



# Words are Powerful

A Style Guide for Writing and Speaking

--- avoiding ageist concepts and language

Produced by the Ageism & Media Committee  
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## **Older adults are a significant segment of the population of Saskatchewan**

Total Population: 1,142,570

Persons aged 65+: 177,000 – 15.5%

Persons aged 55+: 308,500 – 27%

In the foreseeable future, with each passing year the percentage of Saskatchewan's population that is made up of older adults, aged 55 and over, will increase.

Older adults make up a significant part of the market that is interested in receiving information through current media outlets, including social media. Even more importantly, reading, viewing and listening to news sources is a habit deeply ingrained from years of practice. Of course, there is considerable diversity in this group of older adults and thus, their needs and wants will vary. It will be important for journalists and media management to accurately assess the most effective means to reach older adults and to retain their interest and support.

The objective of this style guide is to work with media professionals in journalism, entertainment and advertising to represent older adults and the aging process in an accurate, contemporary and unbiased manner.

### **Ageism – bizarre discrimination of our future selves**

Ageism is defined as a set of beliefs which manifests as negative stereotypes about an age group. This Style Guide addresses the ageism that is directed at or about older adults. Ageist comments and behaviours based on perceptions of impaired physical health and cognitive ability lead to dehumanization of older adults, loss of individual identity and ability to act of their own accord. Thus the entire social group suffers from marginalization and loss of power. The most common forms of age discrimination faced by older adults are:

- treating them as if they are invisible
- acting as if they have nothing to contribute
- assuming they are incompetent.

The term *microaggression* is used to capture “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to the target person or group. The cumulative effects of microaggression are both subtle and stunning for the recipients of these “mini-assaults”. For example, “elderspeak” describes a speech style that implicitly questions the competence of older adults. Elderspeak not only represents patronizing language but also a style of speech that has a slower rate, exaggerated intonation, elevated pitch and simpler vocabulary than normal adult speech.

In 2017 the Saskatchewan Seniors Mechanism (SSM) conducted a research study which examined the attitudes and beliefs present within news reporting in Saskatchewan as well as identifying how consumers of news stories interpret them when using an age-sensitive lens. The results of the study revealed that media monitors felt that “there was more ignoring of seniors...than there was evidence of them.” While many of the stories were considered to be

positive or neutral, there was significant evidence of an unconscious ageism consistent with attitudes that are still acceptable in the Saskatchewan population.

The Media & Ageism Committee of SSM recognizes that changes to media coverage must begin with partnerships among older adult organizations such as SSM and members of the media; thus avoiding pitfalls such as making impossible demands upon media or media imposing changes without consultation.

Our goals for media engagement are to:

- Contact journalists and media managers to raise awareness of the research data and to work collaboratively in order to examine ways in which voices of older adults may be included more often and to reduce any use of negative assumptions and stereotypes.
  
- Encourage and work with media to examine the possibilities of reaching the expanding market of older adults. Older adults are present in an amazing variety and have differing interests and abilities as well as widely differing needs for information and preferences for how they access information and entertainment through the media.

### ***Words are Powerful***

Language is a gift – our most powerful means of communication. Words can inspire. They also have the ability to stigmatize and belittle. The messages we receive via the spoken and written word influence our feelings and our self-esteem. We react physically and emotionally to these messages, whether they are clearly positive or negative or whether they contain subtle derogatory ageist stereotypes.

### **Tips for Journalists**

Older adults are not “one-size-fits-all” – they have a variety of interests, abilities and connections within society. Aging is a highly individual experience and it is not possible to generalize about the skills and abilities of an older person based on age, any more than it is possible to make assumptions about someone based on any other aspect of their identity.

We recommend the use of “person centred language” which recognizes the impact of language on thoughts and actions and ensures that language does not diminish the uniqueness and intrinsic value of each person.

We hope that these suggestions will promote the use of respectful language and encourage you to use them when writing and reporting.

Problematic language	Why you should avoid it	Person Centred Language
<p>Using terms such as <i>feisty, sly, sweet, little, feeble, eccentric, senile, frail, adorable</i> which are often not relevant to the story  e.g. “Jane W. is a feisty, sly little lady who bustles about the room as she serves tea.”</p>	<p>These terms are demeaning and diminish the dignity of the person in the story.</p> <p>Implying that an older person is “cute” or somewhat incapacitated infantilizes the person and gives a message that their normal behaviour is “different” just because of their age. Receiving this message over and over can lead to a loss of self-esteem.</p>	<p>Consider the use of adjectives carefully. Is the adjective necessary? Is it accurate? Does it add to the picture?</p> <p>e.g. “Jane W is an energetic 85 year old who is pleased to welcome visitors to her home.”</p>
<p>Even though he turned 80, he is ‘forever young’.</p> <p>Independent at her age – 75 years young</p> <p>The youngest senior I’ve ever met</p> <p>You’re only as old as you feel.</p> <p>Dr. Frank Martinez, a senior citizen, continues to maintain a vigorous practice despite his age.</p>	<p>Although usually intended to be complimentary, paradoxically the message conveyed suggests that being or acting “young” is positive because being or acting “old” is not. This language may be a type of shorthand that everyone will understand.</p> <p>Avoiding the fact that each person is as old as s/he is.</p> <p>Using a person’s age in a story is much better than lumping the person into a category.</p> <p>“Despite his age” implies surprise that he can manage.</p>	<p>No need to use the word young in this fashion. Name the person and their age if it is relevant to the story (such as a birthday or a story on personal accomplishment).</p> <p>“John S, an active 80 year old, demonstrated his skills as a wood carver.”</p> <p>“Dr. Frank Martinez, now seventy years old, continues to maintain a vigorous practice.”</p>
<p>Gray Tsunami</p> <p>Growing wave of seniors needing care</p>	<p>The ‘gray or silver tsunami’ is a very damaging term – implying sudden destruction of what we have built.</p> <p>Aging is most often framed in negative terms questioning whether health services, welfare provisions, etc. are sustainable.</p> <p>Leads to inter-generational conflict and blaming, often</p>	<p>When creating a story about future societal costs for medical care, financial needs for all, avoid the assumption that the reasons for rising costs are solely dependent upon the number of people over 55 or 65 or 75.</p>

