



STYLE GUIDELINES FOR AVOIDING AGEIST LANGUAGE

What is ageism? Why should we care?

Ageism. Ageism is stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on age. As with any identity-based prejudice, it works under the assumption that it is possible to judge someone knowing one thing about them – in this case, their age. Not only is it inaccurate, it's damaging.

Ageism's negative impact. Ageism has a detrimental impact on our quality of life, health and economy. Ageism happens at every level, from internalized ageism in individuals to ageism embedded in our systems and policies.

Aging has evolved. As lifespans increase, the perception of what constitutes old age is changing. Older adults are living longer and for the most part healthier lives, working and volunteering in greater numbers.

Changing ageist attitudes. Combating ageism is part of a bigger movement to stop dividing ourselves into "us" and "them." [Research by FrameWorks](#) Institute shows that certain terms are often associated with – and reinforce – negative stereotypes about older people that result in stereotyping and discrimination. Our language and the stories we tell can make a difference in reducing ageism.

Like many, reporters are being more sensitive about inclusive language and reducing bias. The following are some guidelines for talking about age with inclusivity and respect, and with the knowledge that older adults are diverse and not a monolithic group.

WORDS

Avoid Ageist Terminology

- Avoid using seniors, elderly, senior citizens, the aged, old person, young person
- People in older adult communities are not patients, they are residents in their homes, even in assisted living
- Don't use age if it isn't necessary. Is listing someone's age relevant to the story?
- Avoid stereotypes like grandmotherly or grandfatherly
- Don't describe all older adults as frail, weak, vulnerable
- Even "positive" ageism is problematic: X years young, old and wise, young at heart or age is just a number

Use More Age-Positive Phrases

- [Associated Press guidelines](#): "We prefer terms like older adult or older people over senior citizens, seniors or elderly as a general description when appropriate and relevant. It is best used in general phrases that do not refer to specific individuals: concern for older people; a home for older adults."
- Use phrases such as older workers, older athletes, younger people
- Use specifics when relevant and necessary, such as adults over 60 or octogenarians
- Another inclusive way to reference age is by presenting age as relative, e.g., younger than or older than, which removes bias and is a factual descriptor

VISUALS

Avoid Ageist Imagery

- Trite, negative stock images: clasped wrinkly hands, lone figures on a park bench and others reinforce stereotypes of decline, depression and dependence
- Unrepresentative images: older adults skydiving and other activities that are exceptional

Use More Age-Positive & Diverse Images

A diverse range of images that are positive but realistic can be found here:

- Changing the Narrative & NextFifty Initiative photo collection
<https://www.next50initiative.org/photorep>
- Unsplash, compiled by Changing the Narrative
<https://unsplash.com/collections/8978812/reframing-aging-collection>
- AARP collection
<https://www.aarp.org/about-aarp/info-2019/disrupt-aging-collection.html>
<https://www.gettyimages.com/collections/disruptaging>
- Ageing Better collection (UK)
<https://ageingbetter.resourcespace.com/pages/home.php>

STORYLINES

Avoid Ageist Storylines

- Silver tsunami, gray wave or the demographic cliff/timebomb. Often used to describe our aging population, these phrases suggest that older people are a natural disaster and that we are surprised by this demographic change
- Be mindful of “compassionate ageism,” a well-intentioned but paternalistic approach in which older people are portrayed as vulnerable and requiring protection
- “Still,” in front of a verb, as in “still working,” which suggests that doing so is remarkable when millions of older adults want to and/or need to work
- Avoid inaccurate boomer vs. millennial tropes and other us vs. them stereotypes that mask generational diversity and encourage social divisions
- Be aware of COVID-related ageism inherent in terms like #BoomerRemover
- Super seniors: Octogenarian Ironman finishers are inspiring but not representative

SOURCES USED

- AP Stylebook:
https://www.apstylebook.com/ap_stylebook/older-adult-s-older-person-people
- American Psychological Association style guidelines:
<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/age>
- Google’s “All-In” guide to inclusive marketing:
<https://all-in.withgoogle.com/audiences/age/#positive-ageism>
- The Dart Center Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism:
<https://dartcenter.org/resources/dart-center-style-guide-trauma-informed-journalism>
- Report by the Centre for Ageing Better:
https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-08/Old-age-problem-negative-attitudes_0.pdf
- Challenging Ageism: A Guide to Talking About Ageing and Older Age:
<https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-12/Challenging-ageism-guide-talking-ageing-older-age.pdf>

And of course, please see and [contact Changing the Narrative](#): Ending Ageism Together for information about ageism and ageist language.