

Planning Events that are Culturally Appropriate: A Guidebook

St. Thomas-Elgin Local Immigration Partnership



ST. THOMAS • ELGIN
Local Immigration Partnership
Building Welcoming, Caring, and Inclusive Communities

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Introduction

What is a culturally appropriate event?

This guide will help you plan community events that are culturally appropriate. But what does “culturally appropriate” mean, exactly? Ultimately, a culturally appropriate event is safe, respectful, and welcoming for community members of all races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Ensuring your event is culturally appropriate means approaching all elements of event planning with that goal in mind, from scheduling and venue selection, to choosing food and drink, selecting themes and decoration, booking entertainment and more.

Why is it important to make sure events are culturally appropriate?

Above all, it is important to ensure events are culturally appropriate so that everyone in our community feels safe, respected, and welcomed.

Additionally, as our communities become more diverse, and our collective knowledge of equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice concepts increases, there is more understanding of the impact of events that are not culturally appropriate.

What is the purpose of this guide?

This guide is meant to be a tool to help you plan culturally appropriate community events. It can't give you all the answers but will help guide you in how to consider the cultural appropriateness of your event.

We understand the unique challenges associated with planning community events, including limited time and resources, particularly if the event is run by volunteers. Additionally, we acknowledge that “community events” is a wide category that encompasses a number of very different types of events. Some information may not be applicable to your situation or may be impossible for you to implement. For these reasons, this guide is NOT a prescriptive list, but rather a tool to help you start asking questions, reflecting, and planning from a perspective that considers cultural appropriateness. It is a starting point for learning.

Sometimes we have assembled information into a checklist, but it is still meant to be a general guide. This guide is broken down into sections, so you can read the whole thing or skip to the most applicable sections. The first section outlines general suggestions for considering the cultural

appropriateness of your event. The final section gives a checklist overview of the entire document. The middle sections take the time to dive deeper into some aspects of event planning.

About STELIP



ST. THOMAS • ELGIN
Local Immigration Partnership
Building Welcoming, Caring, and Inclusive Communities

The St. Thomas-Elgin Local Immigration Partnership (STELIP) is a collaborative community initiative that aims to build welcoming, caring, and inclusive communities by supporting the integration of immigrants and promoting the value of diversity. STELIP is funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada and has been working in the community since 2011.



Select Definitions

EDI: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Generally used to refer to initiatives that seek to centre equity, diversity and inclusion in professional settings.

Equity: The principle of considering people's unique experiences and differing situations, and ensuring they have access to the resources and opportunities that are necessary for them to attain just outcomes. Equity aims to eliminate disparities and disproportions that are rooted in historical and contemporary injustices and oppression.

Diversity: The variety of identities found within an organization, group or society. Diversity is expressed through factors such as culture, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, language, education, ability, family status or socioeconomic status.

Inclusion: The practice of using proactive measures to create an environment where people feel welcomed, respected and valued, and to foster a sense of belonging and engagement. This practice involves changing the environment by removing barriers so that each person has equal access to opportunities and resources and can achieve their full potential.

Racialized: Refers to a person or group of people categorized according to ethnic or racial characteristics and subjected to discrimination on that basis.

Visible minorities: Persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour. Although the terms "members of visible minorities" and "visible minorities" are used in legal and statistical contexts in Canada, they are considered outdated and can be inaccurate in a general context as they do not always reflect provincial, territorial or other regional demographic compositions in Canada.

Person of Colour: Generally meaning "non-white person". A person who is, for example, of African, Asian or mixed racial or ethnic descent. (Plural: People of Colour)

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous and people of colour. The abbreviation "BIPOC" is used to refer to people of colour and was designed to emphasize the particular experiences of Black people and Indigenous people with discrimination as contrasted with other non-white groups of people.

