

Champlain Saint-Lambert

# Land Acknowledgement Guide

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Life consists of a tapestry of animals, plants, people, and all other beings that depend on one another for a fruitful existence. One of the gifts of humanity is the inheritance of abundant land; traditional teachings across Turtle Island remind us that we are responsible for maintaining balance in the natural world, taking care of the plants, the animals, and each other along the way. Acknowledgement is one of the simplest ways in which we can care for everything around us. Each morning, we wake to a new day here on Mother Earth and it is all our responsibility to provide gratitude to the beings and the natural world that provides us with life.

The reality of living in Canada, or even more broadly, Turtle Island (North America) is that we are all impacted by colonization. For most, there is an inherited history of colonial violence and displacement. Just as it is important to honour the beings that provide us with life, it is vital to acknowledge those histories.

Territorial land acknowledgements are a thoughtful way to express recognition of being a visitor or custodian of the lands you are on. It is an opportunity to voice one's relationship to land and history; a moment to articulate recognition and responsibility in the colonized world. The following document was developed to bridge the gap on the reasons why land acknowledgements are useful, but to also ensure there is action and interconnectedness behind the words that are being said.

## **What is a Land Acknowledgement?**

A land acknowledgment should encompass one's relation to the land, honour the original nations who cared for the lands prior to colonization, and speak towards meaningful action. Land acknowledgments are typically known as a verbal acknowledgement to begin a public event as a way to formally recognize Indigenous people as the stewards of specific territories with rich histories and cultures.

Now, land acknowledgements are found on email signatures, institution's websites and read aloud at all sorts of events. A question that should always be posed is 'what is the impact of this land acknowledgment?.' Land acknowledgements should never be used out of obligation. If there is no meaning behind the words being read or written, then it is pointless to do in the first place.

## **When is the right place to do a land acknowledgement?**

It has become common practice for a land acknowledgement to be done at the beginning of an event taking place on Indigenous unceded territories. Many meetings, conferences, lectures, and events begin with someone presenting a scripted land acknowledgement. There are no real inappropriate times for land acknowledgements; the question is not so much about if a land

acknowledgment should be done, but rather what purpose it will serve in the forum. Intention is the key to all land acknowledgement practices.

Within educational institutions, educators may opt to open their courses with a land acknowledgement at the start of a semester or several times throughout. When deciding if a land acknowledgement is warranted, it is important to decide if the context of the lesson is appropriate and justify the use of a land acknowledgement.

A written land acknowledgement can be posted in several prominent areas of the building or class to serve as a reminder throughout the year. The land acknowledgement can also be placed in the course syllabus at the beginning to set the tone and have students be aware from the start. The same idea can be used virtually, on course portals and email signatures.

### **What is Champlain's official land acknowledgement?**

In 2020, the Indigenous student ambassador program carefully crafted the following land acknowledgement:

*With clear minds and respect, we would like to acknowledge that Champlain College Saint-Lambert is located on the unceded lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation. The Kanien'kehá:ka people are acknowledged as the custodians of the lands and water on which we gather. Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal has long been a place of gathering for Indigenous peoples and we recognize the diversity of indigenous people who now reside on the land. We continuously recognize the importance of fostering positive relationships with the Indigenous peoples of the land and their future generations.*

The students chose what they felt were important articulations for a college that is in the pursuit of decolonization and proactive reconciliation. Creating an official land acknowledgement was important in Champlain College's reconciliation journey, and the community is now evolving. The Community has learned that acknowledgement does not need to be static, and so although the above land acknowledgment had been adopted as Champlain's official acknowledgement, it is not intended to be used word for word. Think of this acknowledgement as a step in the reconciliation process and use it as a general template when considering the crafting or creation of your own.

A new (or several new) version(s) of Champlain's land acknowledgment will be written in collaboration with the wider Champlain community, rather than having the Indigenous students craft the statement.

### **What are Indigenous protocols in relation to land acknowledgements?**

Onkwehón:we (the original people/Indigenous people) acknowledge their presence as a visitor on someone else's territory in their general protocol. Showing appreciation as a visitor when stepping foot on another Nation's territory has been done for centuries and is woven into Indigenous ways of life.

