

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

What's in a name?

The names of places are very often tied to their history. Some cities may be named for their founders, while others may be named after existing cities. Many cities in the United States, for instance, as similar to cities and towns in England, but have been prefixed with 'New': York becomes New York, for example.

In Australia, while some place names relate to settlement and are British in origin, others are names from Aboriginal languages handed down by Indigenous Australians. Often, settlers adopted the existing Indigenous name for a place rather than changing it to something else.

A place name with its roots in Aboriginal Australian languages immediately links that place to Indigenous history; that is, the area was populated and known to Indigenous Australians before settlement.

1 Many places in Australia have names that come from Australian Aboriginal languages. List at least two reasons for this.

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2 The following place names are Aboriginal in origin – true or false?

Name	True or false?
Werribee	
Goondiwindi	
Narre Warren	
Fremantle	
Artarmon	
Geelong	
Noosa	
Parramatta	

Perth	
Launceston	
Mount Gambier	

3 Which Australian town is named for an Aboriginal word meaning 'meeting place'?

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4 Make a list of at least ten suburb or town names that you think might be Aboriginal in origin.

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3	
4	
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8	
9	
10	

5 For three of the towns you listed, explain why you think the name might be Aboriginal.

1	
2	
3	

6 For three other towns in your original list, research the name and the town using the internet, to find out if the names are Aboriginal. Record your findings.

1	
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2	
3	

7 Can you think of any common features shared by place names that are of Aboriginal origin? What does this tell you, if anything, about the features of Aboriginal languages? For example, are some letters or sounds repeated more than others? Are the words of similar lengths?