(Source: [Canada Guide on Equity Diversity, and Inclusion Terminology](#))



A note on racialized, visible minority, POC, and BIPOC terminology

Generally, the most accepted term is “racialized”, although it is fairly new and potentially not as well known. “Visible minority” is generally seen as outdated.

With many of the other terms, opinions vary on the usage and usefulness of the terms. The Canada Guide on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Terminology explains: “Some people prefer the term “people of colour” or “BIPOC” over “non-white people,” or vice versa, for various reasons. For example, the term “people of colour” implies that “white” is not a colour, while the term “non-white people” implies that being white is the norm.” When in doubt, it is best to be as specific as possible, eg: Black, East Asian etc.

See the “notes” section under each definition in the Canada Guide on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Terminology.

The Planning Mindset

The most important thing you can do while planning a culturally appropriate event is to approach the planning with an open, curious, and conscientious perspective. Be interested in learning more about cultures different to your own. Be ready to change your mind and opinions. Try your hardest to be thoughtful and thorough in all your decisions. If you bring this perspective to your planning efforts, you will be well on your way to planning a culturally appropriate event.

You will also need a sense of humility. We all make mistakes, and if this is all new information, you will almost certainly make mistakes. That's okay. What's more important is that you are willing to listen, learn, and grow from your missteps and mistakes. We want to encourage you to be open to feedback from the community.

If there is one section you read in this document, let it be this one. Once you work on cultivating an open, curious, and conscientious perspective, you can apply it to almost any situation to help guide planning culturally appropriate events.

- ✓ Consider who is and isn't included in your event-planning process. Why do you think some voices are not represented? Is there anything you could do to diversify your planning team?
- ✓ If this is an event you've run before, have you received feedback about previous events? Have you considered ways to incorporate the feedback into your planning process? If you haven't received any feedback, is there a way you can collect feedback in the future?
- ✓ When planning, consider your event from multiple, different perspectives. How do you think your event will be received by people of different ages, faiths, or cultural backgrounds, for example. Would any of these groups have specific needs during the event? Does your event include anything that could be inappropriate, inaccessible, or offensive to any of these groups?
- ✓ Are you coming at planning with an open, curious, and conscientious perspective? How can you cultivate this mindset while planning your event?

Scheduling and Venue Selection

- ✓ Have you checked whether the date of your event conflicts with important cultural or religious celebrations? If so, do you think this conflict will interfere with someone's ability to attend or appreciate your event? Consider whether you should offer accommodations or change the date.
- ✓ Consider whether it would be appropriate to offer a space for participants to pray, meditate, or reflect quietly during your event.

Select Major Religious Holidays

Christian: Christmas, Easter

Hindu: Holi, Navrati, Diwali

Islamic: Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha,

Jewish: Purim, Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hanukkah

For more information, refer to the Interfaith Calendar of Religious and Holy Days in the Additional Resources Section.

Scenario

A local library is offering a day-long workshop for teens. Since there are a number of regular library patrons who are Muslim and pray five times a day, the library makes sure to open a small activity room to be used as a prayer room. At the beginning of the workshop, they tell all workshop participants that the room is available for religious observances throughout the day.

Selecting Themes, Decorations and Costumes

- ✓ Have you avoided using someone’s culture purely as a theme, decoration, or costume? Consider selecting a theme that is not related to a culture, like seasons and weather, colours, decades, or popular media. (Still look out for ways that offensive stereotypes might pop up in these themes!)

If your event does include a cultural element:

- ✓ Do you approach it with a sense of cultural appreciation, not appropriation?
- ✓ Does your event include people from that culture, as planners, performers, or contributors in some way?
- ✓ Do you avoid stereotypes and caricatures?
- ✓ Do you encourage respectful learning and curiosity? Have you ensured that you have accurate information about that culture?
- ✓ Do you avoid engaging with anything that is sacred to that culture, or otherwise off-limits to outsiders?

What is Cultural Appropriation?