Each nation has their own protocol when beginning ceremonies or events that are of importance. Following the Rotinonhsión:ni ways, the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwén (the thanksgiving address) is spoken prior to any meeting, ceremony, or event. These words that are spoken in Kanien'kéha

give thanks to all the natural beings in the world that work together for us to continue living on Mother Earth. These words also address the reciprocal relationships between people, visitors, and other life forms. Words of territorial acknowledgement are woven into the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen.

When proficient Kanien'kéha speakers pass these words, the detail and direction they take their words differs depending upon everyone's experience with the natural world. One prominent Kanien'kehá:ka elder, Tom Sakokweniónkwás Porter shares this teaching about why the openings are not static:

“It's like if you were to take a beautiful rose with drops of dew on its pedals and then you were to describe that to us. And then let's say we didn't hear that. And so then another person is there and is going to describe what he has seen. And yet another. Well we are all talking about the very same thing, but it would be much different words from each of us as we describe the beauty and everything about that rose. And that's the same way with all the prayers that we, the Iroquois people do; it's always the same, but it's never word for word. It's always living in the moment.” (p.8)

“One of my uncles said, “if tradition does not bend or change, it dies.” So if we keep everything exactly the same as yesterday and never move it, never change it a single word, that means it's going to get arthritic. It's going to become like cement, and it's going to be of no use. Only if it changes, and it can move and it can bend, is it going to be useful.” (p. 9)

Even in the teachings, it is essential to acknowledge that there is no right or wrong way to pass opening words; the intention and purpose behind the opening are what makes it meaningful.

### **Creating your land acknowledgement**

When crafting a land acknowledgement, it is important to consider the following factors.

**Positionality:** Who am I? One essential part of many Indigenous protocols is to introduce oneself. It allows for others to better understand who a person is and where they come from. When beginning to think about what is essential for a land acknowledgement, consider individual positions on land, history and with Indigenous people.

**Accountability:** Why is it essential to acknowledge territory, history, and the current state of colonialism? How am I being accountable to those who came before me, and who are displaced now that I am here? Consider all human and non-human beings; what impact has my being here affected those around me?

**Responsibility:** In what ways am I addressing historical injustice? What are the ways in which I consider myself a part of reconciliation, and what are the actions associated with seeing change? Unpacking these three elements will ensure strong building blocks for the rest of the acknowledgement.

### **How to make it meaningful**

A land acknowledgement is meant to include powerful, heartfelt, and actionable words. There is no right way or wrong way to create land acknowledgement. The following are tips on how to create a land acknowledgement that is meaningful.

1. Incorporate personal stories and connections to the land as a way of deepening the connection between appreciation for the land and the words being shared.
2. Throughout the creation process, ensure that you think about why you are sharing words of acknowledgement. Make sure that the words you are saying have meaning, and value rather than approaching them as merely an obligation.
3. Research historical events and peoples of the land you are speaking on; having a strong and well-informed understanding of these items will provide a more meaningful and thorough offering.
4. It is also important to be conscientious about the words being used in the land acknowledgement. Using the right terminology for the nations and peoples of the land is immensely important and a sign of respect. Another important note would be to use past, present and future tenses to show that the people of the land were here before, remain and will continue to thrive.

### **Additional Guidance**

- When acknowledging the nations who are the original inhabitants of the land you are on, refer to their traditional name rather than the colonial name (e.g., use Kanien'kehá:ka, not Mohawk).
- Research and ask how to pronounce traditional names. This can include asking colleagues, friends and researching online.
- Pronunciations will vary, do not feel discouraged. The effort and language revitalization are the important part.

### **Conclusion**

Land acknowledgments hold the power to pay tribute to Indigenous people across past, present, and future generations. It serves as a means to forge a connection with the land, demonstrate respect for the natural world, and commit to living in friendship. These acknowledgments should be embedded with positive thoughts and genuine emotion, representing a sincere appreciation for all facets of life.

Onkwehón:we may at times perceive land acknowledgments as lacking substance and merely performative. It becomes your responsibility to breathe life into the words. The sole purpose of land acknowledgment lies in genuine efforts to honor and demonstrate respect. When crafting or delivering a land acknowledgment, it is essential to approach them with sincerity, recognizing that their significance is contingent on the commitment of the individual creating and presenting them to the reconciliation journey.