



# COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

Reframing Aging Initiative  
Guide to Telling a More  
Complete Story of Aging

## Acknowledgments

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# INTRODUCTION

## What Is the Reframing Aging Initiative?

The **Reframing Aging Initiative** is a long-term, grant-funded social change endeavor designed to improve the public's understanding of what aging means and the many contributions older people bring to society. Ultimately, this understanding will counter ageism and guide our nation's approach to ensuring supportive policies and programs for us all as we move through the life course.

The initiative is led by The Gerontological Society of America on behalf of the **Leaders of Aging Organizations**. They started the Reframing Aging Initiative nearly a decade ago to advance their work with policymakers. These prominent national aging organizations promote the Reframing Aging Initiative within their own organizations and in the field of aging as a whole.

### Leaders of Aging Organizations (LAO)



american federation  
for aging research



### The Research



The Leaders of Aging Organizations sponsored the **FrameWorks Institute** to conduct the research that underpins the Reframing Aging Initiative. The FrameWorks Institute continues to be a valued partner of the initiative.

FrameWorks used quantitative and qualitative methods (with a sample size of 12,185 people) to develop empirically supported messaging strategies for advocates and communicators working in the aging space. To learn more about this work, read **Finding the Frame: An Empirical Approach to Reframing Aging and Ageism**.



## Why Framing Matters

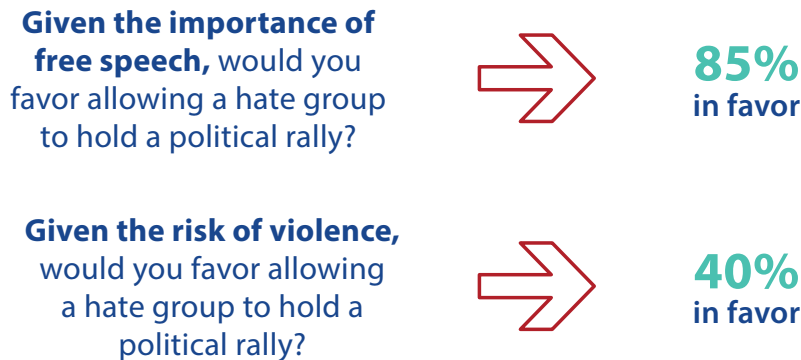
Framing can make a difference in how people understand your message.

Frames are sets of choices around what to emphasize in your messages, how to explain something, and even what not to say. Everybody frames because we all make communication choices, whether we are conscious of them or not. We're always framing!

The frames a communicator uses will influence how an audience understands that message.

Here's an example: In this study on framing by **Sniderman and Theriault**, participants' support for allowing a rally in their communities was measured after describing the event in different ways. The researchers found that using different frames—emphasizing the importance of free speech or the risk of violence—significantly affected people's support for allowing the event to take place. A simple change in frames produced a big change in people's attitudes; this has implications for the way our choices as communicators affect public support for the policies that we champion.

### Understanding is Frame-Dependent



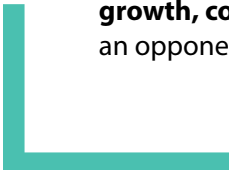
The Reframing Aging Initiative promotes the use of frames that are demonstrated to be effective. **Research shows** that when these frames are used:

- KNOWLEDGE** about aging increases.
- ATTITUDES** toward actions and solutions shift.
- POLICY SUPPORT** for programs and funding grows.

## Why We Should Reframe How We Talk About Aging

We need to improve the public's understanding of aging. **Reframing Aging research** found that there are stark differences between what professionals in the field of aging believe about older people and the process of aging and what the public believes. Because of these gaps, aging professionals and advocates may be working counterproductively. We need to find better ways to talk about aging so that the public learns the whole story about aging, not just the incomplete version that focuses on dependence and disability. Some of these gaps include:

- **Key Drivers of Aging Outcomes**  
While professionals working in the field of aging recognize the **role of contextual, social, and systemic factors** in shaping the process and experience of aging, the public sees individuals and their will and personal decisions as determining the shape and outcomes of the life course.
- **Attitude Toward Aging**  
Professionals working in the field of aging believe that aging brings **new opportunities and capacities for growth, contribution, and self-expression**, while the public sees few positive aspects of aging and views age as an opponent to fight.