<p>Burden of caregiving</p>	<p>about costs of medical care and the dysfunction of the medical system.</p> <p>Implies that all caregivers feel the same 'burden'</p>	<p>"Challenges of caregiving"</p> <p>Write about the specifics that the caregiver wishes to name, e.g. perhaps a week of little sleep...</p>
<p>Change freaks them out.</p> <p>Older adults can't compete with younger adults with regard to technology</p> <p>Pensioners, senior citizens, 'our seniors'</p>	<p>Generalization – unsupported by data.</p> <p>Lumping individuals together as though they were all alike and had similar attributes, opinions, needs, gifts, etc.</p> <p>'Our seniors' used by politicians to describe older adults in general mirrors the other end of ageism, 'our children'</p>	<p>The word <i>individual(s)</i> is a good way to personalize rather than lumping older adults into a group.</p> <p>"Individuals who are not familiar with technology face challenges."</p> <p>"Some older adults have used computer technology since the days of the C64 and the TRS80"</p> <p>"Joe G, age 89, was the first resident to offer a new idea for changing the retirement home dining system."</p>
<p>Elderly</p> <p>"An elderly woman of 72 was involved in the vehicle crash."</p>	<p>Elderly implies frail, incapacitated, diminished.</p> <p>Older adults resent its use to describe them, especially as they age beyond 70.</p>	<p>Use this word carefully and sparingly. Describing a specific person as elderly is bad form. The term is appropriate only in generic phrases that do not refer to specific individuals: <i>concern for the elderly, a home for the elderly, etc.</i></p> <p>Even so, other terms are preferable: <i>concern for older persons, a personal care home, long term care home, retirement residence.</i></p>
<p>"Elder" as used by indigenous cultures</p>	<p>Not a problem – use with respect for the culture from which it came.</p> <p>Elder also is used specifically in some religious communities for individuals who have responsibility for the spiritual life of the community.</p>	<p>Implies respect for individuals as they age, growing in wisdom and care for younger members of the community.</p>
<p>Jean is a patient in Parkside Extencicare.</p>	<p>People who live in long term care homes are living in their home – even if they need some</p>	<p>Ask sources what terms they prefer. Language is evolving, as are the realities it conveys</p>

<p>On Tuesday afternoon the seniors play pickleball.</p>	<p>physical care. They are residents of the home.</p> <p>“Seniors” can be a trigger word. Because of the ageist stereotypes about seniors, many individuals aged 60+ do not want to be named as seniors.</p>	<p><i>Older adult</i> is usually an accepted term and is accurate.</p> <p>Some people want to be named as old and are proud of their age.</p>
<p>Geezer, dinosaur, crusty old guy, over the hill</p> <p>You can't teach old dogs new tricks</p> <p>If I were a senior with Royal Doulton hip bones, I wouldn't venture beyond my mailbox</p>	<p>An approach often used by columnists to inject humour into their writing. (Usually the columnist is 50+).</p> <p>This approach uses self-stereotypes, taking their culture's age stereotypes – to which they have been exposed during their life – and directing them inward toward themselves. Behaviour resulting from these inner stereotypes reinforces the current cultural stereotypes and treatment of older adults.</p>	<p>Humour about aging expressed by an older adult is not wrong.</p> <p>Better to avoid using negative stereotypes of aging exclusively. Write from personal experience.</p> <p>Some one-liners that get the point across:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Age doesn't matter, unless you're a cheese.” Billie Burke</li> <li>- “Retirement must be wonderful. I mean, you can only suck in your stomach for so long.” Burt Reynolds</li> <li>- “I used to dread getting older because I thought I would not be able to do all the things I wanted to do, but now that I am older, I find that I don't want to do them.” Lady Nancy Astor</li> <li>- “Laughter doesn't require teeth.” Wil Newton</li> </ul>

***Raising awareness of how deeply ageism is embedded in our culture, in our minds and in our language, may seem like hard work. Is it necessary?***

Perhaps these words by the poet, Lord Byron (1788-1824) provide an answer:

*“But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
Falling like dew, upon a thought,  
Produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.”*