You might have heard the term “cultural appropriation” be applied in situations where people have been criticized for inappropriately engaging with a culture, but it can be confusing to know exactly what cultural appropriation is. Ultimately, cultural appropriation is when someone from an outside, usually dominant, culture takes something from another culture for their own benefit or gain, without understanding its context or engaging in good faith with its cultural origin. Cultural appreciation, on the other hand, is a process of learning, engaging, and creating a relationship with another culture, which can include exploring cultural art, clothing, beliefs etc.

For more information, check out [Cultural Appreciation and Appropriation in the ETFO’s guide to Cultural Appropriation vs Appreciation](#).

Scenario

A volunteer group is planning a celebration for local high school graduates. The theme “Hawaiian Luau” is suggested. Some members are excited by this theme, but another member feels there is potential to misrepresent Hawaiian culture. After discussing, the planning group realizes what they are really excited about is the opportunity to put on a colourful, fun event. They decide on the new theme of “Flower Power”, which will still allow them to decorate

the venue in multicoloured flowers and enjoy a summer barbeque, but won't encourage participants to wear poor imitations of traditional Hawaiian dress.

Communication and Promotion

- ✓ Consider making your communication and promotion materials as easy-to-read as possible. Using simple sentences, avoiding small and stylized hard-to-read fonts, and ensuring sufficient contrast between text and background helps make text more accessible to English language learners and people with disabilities.
- ✓ Consider making any presentation materials available to participants (eg: slideshows). This can help make presentations more accessible to English language learners and people with disabilities.
- ✓ Consider if language interpretation services are needed. If you have many participants who don't speak English, there are options available to provide translation and interpretation. You can check out STELIP's Interpretation Services Guide in the Resources section for more information.

Scenario

A local advocacy group is running a information event about available community services. They are anticipating a number of participants who are English language learners. Some of their participants also have learning or intellectual disabilities. To make the event as accessible as possible, they offer information in written and oral formats. They also ensure all materials are written in plain English.

Food and Drink

- ✓ Have you consulted with participants about their dietary needs? (eg: Halal, Kosher, vegetarian). Are you able to accommodate all needs?
- ✓ Is food labelled so participants can make informed decisions about their meal choices? Consider labelling food that contains any ingredients that participants have indicated they must avoid. Also consider labelling food that is Halal, Kosher or vegetarian.
- ✓ If you are serving alcohol, are non-alcoholic options also available? Some people avoid alcohol for a variety of reasons, including cultural and religious purposes.

- ✓ Consider offering takeaway options, particularly if your event falls on a day that some participants are fasting. While many different religions observe fasting, this is most applicable to Muslims observing Ramadan, who fast from sunrise to sunset during the month-long observance.

Scenario

A business group is running a local networking conference. The organizers note that this conference will fall during the observance of Ramadan. They decide to offer the takeout containers alongside the provided lunch. That way, any participants who are fasting can enjoy the food later, especially since they have paid for the event including lunch.

Selecting Entertainment

- ✓ If your event entertainment (activities, guest speakers etc.) is related to a specific cultural activity or practice, will the roots and history of the activity be acknowledged?
- ✓ Consider hiring guest speakers and/or entertainers who belong to the specific group they are speaking about.

Scenario

A group of community volunteers are planning a summer festival. They would like to hire a dance group to run a workshop. They are considering hiring a Bollywood dance group but there are none in the local area. They find two potential groups an hour away. One is from an Indian Cultural Centre, but they are unavailable. The other group is not officially connected to the Indian community. The planning committee wants to make sure that this group will acknowledge the history of Bollywood dancing during their workshop, so the volunteer group schedules a call with the dance group to discuss their concerns and needs. The dance group assures them that also value being culturally respectful and will acknowledge the history and meaning of Bollywood dance styles during their workshop.

