



Anti-Ageism Guide - Language

At home, in the town office, at work, and in all of your communications, *language matters!*

Why? Whether you're trying to attract customers, provide services, or hire qualified staff, you can miss the target with your language. Americans associate the words "senior" and "elderly" with the oldest and least competent among us. If you're using these words, a 60 year old thinks the service or product is intended for his 90 year old mother. No matter how old you are, someone else is older! Mostly, if you ask older people what word they'd prefer to be called, the majority don't like any of the options, but most can live with older person.

Below are recommendations the Associated Press made in 2020 to media outlets that abide by their Stylebook in relation to reporting on older people. We should adopt these recommendations in all of our spoken and written communications, and *ask others to do the same*:

- Use older people/person or older adult instead of senior, senior citizen, elder or elderly.*
- Aim for specificity when possible, i.e. people over 60, or a woman in her 60s.
- Provide context when discussing age when possible.
- If an official or organization uses words like "seniors" or "the elderly" ask for specifics to understand the age range being described.
- Do not use "the elderly" as reference to a group.
- **As with all people, describe the person as the person wants to be described.***

*Some people of color and indigenous people use the term elder to describe themselves or older people in their community. This is an equity issue that must be considered.

FrameWorks Institute's research on Reframing Aging is this basis for the above recommendations, and their findings lead to some additional ways we can use language to combat ageism. These include:

- **Be inclusive** – literally everyone is aging! Be intentional about reducing "us versus them" thinking by never "othering" older people. Check your language - are you doing things for others? Shift your words to be inclusive - "building communities that work for everyone," or "making it possible for us all to get the help we need."
- **Focus on the collective** – our new longevity means our old systems don't always work for us anymore. A focus on the individual triggers unproductive thoughts – "they didn't save enough," "where's the family," or "they decided to live in the middle of nowhere." An individual cannot solve our workforce shortage, create public transit solutions, or build enough housing that works for tens of thousands of older people. These are systems problems that require collective solutions.
- **Resist the crisis metaphor** – we are nearing or are past crisis in many issues. However, crisis speak causes people to feel there is nothing they can do. Instead, frame big issues with the metaphor of ingenuity – remind people we've solved tough challenges before – if we can send people to the moon, we can solve our earthly problems!
- **Avoid stereotypes, bias, and generalizations** – the images we use can also perpetuate stereotypes and bias. Our websites might show young people as vibrant (positive) and older people as frail (negative), or may buy into the aging extremes of positive (fully able bodied and loving retirement) or negative (bed-ridden and needing care). Strive to offer a balanced view of the lived experience of older people not only in your words but images.



Anti-Ageism Guide - Action

Before you take action, make sure you've checked your language!

Individual - Educate others that language matters and *individual change is needed*.

- Call out ageist humor, comments, and jokes, and buy age-positive birthday cards!
- When introducing yourself in a meeting, say, “and during this meeting, I ask that we all refer to people over 60 as older people instead of seniors or the elderly.” You’ll be surprised what an impact this has – it even sparks some very productive conversations.
- Include a statement about being anti-ageist in your email signature block.
- When you hear the use of “senior,” “senior citizen,” or “the elderly,” consider saying, “we don’t use those terms to describe people over 60 anymore” or ask the person to be more specific about the age of the people they’re discussing.
- Especially when engaging members of the media, or communications staff of other organizations, talk about and share the Associated Press Stylebook recommendations.
- Address ageism when you see it – write letters to the editor when articles stereotype or marginalize older people; write television stations about offensive anti-aging ads.
- Use social media to show age-positive images of older people that offer a balanced view about aging – we can be productive, healthy, and happy, and still need some help!

Institutional - Educate your organization that *institutional change is needed*.

- Particularly if your organization serves older people, review and modify all internal, including mission, vision and goals, and public facing communications to be consistent with the language recommendations. Be public about the changes!
- Regardless of the type of organization, share the Associated Press Stylebook and FrameWorks recommendations with your communications staff and ask them to incorporate the recommendations into future communications.
- Is your organization doing Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion work? Is ageism being included? If not, ask why not, and encourage it be part of all discussions about equity.
- Do you offer orientation and training to your staff? Consider including specific training on ageism and implicit age bias, and set expectations for staff around these issues.
- Examine your workforce, hiring practices, and HR policies to determine if you’re actively building and supporting an anti-ageist, multi-generational workforce.
- If you are a service provider, engage consumers to check your service delivery model and workers – are your model and staff age-positive and person centered?

Systemic – Take every opportunity to educate others that *systemic change is needed*.

- Ask how much your municipality spends per capita on children and older residents.
- Does your town’s comprehensive plan addresses the needs of older residents? If not, ask why not, and what they plan to do about it. Ask what the plan is for addressing the housing and transportation needs of older residents – or why there isn’t one!
- Educate yourself and get involved in policy! Talk to policymakers about critical justice issues – why are there long waitlists for home care and homemaker services? Why isn’t there affordable access to essential services and supports? Why isn’t the state investing in new models of housing? Why doesn’t Medicare cover oral health or long term care?
- Call out systemic age-based stereotypes and bias. Are there age-positive images of older people on the State’s website, or only positive images of young people? Do our State Plans on Aging use age-positive language or othering, stereotyped language?