

How to Write Ages

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

Ages of people

Editors of most publications want to know how old people are.

If a person is rowing single-handed around Australia, it makes a great difference to the reader if that person is nine years old, 19, 29, 69 or 99.

If a person has just retired, the reader wants to know her age . . . is she 39, 45, 50 or 105?

It makes a difference to your story.

So as a journalist you must get used to gently, politely and with respect, but bluntly, asking someone's age.

You don't ask professors, scientists and other "authorities" their ages unless that person is unusually young or old.

But the answer is super-simple.

It's not about what you want to do. It's not about whether it's "nice" or "rude" to ask people their ages. It's not about whether age is supposedly relevant to the topic of your article.

This is about what your target publication expects . . . does it WANT people's ages included?

You should have read enough editions of your target publication to know. Ages are usually included for "ordinary people", that is, people not authorities, not famous and usually not in the news.

But don't be AGEIST. When you use terms like:

- baby
- toddler
- child
- pubescent
- pre-pubescent
- pre-schooler
- adolescent
- teenager
- boy
- small fry
- moppet
- girl

- youth
- man
- woman
- mature age

woman

- senior citizen
- ?and so on?

. . . how old are these people?

The important message I have is:

- Don't refer to any male as a man unless he's 18 or older
- Don't refer to any female as a woman unless she's 18 or older

People aged 17 or younger are officially children, but it's considered patronising to call 16 and 17 year olds "children". You could refer to them as youths or young women.

Anyone aged 15 or under can safely be referred to as a child.

But you usually avoid all this fuss by simply stating a person's age. And you don't need to identify their sex if they have obviously male or female names like Suzette or Jonathon, or Simone or Simon.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.