UWL REPOSITORY

repository.uwl.ac.uk

Acting Against Ageism: guidelines for inclusive representation in creative media production

Olsen, Dennis, Crewe, Jon ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4108-1551 and Nicholls, Marcus ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6047-108X (2024) Acting Against Ageism: guidelines for inclusive representation in creative media production. Manual. University of West London.

This is the Published Version of the final output.

UWL repository link: https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/14102/

Alternative formats: If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact: open.research@uwl.ac.uk

Acting Against Ageism: Guidelines for Inclusive Representation in Creative Media Production

Foreword

Ageism remains one of the most pervasive yet underacknowledged forms of discrimination in British media. Despite its widespread impact, age-related bias is often normalised through familiar tropes, casting practices and narrative structures that reduce older people to stereotypes – frail, wise, burdensome or invisible. These portrayals shape public perception and contribute to systemic exclusion across the creative industries.

These industry guidelines have been developed as part of the interdisciplinary research project Acting Against Ageism, based at the University of West London. They are designed to support practitioners across the creative industries – writers, producers, directors, casting agents, commissioners and development teams – in recognising and disrupting ageist assumptions in media production.

The guidelines are not prescriptive rules but reflective tools. They offer a structured approach to inclusive storytelling, grounded in research and creative practice. Each of the seven sections addresses a key area of representation:

- Different Experiences of Ageing
- Age and Gender
- Intergenerational Characters and Stories
- Age, Work and Value
- Technology and Modern Living
- Humour and Narrative Agency
- Sexuality, Health and the Body

Each section includes a core principle, practical "Do/Don't" advice, a creative checklist for development during pre-production and a reflective checklist for review during post-production. These are followed by an overview table, a quick reference guide and a review checklist for use at script, casting and roughcut stages.

We hope these guidelines will support more nuanced, diverse and equitable portrayals of older people – on paper, screen, stage and behind the scenes – and contribute to a creative culture that reflects ageing as a dynamic, multifaceted experience.

Dennis Olsen, Jon Crewe and Marcus Nicholls
University of West London

1 Different Experiences of Ageing

Core principle

Ageing is varied and individualised and should act as context, not identity. Characters who are older should be as contradictory and dynamic as any other group – never reduced to a single attribute. Deficit and 'exception' narratives (frailty / decline or super-ageing) should be avoided.

✔ Do

- Portray older characters with history, flaws, growth and agency; let them change over time.
- Use multiple lenses of identity (class, race, culture, disability, sexuality, location) alongside age.
- Portray age and health without making decline the defining feature.

✘ Don't

- Default to a single visual or cultural shorthand - eg 'older white males'.
- Treat old age as static, purely wise, or uniformly (in)competent.
- Equate ageing with decline, frailty, naivety, or disability.
- Present 'super-ager' myths as the only positive model.

Creative checklist

- What conflicts or desires push this older character forward?
- How does their past complicate their present? What do they still learn, unlearn or need to learn?
- What non-age-related traits define this character?
- How does the character describe themselves without mentioning age?
- Are their motivations and contradictions as rich as any other character group?

Reflective checklist

- Can we identify the character's needs, wants, contradictions and story arc – beyond 'they are old'?
- Do their dialogue and action suggest self-efficacy?
- Are age references specific and situational, rather than identity labels?

> "Ageing is not a monolithic process, it's not one thing, and it doesn't affect all people in the same way." (Professor, University of West London)

> "Most people are living diverse, individual, interesting lives. You're not a homogenous group of 30-year-olds any more than you're a homogenous group of 50-plus-year-olds, but advertising, TV, media, film, presents it to us that way." (Centre for Ageing Better)

2 Age and Gender

Core principle

More age diversity is needed on- and offscreen. Older women deserve equal presence, voice and continuity in both on- and offscreen roles.

✔ Do

- Cast age-appropriately and write older lead roles.
- Commission and hire older creatives – especially older women – across writing, directing, editing, producing.
- Ensure that dialogue, screen time, narrative agency and continuity in roles for older women match that of older men.

✘ Don't

- Present older characters only in terms of their relationships with younger characters – eg grandparents.
- Relegate older women to side roles or background support.
- Replace ageing female roles with younger versions while keeping older men in place.

Creative checklist
- Could a lead role plausibly be older?
- Which department heads or above-the-line roles can be filled by older talent?
- Have you checked line counts and scenes with purpose by gender and age?
- Are archetypal roles (action lead, comic lead, romantic lead, antihero) distributed equally between older men and women?
- Are older women given narrative agency, continuity and emotional range?

Reflective checklist
- Do casting breakdowns and call sheets show age diversity in leads?
- Do crew lists show older creatives in key roles?
- Is there parity in speaking minutes, story arcs and stakes for older women?

Even when [older female characters] are there, they´re invisible. They´re still not being heard; they´re still not being seen. (Centre for Ageing Better)

"When a man ages, he becomes wise or dignified. When a woman ages, she becomes irrelevant." (Woman, 69)

3 Intergenerational Characters and Stories

Core principle

Intergenerational stories should be meaningful, not tokenistic. Ageism should be avoided in all directions – including towards younger people. Care and support are not one-way processes, but a multi-directional spectrum.

