

Evidence essay · Communities and governance

Consent is a conversation, not a form

Ivalu Petersen · 23 September 2026

Fictional author and institute · Editorial demonstration, not peer reviewed

ABSTRACT

Consent requires an understandable, voluntary, and continuing choice, not merely a signed form. Using a hypothetical interview about winter conditions, this essay separates participation from permission to publish recordings, locations, or quotations. Canada's TCPS 2 consent guidance informs discussion of explanation, power relationships, recruitment, compensation, and meaningful refusal, while remaining a specific policy rather than a universal legal rule. The National Inuit Strategy on Research helps distinguish individual consent, institutional approval, and collective authority without prescribing local arrangements. Changed projects and new uses may require renewed permission, and withdrawal limits must be explained before participation. The practical conclusion is operational: clear responsibilities, private records, and usable routes to pause, revise, or decline should continue after documentation has been completed.

Keywords: research consent · ongoing permission · collective authority · withdrawal · research ethics

Adapted from the Still North field journal. Original article. A source-based editorial text, not a report of original Still North research. Examples and imagery are illustrative.

A signed form can record an agreement. It cannot show, on its own, whether someone understood the proposed research, felt able to decline, or later learned that the plan had changed. Consent is a process of giving people a real choice about a defined activity. The document should serve that process, not stand in for it.

Consider a hypothetical interview about changing winter conditions. A participant might be comfortable discussing an experience with a researcher but not with their voice appearing online, a precise location being mapped, or an anecdote becoming a promotional quotation. A single invitation to participate should not silently bundle those choices together.

Make the proposed journey understandable

Explain the purpose, who is responsible, who funds the work, what participation involves, and what will happen to the material. Describe foreseeable risks and potential benefits without promising outcomes the project cannot control. Name who can answer questions and who can receive a concern independently of the immediate research team. Give people time to consider the invitation in a format and language they can use.

Canada's TCPS 2 chapter on the consent process defines consent as free, informed, and ongoing, and distinguishes the process from its documentation. It is a specific Canadian research ethics policy, not a universal legal rule. Its practical distinction is valuable: asking someone to sign is not the same as helping them understand what they are being asked to decide.

A check on understanding should examine the explanation, not test or embarrass the participant. Invite questions about what will be shared, with whom, and for how long. Where useful, work through a concrete example of an eventual publication. A draft map or sample quotation

can reveal an ambiguity that a paragraph about dissemination leaves hidden.

Refusal has to be usable

Voluntary choice depends partly on the relationship. An invitation from a teacher, employer, or service provider may carry pressure even when nobody intends it. Explain what remains available if a person declines, and arrange recruitment so that refusal does not require a public explanation. A crowded meeting is a poor place to ask someone to disclose a private concern.

Compensation and expenses also need clear terms. People should not have to subsidise research through travel, childcare, or lost work, but payment arrangements must be reviewed for the particular context. Do not turn a general statement about fair compensation into an assumption that any offered amount guarantees an unpressured decision. TCPS 2 discusses these distinctions and the importance of power and dependency.

Separate individual choice from collective authority

In a community-based project, an institutional ethics approval, an agreement with a relevant governing body, and a person's consent answer different questions. Community engagement does not automatically provide consent on behalf of every individual. Equally, one person's willingness to share does not necessarily authorise publication of knowledge they are not entitled to release on behalf of others.

The National Inuit Strategy on Research sets priorities for Inuit governance, ethical conduct, and access, ownership, and control over data and information. It should be read on its own terms. This fictional institute cannot prescribe consent arrangements for Inuit communities or apply one national document to every Indigenous people.

The relevant authorities and knowledge holders must determine the applicable processes.

Plan for the moment the proposal changes

A request to reuse an interview in a new project, join datasets, or publish an identifiable recording may fall outside the original agreement. Establish who reviews such changes and how renewed permission will be sought where required. If permission is not given, an inconvenient deadline does not expand the original consent. Keep a record of decisions without exposing private consent documents in a public archive.

Withdrawal also needs an honest explanation. A project may be able to stop future use of identifiable material but unable to recover copies already distributed or separate data that have been irreversibly anonymised and pooled. State these limits before participation, not when someone asks to leave. Do not promise that every trace can always be erased. Design collection and release to preserve meaningful choices for as long as practicable.

Our [Communities and livelihoods](#) page places authority before extraction, while [Sources and methods](#) explains this site's governance references. The final question is operational: can a participant ask to pause, revise, or decline, and will someone know what to do? Consent becomes credible when the answer remains yes after the form has been filed.

References

1. TCPS 2 chapter on the consent process ([ethics.gc.ca](https://www.ethics.gc.ca))
2. National Inuit Strategy on Research (itk.ca)