

Anti-Ageism Guide – Language

Language matters! 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. Also, 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.

- 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 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 these recommendations, and their findings lead to some additional ways we can use language to combat ageism.

- **Be inclusive** –everyone is aging! Reduce “us versus them” thinking by including yourself. Are you doing things for older people or so we can all live well as we age?
- **Focus on the collective** – our new longevity means our old systems don't always work for us anymore. 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** – while we are experiencing many serious problems, “crisis speak” causes people to feel overwhelmed and powerless. Use the metaphor of ingenuity to 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 words but images.

Note: This guide was originally developed by the Maine Council on Aging.