### • **Outcomes of Increased Longevity**

Advocates and professionals in the field of aging recognize that increased longevity brings both challenges and opportunities. It may mean more years living on a fixed income, living with chronic conditions that require treatment and supports, and living beyond our ability to drive our own cars. At the same time, it may mean more opportunities to contribute to families and communities and experience new things for the first time. We know that there are many ways to meet these challenges and maximize these **opportunities through programs, policies, education, and new attitudes**. The public, on the other hand, sees only the challenges and are not confident that much can be done to ensure well-being in older age.

### • **Policy Solutions**

While professionals working in the field of aging explain that successful adaptation to an aging society requires **adjustments across the full spectrum of our national infrastructure**, the public has largely not considered public policy as a solution.

### • **Ageism**

Professionals working in the field of aging are attuned to the myriad ways that **older people face discrimination** in our society, however the public is largely not aware of ageism or the need to address it.

## A Look at Ageism

- Ageism refers to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward people on the **basis of age**.
- Ageism **impacts our society at large and people as individuals** in many ways, affecting our health, employment, financial security, and self-perceptions.
- Ageism can affect people's ability to get a job or keep a job. Nearly **three in five older workers say they have seen or experienced age discrimination**. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, this situation has amplified, and the **unemployment toll for older workers is the worst it has been in half a century**.

When we make judgments based on age, we ignore the other characteristics that individuals bring to the table. Racial and ethnic identities or socioeconomic situations may affect a person's life as much or more than age—and often, ageism can be a part of an intersectional experience. Intersectionality is how individuals' characteristics may combine to create different discrimination experiences.

To address the lack of knowledge about ageism and its impacts, advocates need to **define ageism, explain the problem and its consequences, and suggest systemic solutions** in messages about ageism.

## Promoting Well-framed Language in Publications

The Leaders of Aging Organizations are incorporating reframing aging and bias-free language principles into their work. For example, the **American Geriatrics Society** and **The Gerontological Society of America** have incorporated Reframing Aging principles into their publication guidelines. Other organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the Associated Press, and the American Medical Association are promoting similar guidance in their publication style guides. These style guides are used by more than 1,000 scholarly journals and more than 100 academic disciplines.

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The Reframing Aging Initiative encourages you to read this entire guide from start to finish so that you may incorporate these valuable recommendations into your own work and engagements. Research-based rationales for these communication best practices are presented to help you understand why each is included. To make it easier to identify wording that can be improved, we point out terms to *avoid* and offer terms to *advance*.

You don't need to be a professional in the field of communication or aging to benefit from this guide.

## COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

### 1. Use Language That Is Inclusive and Free of Age Bias

Words matter. They evoke images that connect to deeply held attitudes and feelings. Unfortunately, these connections are too often negative when referring to older people, evoking images of frailty, dependency, uselessness, and burden. To counter negative patterns of thinking about older people, use inclusive and bias-free language. Terms such as “older person” and “older adult” are preferred over words such as “elderly” or “senior citizen” that evoke negative stereotypes. [Reframing Aging research](#) shows that the word “older person” was associated with greater competence than the terms “senior” and “senior citizen.”

**Avoid** “other-ing” terms and labels that stoke stereotypes and suggest that advanced age places a person in a separate category from the rest of society.

*Avoid:*

- Terms such as “seniors,” “elderly,” “aging dependents,” and “the aged.”
- “The elderly are more likely to own their homes.”

**Advance** more neutral and inclusive terms by finding ways to replace “they” and “them” with “we” and “us.”

*Advance:*

- “Older people” and “older adults.”
- “We,” “us,” and “our” statements.

**Example:**

- We need a health care system that is built to help all of us live well as we age.

### 2. Highlight the Diversity That Exists in the Older Population

Older people are not all alike. We often refer to people ages 65 years and older as though they are one homogeneous group. In this categorization, we are aggregating 40 or more years of life! In fact, this group of people is very diverse and includes a wide range of health, social, and financial statuses. For example, the [2020 Profile of Older Americans](#) reports that the percentage of people who reside in nursing homes varies a lot across age groups: 1% of people who are 65 to 74 years of age reside in nursing homes while it is 8% for those 85 years and older. Given our diversity as we age, it is important to be as specific as possible by indicating the age range being considered. Be specific about age when it is relevant.