✔ **Do**

- Write reciprocal care roles (young → old; old → young).
- Use intergenerational dynamics for plot propulsion, shared goals and conflict resolution.
- Show competence and fallibility distributed across ages.
- Reflect the idea that people share a common journey at different points.
- Create roles for older people that appeal to younger audiences, in terms of genre, tone and storylines.

✘ **Don't**

- Make giving or receiving care or support the sole function of older characters.
- Tie 'innovation' or 'freshness' exclusively to youth.
- Define intergenerational relationships merely via stereotypes such as 'sage advice.'
- Focus too much on physical care while neglecting other forms of connection.

Creative checklist

- What does the younger character learn or gain from the older one and vice versa?
- Where do younger characters show dependence or misunderstanding too?
- Where do older and younger characters co-create outcomes?
- Are intergenerational dynamics used to explore shared goals, conflict, or transformation?

Reflective checklist

- Are there moments in the story where both age groups initiate help, change views and share wins?
- Do intergenerational relationships avoid one-directional care or wisdom tropes?
- Do we see intergenerational relationships outside of family units?

"The beauty of intergenerational relationships is really powerful."
(Centre for Excellence on Ageing)

"A lot of ageism from my perspective is just a loss in translation between the different generations."
(Woman, 27)

4 Age, Work and Value

Core principle

Decouple human worth from employment while recognising evolving opportunities and the continual blurring of generational similarities and difference.

✔ **Do**

- Show value expressed through community, creativity, activism, care, play and learning – not just jobs.
- Portray later life career shifts, entrepreneurship and portfolio lives.

✘ **Don't**

- Make job status the sole validator of relevance.
- Present older workers only as retiring or obsolete.

Creative checklist
- How does this character create meaning or impact outside work?
- What new skill or relationship do they actively pursue?
- Is their value expressed through creativity, care, activism or play?

Reflective checklist
- Are there storylines where worth is intrinsic and relational, not just occupational?
- Is the character's relevance shown through personal growth or contribution beyond employment?

"A lot of what older adults do is unrecognised." (British Society of Gerontology)

"We tend to value people by their productivity and their output. When you no longer have that, maybe in retirement, suddenly your value seems to go down. [...] But actually, productivity can go up [with age] with the right stimulation; this is important to show." (New Vic Theaatre)

5 Technology and Modern Living

Core principle

Competence with technology and modern media is not age-bound. Older characters should be shown as adaptable, curious and open to learning, just as much as younger characters. This should be expressed through examples of older characters engaging with contemporary culture in diverse ways, including proficiency with tech and awareness regarding trends.

✔ Do

- Write older characters who adopt, teach, or design technology.
- Show diverse tech attitudes within all age groups.
- Show older characters who understand and are aware of emerging trends and innovations.
- Allow older characters to be 'in on the joke' when it comes to current cultural references.
- Depict older characters who use social media proficiently alongside other key modes of modern communication.

✘ Don't

- Default to tech-illiterate gags for older characters.
- Equate inability at a task with being 'old'.
- Exclude older characters from conversations about current cultural trends.
- Depict older characters as reliant on older forms of tech/media and unaware of newer forms.
- Show older characters as unable or unwilling to learn or explore new forms of tech, media and communication.

Creative checklist
- Could the tech mentor be older?
- Where does the younger character misuse or misunderstand tech?
- Are tech attitudes shown as diverse across all age groups?
- Do we see older characters learning to use new forms of tech and media?
- Do we see older characters communicating in a similar way to younger characters?

Reflective checklist
- Are there scenes where older characters confidently use or critique modern tools?
- Is tech competence portrayed as situational, not age-bound?
- Is an engagement with modern media culture normalised for older characters?
- Do older characters have the opportunity to learn and adapt to new forms of tech and communication?

"People would talk about [the] contemporary [...] through metaphors of youth, thinking about what's fresh, what's innovative, what's cutting-edge, what's new."
(Professor, Loughborough University)

"There's the incorrect assumption that older adults aare not technologically competent."
(British Society of

6 Humour and Narrative Agency

Core principle

Humour is welcome – punch up on specifics, not down on age. Older characters should be participants in humour, not an object of ridicule. Optimism about the future is valid at any age – ensure older characters have goals and desires.

✔ Do

- Use character-based humour, situational irony and self-aware wit.
- Allow older characters to hold hope, plans and joy.
- Ensure that older characters have a variety of aims and objectives in different areas of life and with varying timeframes.

✘ Don't

- Rely on negative age jokes as comedic shortcuts.
- Make being older the character's self-definition or punchline.
- Define older characters only by nostalgia and memories of youth.

Creative checklist

- What's funny about this person, putting aside their age?
- Where does optimism drive the plot for older characters?
- Is humour used to reveal character, not stereotype?

Reflective checklist

- Is the humour derived from crafted situations, rather than age clichés?
- Do some of the older characters have buoyant arcs?
- Is the tone inclusive, avoiding ridicule or reduction?

