help work through the contest, both for artistic inspiration and to help address issues that may come up during the process. Many educational resources, including the [Aboriginal Arts & Stories Learning Tools](#), [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#) and the [Heritage Minutes](#) can be found online. Help students explore local and national arts and media resources, including local Indigenous artists, national, regional and local art banks and art galleries, and the wealth of Indigenous literature written for and by Indigenous youth. Make sure to familiarize yourself with the resources available in your school and school board, including guidance counsellors, social workers, and Aboriginal student liaisons. Community organizations might include Native Child & Family Services, Community Resource Centres and Friendship Centres, and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Youth Council.

If personal issues emerge as students explore their topics, find ways (like those listed below) to help to translate issues and emotions positively. **Never put Indigenous students on the spot to speak on behalf of — or respond to — questions about Indigenous identity.** All discussion should be organic and voluntary.

- Use distancing techniques to depersonalize discussions. For example, show a relevant video, or read a story from the newspaper. Identify Indigenous role models or leaders who may have dealt with similar issues. This allows students to explore their feelings safely without having to expose their own experiences.
- Suggest alternative approaches to the work. For example, instead of describing a situation from a personal perspective out of a student's own life, it may be safer to fictionalize the story.
- Encourage students to express themselves in different formats. For example, those who don't feel comfortable writing about a topic may be able to express themselves through another art form.
- Provide alternative outputs for students to explore their stories. A student may be comfortable writing about or artistically depicting a topic that they would never dream of bringing up in a class discussion.

*Spiritual Warrior, "Nodinamaad"* Isaac Narciso Weber,  
Toronto, ON, Henvy Inlet First Nations, Age 27



*Oliver, The Cover-Up Kid*, Jared Boechler,  
Saskatoon, SK, Métis,  
Age 20



*Hidden Expression*, Victoria Swain, Bruce Mines, ON,  
East Algoma Métis and Non-Status Indian Association, Age 17

Maskasina, Jenna McGuire, Lion's Head, ON, Historic Saugeen Métis, Age 28



## Using the Contest Activities in your Classroom

Aboriginal Arts & Stories can be used in a variety of ways in your classroom. The competition aspect of the project is open only to Indigenous students, but learning about Indigenous history and culture through art and writing is important for all students. Most curricula in Canada now have learning outcomes that mandate all students become knowledgeable about the relationship between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians. This is Canada's history and it applies to everyone.

As the Executive Summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada notes, "Schools must teach history in ways that foster mutual respect, empathy, and engagement. All Canadian children and youth deserve to know Canada's honest history...and to appreciate the rich history and knowledge of Indigenous nations who continue to make such a strong contribution to Canada, including our very name and collective identity as a country. For Canadians from all walks of life, reconciliation offers a new way of living together." (*Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 21.) The TRC's **94 Calls to Action** include many recommendations about incorporating reconciliation into the education system.

Teachers can demonstrate the important role education plays in the reconciliation process and encourage participation in that process. Teachers can also encourage non-Indigenous youth to try to understand issues from an Indigenous perspective. But it is important to emphasize the difference between understanding and appropriation. A discussion about cultural appropriation may be both valuable and necessary.

## 1. Curricular Links

The principal goal of the contest is for students to express, in written or art form, an aspect of Indigenous history and culture in the Canadian context. The focus is on a personal connection.

The activities can be included in several curriculum areas, such as Aboriginal or Indigenous Studies, History, English, Social Studies and Visual Arts. You may find ways to incorporate activities you already have developed into the contest, such as essays or letters in history class, or poetry in English. Making contest participation an assignment for your course, if it aligns with learning outcomes, may improve follow-through on the project. **However, if you do choose to include it as an assignment, be sure to have an alternate assignment for students who are uncomfortable with the contest.** Most curricula in Canada require all students to learn about the historic and current relationships between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians.

## 2. Suggestions for Introducing the Project Ideas

Introduce the contest to your students, outlining the goals and expectations of the project. Make sure to explain how it fits into the course they are studying, and give students time to think about topics before having them select one.

- Start with the **learning tools** and other resources available on the Aboriginal Arts & Stories website.
- Make sure students understand the goals of the competition, as well as the requirements of the final submissions.
- Make time for students to explore past winners. Suggest students start by examining the different themes (you can filter entries by theme on the "Explore" page at [our-story.ca](http://our-story.ca)).
- Examine the topic suggestions in the **learning tools**. Make sure students understand that while they can pick any of these topics, they are welcome to work with other topics that interest them.
- Give students time to consider which topic they would like to pursue. Ask them to consider what they are curious about, or what inspires them.
- Try to encourage students to choose a subject that will sustain their interest throughout the development period.

## Supporting students throughout the process

It is important to provide support where needed to ensure success.

- Carefully introduce the goals and project ideas to motivate and set the stage for success
- Provide personal and emotional support for students confronting difficult issues
- Guide non-Indigenous students through a respectful process (including self-reflection)
- Direct students to authentic historical sources during the research phase
- Connect with the local Indigenous community and resources where appropriate
- Motivate students during the completion stages to stick with the project

► *Abawaadiziwin, the art of being together, Joshua Mangeshig Pawis-Steckley, Vancouver, BC, Wasauksing First Nation, Age 26*



◀ *Keeper of the Voice, Nicole Paul, Prince Albert, SK, Métis, Age 22*

### 3. Suggestions for the Process Stage

How students work through the process will depend on factors such as the nature of the course, class time available, teacher engagement and motivation, and the type of project selected. Each of the **Aboriginal Arts & Stories Learning Tools** includes detailed suggestions that lead students through the development process of their writing or art work. This is the stage where your support can best help students fully engage with their topic.

- Discussion may help unpack topics and lead to deeper levels of understanding. For example, students may need help going beyond the surface interpretation when it comes to demonstrating how the project connects to Indigenous culture.
- Use warmup activities to get students focused and to encourage creativity and alternative ways of thinking.
- Have general discussions about style and voice. Select examples from former contest winners.
- Talk about the importance of the editorial process. Re-writing is a hallmark of a successful writer.
- Facilitate access to resources and materials.

*Preservation of Balance, Océane Perham, Lorette, MB, Qalipu Mi'kmaq, Age 17* ►

### 4. Suggestions for the Completion Stage

Follow-through is an issue for many students. They may begin with enthusiasm, but due to any number of reasons, don't manage to complete the project. While that doesn't mean the energy they've spent on the project has been wasted, it may reinforce some personal feelings, such as lack of self-worth. Finishing a creative project with a successful conclusion can boost self-esteem.

- Support students if they seem to be bogged down. You may want to organize groups to provide support.
- Help students recognize when their goals are outside the scope of the contest. How can the topic be refined?
- Have students share their works-in-progress and celebrate successes.
- Have students identify some roadblocks to completion.
- Invite artists or writers into the class to talk about their workflow and what they do when they are feeling uninspired.
- Encourage students to speak to family and friends to help think through their project.
- Some students might find inspiration by spending time on the land. See if there are ways to facilitate this activity.
- Give students the time and space they need to work on projects by allowing for class time or by opening up your classroom after school. You could also organize a lunchtime club or after-school group to encourage student participation.
- Help students with the submission process, if needed. This might include anything from making sure they think about their writer/artist statement to walking them through the online submission form.
- Follow up with students after the project is completed and submitted to encourage their sense of accomplishment, and to create a constructive environment for future participation.
- You may want to publicize student participation in the school and community, especially if students are winners (with permission, of course).