**Avoid** categorizing people into large age ranges.

*Avoid:*

- “Older adults reduce the amount of time behind the wheel!”

**Advance** being as specific as possible when age *is* relevant and using age groups that more accurately reflect the heterogeneity of older people.

*Advance:*

- “Drivers ages 50 to 65” or “drivers ages 75 and older.”

**Example:**

- This study describes characteristics in a sample of African American women, 75 to 95 years of age, diagnosed with arthritis.

### 3. Talk Affirmatively About Changing Demographics

The extension of human life is one of the greatest accomplishments in history. Language that emphasizes the opportunities inherent in longer, healthier lives inspires support for solutions that address the challenges of longer lives. Yet we often talk about the demographic changes relating to the growth of the older population as a crisis and later life as a problem. Common characterizations of age-related demographics include a “silver tsunami” or an impending burden. Crisis language evokes fatalism, pessimism, and a lack of commitment to take action.

When demographics are an important part of the story, explain how the numbers relate to your position. Remember that the size of the population may not be as important as the story about quality of life and justice for people across the life course. Language about achieving a just society for all creates more commitment to solving problems and supporting systemic solutions.

**Avoid** using catastrophic terms for the growing population of older people.

*Avoid:*

- Phrases such as “age wave,” “silver tsunami,” and “graying of the population.”

**Advance** using language that speaks affirmatively about changing demographics.

*Advance:*

- Phrases such as “While Americans live longer and healthier lives....”

**Examples:**

- With the changing demographics come more opportunities for older people to contribute to our communities.
- The increasing number of older people means more possibilities for intergenerational exchanges.

### 4. Emphasize Collective Responsibility and Social Context

There is a widely held belief that older peoples’ situations are primarily the result of personal choices and that older people with better health and financial well-being have made better choices than those who have low incomes or poor health. This type of thinking is demonstrated in comments such as “to age successfully you just have to exercise and eat healthy.” This default assumption obscures the social determinants and contextual factors that strongly influence people’s lives.

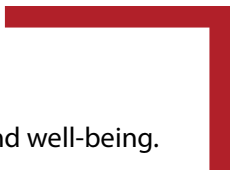
In your writing, explain context and emphasize that because people are interconnected, collective actions and policy-level solutions are possible and can make a lasting impact. By emphasizing external factors, we can reduce individualism and promote the idea that by changing social conditions, we can improve the lives of all people as we age.

**Avoid** implying that individuals are wholly responsible for aging outcomes by their individual actions.

*Avoid:*

- Terms such as “choice,” “planning,” and “control.”





**Advance** ideas about the interconnectedness of people and collective responsibility to ensure health and well-being.

*Advance:*

- Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age.

**Examples:**

- Americans are living longer, but our systems and structures haven't been updated to match that reality. Instead, outdated workplace policies, inadequate transportation systems, and other features of daily life can marginalize older adults—with consequences ranging from increased health risks to less vibrant and diverse communities. To build a more just society, we need to take steps to prevent social isolation of any group, including older people.
- Any time a particular group is isolated or marginalized, it's a problem for all of us. If we want to live up to our ideal of a just society, then that means taking steps to make sure all individuals, no matter their age, are treated as equal members of our communities.

## 5. Talk About Aging as a Dynamic Process That Can Benefit Society

Highlight that aging is a continuous process of growth and change rather than focusing on aging as decline and deterioration. Using language that describes aging as a dynamic process that leads to new possibilities for individuals and communities decreases people's negative attitudes about aging. In the face of fatalism, these ideas inspire optimism and generate energy for new programs and policies to support our aging society.

**Avoid** conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences.

*Avoid:*

- "Struggle," "battle," "fight," and similar terms.

**Advance** a more realistic description of aging.

*Advance:*

- Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new aspirations, abilities, and knowledge that older people can share.

**Examples:**

- As we age, we accumulate wisdom, insights, and rich experiences. This momentum moves us forward through our life span, and we can use it to move our communities forward, too.
- Our communities are better when they include the full scope of our energy, including the contributions of older people.

## 6. Always Define Ageism When You Use the Term

Defining ageism helps to shift attitudes about aging and increase realistic perceptions about aging. For many, aging is viewed negatively, and older people are stereotyped as burdensome, dependent, and without value. This is ageism. By providing concrete examples of what ageism looks like, we can help people see how ageism affects us all—and find ways to address it.