"For some people [getting older] can be joyous and wonderful, and can have opportunities to have a whole new lease of life, and do things they never thought they'd do." (Centre for Excellence on Ageing)

"[Older characters] are often pegged there to help us understand or navigate life, and that's why they're in it, not for their own complexities or interests." (New Vic Theatre)

7 Sexuality, Health and the Body*

*Note: While section 1 focuses on identity and narrative complexity, this section addresses embodiment and physical representation. Practitioners should avoid conflating age with bodily decline or using physical traits as identity markers.

Core principle
Sexuality, intimacy and the body remain present and narratively valid in older age; discuss boldly and without euphemism.

✔ Do

- Portray consensual, age-appropriate intimacy and desire.
- Treat bodies and bodily functions with frankness, dignity and (when fitting) humour.
- Include older LGBTQ+ and diverse body stories.

✘ Don't

- Erase sexuality for older characters or treat it as taboo.
- Use body-related topics solely for shock or derision.
- Hyperfocus on negative bodily sensations.

Creative checklist
- What does intimacy look like and mean for this character now?
- How do health, culture, or history shape sexuality without defining the whole person?
- Is the portrayal of the body grounded, respectful and narratively justified?

Reflective checklist
- Are there scenes which depict respectful, grounded sexual expression?
- Is there a tone of normalisation, rather than sensationalism?
- Are older bodies and sexualities treated with dignity and narrative relevance?

"We are not supposed to want anything anymore – not touch, not sex, not even to be seen as attractive."
(Woman, 58)

"Often [contemporary plays about older people] are about ill-health and frailty being defining in negative ways and so totally consuming someone's identity."
(Professor, Loughborough University)

Overview table

Focus area	What to do	What to stop	Practical mechanisms
Characterisation	Multidimensional older leads with arcs; avoid "age as identity"	Wisdom-only or frailty-only portrayals	Development room checklists; table reads flagged for age clichés*
Casting and Crew	Age-appropriate casting; older creatives (esp. women) in key roles	Token elder roles tethered to younger leads	Targets for age distribution in lead roles and HODs
Story Worlds	Intergenerational reciprocity; tech competence across ages	Youth = innovation; old = decline	Writers' room prompts; "reverse mentor" beats**
Humour and Tone	Character-driven humour; optimism at any age	Age-based putdowns	Comedy punch-up rules; script notes template
Themes of Value	Worth beyond work; later life growth	Work as sole validator	Story grid that maps meaning beyond occupation
Bodies and Intimacy	Normalise older intimacy; be direct and respectful	Erasure or sensationalism	Intimacy coordination guidelines inclusive of older actors

*A development practice where scripts are read aloud and participants actively identify age-related stereotypes – eg frailty-only portrayals or age-as-punchline dialogue – before production.

**Story moments where older characters guide or challenge younger ones, flipping the usual mentor dynamic. These help disrupt ageist assumptions and show older characters as sources of insight or innovation.

Quick "Do/Don't" reference (10 Point)

1. Do write older leads with growth; Don't use age to portray a character.
2. Do cast age appropriately; Don't box older roles into family-only labels.
3. Do include older women onscreen and behind the camera; Don't reduce their dialogue or onscreen time.
4. Do balance health realities; Don't define age by decline or 'super-ager' exceptions.
5. Do show mutual care; Don't make caring one-way.
6. Do separate worth from work; Don't make job status the only value.
7. Do portray tech savvy older characters; Don't default to 'can't use phone' gags.
8. Do use humour thoughtfully; Don't rely on negative age jokes.
9. Do normalise older sexuality and bodies; Don't treat them as taboo.
10. Do reflect diversity within ageing; Don't present a single archetype.

Review checklist (use at script, casting and roughcut stages)

- Stereotype sweep: Any instances of frailty-only, naïve victim or superager tropes?
- Role function: Are older characters doing more than support/care roles?
- Diversity within ageing: Are race, class, culture, disability, sexuality considered in older characters – and are any perspectives notably absent or underrepresented?
- Dialogue parity: Are older women's speaking time and decision-making on par with men's?
- Character arcs: Can we state each older character's goal, change and contradiction?
- Intergenerational reciprocity: Where do both sides learn/help?
- Technology portrayal: Any age-based tech clichés to fix?
- Humour audit: Are jokes about specifics, not age itself?
- Intimacy and body: Is representation respectful, consensual, narratively justified?
- Behind the camera: Do we have older creatives (esp. women) in key roles?

Acknowledgements

UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON
The *Career* University

University of
West London
St Mary's Road
Ealing
London W5 5RF

University of
West London
Boston Manor Road
Brentford
Middlesex TW8 9GA

University of
West London
Fountain House
2 Queens Walk
Reading RG1 7QF

Drama Studio London
Grange Court
1 Grange Road
Ealing
London W5 5QN

Ruskin College
Ruskin Hall
Dunstan Road
Old Headington
Oxford OX3 9BZ

Tel: 0800 036 8888   Int: +44 (0)20 8231 2468   **uwl.ac.uk**   Published: 2025