

QUICK START GUIDE to Reframe Aging Advocacy

Words are a powerful tool for advocacy. Research has shown that our words and the way we frame them matters, especially when advocating for policies and programs to support aging.

Starting with the idea that we are all aging is an effective strategy in our communications. As advocates, it is imperative that we apply research-informed strategies to advance our messaging. Here's a quick tour with examples of themes to avoid and alternatives to advance in your advocacy communications.

OBJECTIVE: Focusing on steps we can take to address the opportunities and challenges that come from a growing population generates the momentum to move forward with realistic solutions.

AVOID

Catastrophic terms for the growing population of older people

UNFRAMED:

"The silver tidal wave is coming, and our communities need to be ready with the necessary resources to support them."

INSTEAD, TRY THIS

Start by talking affirmatively about changing demographics

REFRAMED:

"As Americans live longer and healthier lives, age-inclusive infrastructure will be essential in our communities to ensure we all have access to resources and opportunities as we age."

OBJECTIVE: Recognizing our diverse experiences as we age and the options of systems to support us can open the door to a productive conversation about equitable policies that support everyone at every age.

AVOID

Focusing on individual determinants of aging outcomes

UNFRAMED:

"Older people need to plan ahead and get their affairs in order to make sure they can age safely."

INSTEAD, TRY THIS

Emphasize how to improve social contexts

REFRAMED:

"Accessible community resources such as advance care planning tools, supports for caregivers, and transportation alternatives have the potential to improve all our lives."

OBJECTIVE: Inclusive language creates a sense of collective responsibility; all of us are involved — not just them. Ageist discourse is based on many harmful stereotypes about older people. It may be tempting to rebut those labels or ideas, but when we repeat stereotypes, we cue and reinforce them.

AVOID

Terms that stoke stereotypes

UNFRAMED:

"Voters do not trust elderly elected officials because they suspect old people may have cognitive impairments, which is a barrier in advancing imperative policies."

INSTEAD, TRY THIS

Use neutral and inclusive terms

REFRAMED:

"As we age, we gain lots of experience in making decisions under stressful circumstances, which is critical to people in government or elected office."

OBJECTIVE: Emphasizing our unique capacities at every stage of life and the developmental strengths we gain as we age creates opportunity to link to specific examples such as strengths in leadership or in the workplace.

AVOID

Conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences

UNFRAMED:

“Getting older is a struggle and it is important that the younger generation help seniors in their communities.”

INSTEAD, TRY THIS

Tell a positive developmental story about aging

REFRAMED:

“We continue to grow in a variety of ways as we age. Intergenerational approaches to workplaces and community organizations provide the opportunity for people to contribute and benefit regardless of their age.”

OBJECTIVE: Clarity on the discussion will create a strong understanding of why we all have a stake in age- inclusive policies and programs, which will then allow for more engagement and conversation on the topic.

AVOID

Using the terms “ageism” or “implicit bias” without explanation

UNFRAMED:

“Ageism in America needs to be addressed; it is holding our nation back from healthy aging.”

INSTEAD, TRY THIS

Always define ageism and implicit bias

REFRAMED:

“Ageism is discrimination or unjust treatment based on age. Underlying ageism is implicit bias — the unconscious attitudes and beliefs that lead to judgments about older people. Ageism is bad for our health, making us sicker and costing our nation billions of dollars in avoidable health care costs.”

OBJECTIVE: Using specific solutions in your advocacy will make the concern you are addressing solvable and empower your listener to take action.

AVOID

Making generic appeals for the need to “do something” about aging

UNFRAMED:

“It’s time to do something today about aging safely in America!”

INSTEAD, TRY THIS

Use concrete examples

REFRAMED:

“We are all aging and have a stake in age-inclusive policies to strengthen essential community programs, including transportation, community centers, and health care.”



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The National Center to Reframe Aging is dedicated to ending ageism by advancing an equitable and complete story about aging in America. The center is the trusted source for proven communication strategies and tools to effectively frame aging issues. It is the nation’s leading organization cultivating an active community of individuals and organizations to spread awareness of implicit bias toward older people and influence policies and programs that benefit all of us as we age. Led by The Gerontological Society of America (GSA), the National Center acts on behalf of and amplifies efforts of the ten Leaders of Aging Organizations.