**Avoid** using the word ageism without explanation.

**Advance** understanding of ageism by defining it and providing an example.

### Examples:

- Ageism is discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes, and it has a significant impact on health.
- Ageism (discrimination based on age) affects three out of five workers, according to [AARP](#).

## 7. Include Concrete, Systems-Level Solutions

By providing examples of solutions that people can easily imagine and understand, we help prevent fatalism—the idea that nothing can be done to address our issue. [Reframing Aging research](#) shows that when we offer concrete examples and solutions, we are better able help people recognize that we can institute programs and policies to support us and help us thrive as we age.

**Avoid** making generic appeals to the need to “do something” about aging or only sharing problems without sharing solutions.

**Advance** using concrete, systems-level examples to illustrate inventive solutions.

### Examples:

- Intergenerational community centers help turn the experiences and wisdom older people have accrued over a lifetime into a resource that helps power our neighborhoods, enhancing life for all of us. For example, children tend to build stronger social and emotional skills when they interact with older people, setting them up for a lifetime of good experiences.
- Employers should review their hiring practices to avoid discriminating against applicants based on age by removing graduation date requirements and other indicators of age.

## 8. Incorporate the Concepts of Justice and Ingenuity

**Reframing Aging research** found that two specific concepts—“justice” and “ingenuity”—are effective at helping the public to understand a more complete and accurate story of aging and to support policies and programs that help us thrive at every age.

### **Justice**

In a just society, all people are treated equally. When older people are marginalized or discriminated against, we are not living up to one of our most cherished values.

Justice moves thinking away from:

- “Us versus Them.”
- Individualism.

And moves thinking toward:

- Aging as opportunity.
- Contexts and environments matter.
- Discrimination on the basis of age (ageism) is a problem that should be solved.
- Systemic solutions.

### **Ingenuity**

We are resourceful and can find new and creative solutions for the challenges that come as we age.

Ingenuity moves thinking away from:

- Fatalism.
- “Us versus Them.”

And moves thinking toward:

- Collective action and solutions can be implemented.
- Collective benefits accrue when older people can contribute.

**Avoid** starting your communication with less effective messaging.

### **Example:**

- In 1900, 4% of the U.S. population was aged 65 and older. Today, 15% of Americans are of that age, a figure that will approach 24% by 2060.

**Advance** starting your communication with justice or ingenuity.

### **Examples:**

- As our population ages, we can tap into the innovation and can-do attitude that Americans are known for to address the challenges that come with this changing demographic. For example, we can train health care providers to understand and study the diverse needs of older people.
- As a society that values justice, we should strive to ensure that everyone has access to the services they need in the settings they choose. Transportation routes in our city should be expanded to reach rural areas with updated vehicles that can link residents with services across the region.

# WORDS MATTER

**Use of age-inclusive, bias-free language is the cornerstone of improving people's understanding of what aging means. The Reframing Aging Initiative recommends terms to avoid and terms to advance.**

**Avoid** terms such as “seniors,” “elderly,” “aging dependents,” and similar “other-ing” terms that stoke stereotypes and present a diverse population as a separate group.

**Advance** more neutral (“older people/Americans”) and inclusive (“we” and “us”) terms.

**Avoid** using general terms such as “people over 65” when more specific information is available.

**Advance** being as specific as possible when age *is* relevant and using age groups that more accurately reflect the heterogeneity of older people: “Participants ages 65 to 74 years...”

**Avoid** using phrases such as “tidal wave,” “tsunami,” and similarly catastrophic terms for the growing population of older people.

**Advance** using language that speaks affirmatively about changing demographics: “While Americans live longer and healthier lives....”

**Avoid** terms such as “choice,” “planning,” “control,” and other individual determinants of aging outcomes.

**Advance** how to include context and societal influences: “Access to social and health services contribute to our ability to stay in our homes as we get older.”

**Avoid** “struggle,” “battle,” “fight,” and similar conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences.

**Advance** a more realistic description of aging: “Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new aspirations, abilities, and knowledge we can share with our communities.”

**Avoid** using the word ageism without explanation.

**Advance** defining ageism when you use the term: “Ageism is discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes.”

**Avoid** making generic appeals to the need to “do something” about aging or only sharing problems without sharing solutions.

**Advance** using examples that illustrate concrete, inventive solutions that have an impact at the societal, organization, or community level.



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