Ensuring a Respectful Environment

- ✓ Consider creating event policies that affirm your commitment to being a safe and respectful environment for everyone, including a specific anti-discrimination policy. Policies can help you plan for how you would address any issues, should they arise. Be clear about how you intend to keep your event safe and respectful for everyone.
- ✓ Have open discussions about safety, respect and anti-discrimination with your planning team. This helps ensure you share common goals, vision, and values for your event.
- ✓ Ensure you or other event organizers feel comfortable responding to potential issues, especially in the case of a participant who is harassing or discriminating against another participant. Check out our Bystander Training in the Resources section for a starting point.
- ✓ Consider including content warnings on event materials if your event is going to include content or discussions that some participants could find distressing.

Scenario

A group of volunteers are running a youth community baseball league. To ensure the safety of all participants in the league, they decide to write an anti-discrimination policy that underlines their zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory behaviour. When an incident unfortunately arises where a parent uses racist language during a baseball game, the organizers are able to use their policy to ask the parent to leave and not return to any games. This ensures the safety of all the youth players and especially racialized youth.

Land Acknowledgements

- ✓ Consider including a land acknowledgement at the beginning of your event.

If you include a land acknowledgement:

- ✓ Make sure it is accurate and you know how to pronounce all the names. You can find the phonetic spelling or listen to audio clips to practice. See the Elgin County Land Acknowledgement in the Resources section.
- ✓ Consider tailoring the land acknowledgement specifically to the event.

What is a Land Acknowledgement?

A land acknowledgement is a statement read before an event that recognizes that the land on which the event is held as traditional territory of Indigenous People(s), many of whom continue to call the land their home today. Land acknowledgements should be as accurate and specific as possible, naming individual Indigenous groups. Often land acknowledgements also include information about the treaties that govern the land, if applicable. The purpose of land acknowledgements is to recognize the ongoing presence of Indigenous people in Canada and allow participants to reflect on their relationship to the land. Land acknowledgements are one of many parts of the Reconciliation process.

Conclusion

There are many different elements to consider when planning a culturally appropriate event. This guide serves as an overview of some of the elements and is a starting point for your planning process. Now that you've worked your way through this guide, you are well-positioned to plan culturally appropriate events. You have learned about the perspective needed to plan culturally appropriate events, as well as some of the specific considerations you should plan for. Just remember to be continually open to listening and learning—especially from relevant cultural groups. Thank you for taking the time to embed these questions and considerations into your event planning.

The following checklist is a summary of the most important points from all the previous sections and can be used as an overall guide when planning your event.

- ✓ Have you tried your best to approach planning your event with an open, curious, and conscientious perspective?
- ✓ When selecting your date, have you considered any potential conflicts with religious or cultural celebrations?
- ✓ Have you avoided using someone's culture purely as a theme, decoration, or costume?
- ✓ If your event does include a cultural element, have you approached it with a sense of cultural appreciation, not appropriation?
- ✓ Have you tried to make all communication about event as accessible as possible?
- ✓ If your event includes food or drink, have you met participants' dietary needs?
- ✓ If your event entertainment is related to a specific cultural activity or practice, will the roots and history of the activity be acknowledged?
- ✓ Have you considered creating event policies that affirm your commitment to being a safe and respectful environment for everyone, including a specific anti-discrimination policy?
- ✓ Have you considered including a land acknowledgement?



Additional Resources

[About the Area \(including Land Acknowledgement\) \(STELIP\)](#)

[Bystander and Allyship Training \(STELIP\)](#)

[AODA Accessibility Guidelines \(Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act\)](#)

[Central Elgin Land Acknowledgement \(Municipality of Central Elgin\)](#)

[EFTO Cultural Appropriation vs Appreciation Guide \(Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario\)](#)

[Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology Glossary \(Government of Canada\)](#)

[Interpretation Services Guide \(STELIP\)](#)

[Land Acknowledgement \(City of Toronto\)](#)

[Resources for Service Providers Working with Low German Speaking Mennonites \(Opening Doors\)](#)

[Territory Acknowledgement \(Native Land\)](#)

[2023 Interfaith Calendar of Religious and Holy Days](#)