



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Virginia Council on Indians

Office of the Governor

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A Guide to Writing about Virginia Indians and Virginia Indian History
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As a result of the events and attention of 2007 and the increasing interest in all cultures, more opportunities arise today for writing about Virginia's Indian tribes and American Indians in Virginia. In the spirit of mutual benefit for writers and the Virginia Indian communities, the Virginia Council on Indians offers the following helpful suggestions:

1. Take care when using the phrase American Indian or Virginia Indian "culture." There were numerous Indian cultures in Virginia, and hundreds in North America. Unless you are referring to only one tribe, the word "culture" should be plural.
2. Avoid using plurals of names of nations when referring to our people as a group, as in "The Chickahomines shared a reservation with the Mattaponis in the 17th century." When referring to a tribe as a group by their tribal name, the name should always be singular and the verb form plural: "The Monacan were recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1989."
3. If possible, seek opportunities to mention American Indians who lived in Virginia before the Europeans arrived, and to show the continuity of our existence here through time into the present. The use of words such as "extinct" or "disappeared" in referring to tribes gives the reader the impression that there are no descendants today. Similarly, the use of "discovery" for a European group's first exploration of Native territory implies that the Natives' use of the land and water was unimportant.
4. When writing of modern events, try to avoid referring to Indian songs as "chants" and to Indian powwow drums with overly dramatic adjectives such as "throbbing." Use the term "regalia" rather than "costumes" for American Indian clothing worn for powwows or ceremonial events.
5. Use discretion when using the word "village" to describe any historic Indian community. Even the 17th century English usually called our communities "towns", as distinguished from temporary "camps" used in seasonal visits for hunting, fishing, and harvesting oysters or various plants for food, medicine and life functions. Terms like "village" and "hamlet" consistently applied to American Indian communities imply that our towns were primitive or quaint.
6. Use caution when describing elements of Native cultures in terms that simplify or marginalize, such as "gardening" for "agriculture," "myths" or "legends" for "history," or "woodlands survival skills" or "lore" for "science." Similarly, words referring to historic conflicts or intercultural interactions may unintentionally connote values, such as describing tribes as "friendly" or "hostile" according to how the Indians reacted to incursions by Europeans, or using words such as "massacre" or "murder" when describing intercultural violent acts.

7. Avoid referring to the paramount chief Powhatan as “Chief Powhatan” as if he were an ordinary chief, or by his informal name Wahunsunacock, when writing about him as a leader. It is inappropriate for those outside the Virginia Indian community to use his personal or informal name. It is appropriate to refer to him as Powhatan, the name (and name of hometown) that he took when he became paramount chief, before the English came to Virginia. This is what other Indian nations called him. The English terms “king”, “emperor” and “ruler” are also inappropriate, as they are imperfect English translations used by the colonists who did not understand the nature of his political organization.

8. Powhatan’s tributaries (the tribes that paid tribute to him) are best referred to as a "paramount chiefdom" or “paramountcy” or by using generic terms such as “the Powhatan tribes”, when referring to these tribes at the time of English contact. They were not a “chiefdom”, a "confederacy", a “tribe” or a "nation." The separate tribes were not sub-tribes, but individual nations that paid tribute to the same paramount chief. The only "Powhatan nation" or “Powhatan tribe” was the tribe located to the east of Richmond on the James River, where the paramount chief came from originally. Because not all of the Virginia Algonquian tribes were tributaries to Powhatan, please avoid referring to all Virginia Algonquian tribes collectively as “Powhatan Indians.”

9. Virginia Algonquian cultures (indeed, most North American Indian cultures) were matrilineal. A child’s status (such as being eligible for leadership) was determined by the mother’s status, not by the father. Powhatan’s high status wives were known to the English colonists by name, but the mother of Pocahontas was never identified. Therefore avoid referring to Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, as a “princess.”

10. Use caution when referring to Pocahontas, her age (she was born in 1597), and the events of her life. It is important to note that opinions differ strongly on the alleged “rescue” incident at Werowocomoco in 1607. Some think it happened much as Smith described it in his 1624 writings, although he did not mention the incident at all in his earlier writing of his time at Werowocomoco. Others think it never happened, and still others believe the event occurred, but was an “adoption” ritual that was misunderstood by Smith. Many Virginia Indians believe that her role as a child was overemphasized by the English, and that historians frequently overlook or misinterpret her accomplishments as a young adult.

11. Take caution to prevent misinformation about Virginia Indian history, such as incorrect population estimates, referring to the Virginia Algonquian tribes as “Algonquins”, the Siouan speaking tribes of the piedmont as "Sioux", or the Iroquoian speaking tribes as “Iroquois”, misspelling the names of tribes, the misrepresentation of events, and using inappropriate language, such as describing periods of intensified English/Indian conflict as “wars.”

12. Avoid using only non-Indian “experts” as sources of information about Virginia Indians, whether historical or contemporary. This often results in errors in both historical and modern information, and in the use of inappropriate words, as shown in some of the examples above.

Please check your facts and use multiple, reliable sources. The Virginia Council on Indians office can supply background and accurate historical information, suggestions for resource material, and contact information for both Native and non-Native scholars who work with the tribes. It can also supply contact information for the tribes and referrals to the appropriate tribal leaders and scholars among the Virginia Indians as sources for interviews and quotes. The office can be reached via email at vci@governor.virginia.gov, or at telephone number 804.225.2084.

Note: This Guide uses the generic phrases “American Indian” or “Virginia Indian” throughout because the Indian tribes of Virginia have been accustomed to being called Indians for hundreds of years, and the word “Indian” is included in all of their tribal names. Virginia Indians generally do not refer to themselves as “Native Americans”. Preferences may differ in other parts of the United States. When in doubt, check with your regional tribes, and use the tribal name if possible.