Who Owns a Name? Team names, mascots and the power of naming

NBE3U, Unit 2: Behind the Image, Lesson 5. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Team names and mascots turn real peoples into symbols that crowds cheer, wear and chant. Inuit asked Edmonton's football team for years to drop a name outsiders had given them; the club changed only when sponsors pressed. Whose reading of a symbol counts? Naming is power.

What students do: Students trace the Edmonton CFL team's name change (2020–2021) and two U.S. examples, analyse why one symbol prompts different responses from different audiences, practise appropriate and inappropriate terms for Indigenous peoples, and write a short analysis of who held the power to name.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
E1.4	explain why the same media text might prompt a variety of different responses from different audiences
E1.5	identify the perspectives and/or biases evident in media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, and comment on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power
A3.2	identify appropriate ways to refer to Indigenous peoples in diverse contexts, and locate examples of inappropriate terminology in contemporary and historical text forms from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources and explain the significance of naming choices
A2.2	identify contradictions in how First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures have been depicted in various contemporary and historical Indigenous text forms, and non-Indigenous texts, and analyse the reasons for the divergence of views

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning why the same media text prompts different responses from different audiences. • We are learning why naming choices matter.	• I can explain why audiences responded differently to a team name. • I can identify the perspectives in the story of a team name. • I can use appropriate terms and explain why some terms are harmful. • I can analyse who held naming power, using evidence.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Who Owns a Name? deck.
- **Handouts:** Audiences (page 1), Naming Matters (page 2).
- **Optional:** News coverage of the Edmonton name change from Nunatsiaq News or CBC North.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	What's in a name?	Discuss.	
8–30	**Edmonton**	A timeline.	Analyse.	Audiences identified.
30–45	**Other teams**	Patterns.	Compare.	
45–62	**Naming**	Terms and why.	Practise.	Appropriate terms used.
62–75	**Analysis**	Write.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Sentence frames for the analysis paragraph.
- **ELL:** Terminology chart with examples.
- **Challenge:** Research a school or local team in Ontario that changed its name or logo.

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Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Audiences and Naming Matters	Audience responses (E1.4), perspectives (E1.5), terminology (A3.2) and contradictions (A2.2)

Who owns a name: key points

- **Edmonton:** Asked to change by ITK's president in 2015; kept the name after consultation in early 2020; dropped it July 21, 2020; became the Elks June 1, 2021.
- **Different audiences:** Long-time fans heard tradition and pride; many Inuit heard an outsider's label for their people on a jersey; some Inuit leaders disagreed with each other.
- **Pattern:** Cleveland (Guardians, 2021) and Washington (Commanders, 2022) followed decades of Indigenous protest.
- **Why naming matters:** Choosing what a people is called is a form of power; the respectful choice is usually the name a people uses for itself.
- **Contradiction:** Teams said the names “honoured” Indigenous people while using them as mascots that Indigenous people had not chosen.

Teacher notes

- Edmonton timeline (Nunatsiaq News, June 2021): in 2015, ITK president Natan Obed called on the team to change its name; the club consulted Inuit communities and in early 2020 said it would keep the name; some Inuit leaders, such as Nunavut minister Lorne Kusugak, supported keeping it; in summer 2020 sponsors pressed for change; on July 21, 2020 the club dropped the name; it played as the EE Football Team, then announced “Elks” on June 1, 2021.
- U.S. examples: Cleveland's baseball team announced it would become the Guardians in July 2021; Washington's football team became the Commanders in February 2022. Check for updates before teaching: these debates continue.
- Inuit leaders disagreed with each other, which is an important teaching point: Indigenous people are not one opinion. Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.
- Terminology: “Inuit” (the people), “Inuk” (one person). “Eskimo” is an outsider term that many Inuit in Canada consider offensive. Historical texts use the words of their time, including terms now considered offensive (for example, “Red-skin,” “savage,” “squaw,” “half-breed,” “Eskimo”). We quote accurately when analysing, explain why these terms are harmful, and use today's terms (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, or the specific Nation) in our own words. Readers may say “[skip]” instead of reading a slur aloud.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 6, Reel Injun.

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