

LANGUAGE MATTERS: ROMANCE SCAMS

A guide for journalists, media, Government & corporate organisations

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About these guidelines

These guidelines provide information and tips to support accurate reporting of romance scams. They can be extended to all scam typologies and were developed with National Anti-Scam Centre, romance scam victims, academics and industry professionals.

Why a guide on language?

In 2024, Australians lost \$2.18 billion to scams. Romance and relationship scams are responsible for the third highest loss at \$139.9 million. Global financial losses to scams are estimated to exceed \$442 billion annually, with approximately 57% of adults worldwide experiencing a scam in the past year.

Scams are too often portrayed as personal failings, as though victims should have “known better”. These are not personal failings but the result of deliberate and calculated criminals that prey on trust and human vulnerability. Blaming victims worsens trauma, discourages reporting, and isolates survivors. Language must reflect the criminal nature and sophistication of these scams.

Media and corporate communications shape public awareness and understanding, yet guidance on responsible reporting and messaging has been limited.

This guide proposes practical ways to:

- Shift the focus from the victims’ actions to the scammers’ tactics
- Promote understanding and empathy, and reduce stigma
- Use trauma-informed, crime-accurate language
- Improve the consistency of language across media, government, and other organisations.

Understanding romance scams

Romance scammers use emotional manipulation to exploit victims and convince them that they are in a relationship with a persona the scammer has created. These criminals are often part of organised networks with access to technology, resources and scripted playbooks. They use encrypted messaging platforms frequently, making their activity harder to detect. Advanced tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technology also help them appear legitimate in photos, videos and voice calls.

These scams prey on our natural human desires for connection, friendship, and relationship, using overwhelming affection and affirmation to build trust. This form of manipulation, known as social engineering, makes it hard for victims to recognise the deception.

Romance scams are intentional crimes involving deliberate deception and exploitation.

“Romance scams aren’t about gullibility or naivety - they’re about manipulation, coercion, and control. Language matters: The headline ‘woman duped,’ invites eye-rolls, not empathy. When it says, ‘criminal steals \$300k using coercive tactics,’ it invites outrage and action.”

- Tracy Hall, romance scam victim

A note on terminology:

This guide uses the term “victim” as it remains the accepted legal and policy term for someone against whom a crime has been committed. However, it is acknowledged that some individuals may prefer to identify as a “survivor” or “victim-survivor,” and these choices in self-identification are respected.

9 principles for media and messaging on romance scams



1. Focus on the actions of the scammer, not the victim

Emphasise the scammer's deliberate criminal behaviour rather than the victim's perceived mistakes.



2. Clarify the method of deception

Make the scammer's tactics visible (e.g. impersonation, emotional manipulation, phishing), aiding public awareness and prevention.



3. Use active, crime focused language

Replace passive language ('lost', 'fell victim') with active verbs like 'steal', 'defraud' and 'exploit' to reinforce that a crime has occurred.



4. Use precise, neutral language

Avoid sensationalism and support respectful, empathetic communication.



5. Use evidence to contextualise scams

Use credible sources such as ACCC Scamwatch, IDCARE, and the AFP to illustrate scam patterns and methods. Avoid extreme or atypical examples that may misrepresent who is affected.



6. Use statistics to show impact

Include data, such as "Australians were defrauded out of \$139.9 million in romance scams in 2025," while noting that figures are likely underreported due to stigma.



7. Support trauma-informed communication

Recognise the emotional impact of scams and avoid language that could re-traumatise.



8. Reduce shame and stigma

Help victims feel less isolated or blamed, encourage reporting and support-seeking.



9. Include support options

Include details for scam-specific support services and helplines alongside all scam-related content. Providing clear pathways to assistance reinforces trust and encourages reporting and recovery.

Changing the Story: How language shapes scams awareness

Stigmatising phrasing	Scammer-focused narrative	Why it matters
Focus on the actions of the scammer, not the victim		
<p>✗ “Widow duped by online scam, loses \$250K.”</p> <p>✗ “Man falls for fake crypto investment.”</p>	<p>✓ “Scammers exploit widow through online romance fraud, stealing \$250K.”</p> <p>✓ “Organised crime ring defrauds man using fake crypto platform”</p>	<p>Focussing on the actions of the scammer reduces victim blaming and exposes the scammer’s criminal activity. This emphasises that scams are deliberate acts of criminality, helping the public understand that anyone can be targeted.</p>
Clarify the method of deception		
<p>✗ “Scammer tricks man online.”</p> <p>✗ “Victim fell for cryptocurrency scam.”</p>	<p>✓ “Scammer used stolen photos and false military identity to groom man before demanding money.”</p> <p>✓ “Scammers falsify profits to lure people into fake crypto platform”</p>	<p>Clearly explaining the scammer’s method of deception rather than using vague or victim-blaming language contributes to an informed public understanding of scams. This helps protect the community, makes prevention more effective, and affirms that the responsibility lies with the perpetrator.</p>
Use active, crime-focused language		
<p>✗ “Woman loses \$63,000 indating scam.”</p> <p>✗ “Victim tricked into drug trafficking.”</p>	<p>✓ “Scammer steals \$63,000 through online dating app exploitation”</p> <p>✓ “Romance scammer manipulated victim into unwitting drug trafficking.”</p>	<p>Use of active, crime-focused language emphasises the scammer’s deliberate actions rather than portraying the victim as passive. This approach reinforces accountability, highlights the criminal nature of the act, and helps shift public perception.</p>
Use precise, neutral language		
<p>✗ “Naïve woman caught inelaborate scam.”</p> <p>✗ “Victim fell into honey trap.”</p>	<p>✓ “Scammer used fake online identity to commit fraud.”</p> <p>✓ “Scammer groomed victim for months before stealing thousands”</p>	<p>Replacing biased or judgmental language with precise, neutral terms that describe the scammer’s actions ensures clarity, avoids reinforcing stereotypes, and maintains a professional, fact-based tone that supports victim dignity.</p>
Support trauma-informed communication		
<p>✗ “Desperate for love, Perth woman conned out of \$780K.”</p>	<p>✓ “Romance scammers use fake identities to steal \$780K”</p>	<p>Language that implies desperation or embarrassment can re-traumatise other victims. By focusing on the scammer’s coercive tactics, a</p>

✗ “Embarrassed victim kept scam secret for months.”	✓ “Coercive scammers isolate victims from support”	trauma-informed narrative acknowledges the harm caused and supports a more compassionate, victim-focused response.
Reduce shame and stigma		
✗ “Lonely pensioner duped by dating scam.” ✗ “Woman admits she was tricked into transferring funds.”	✓ “Romance scammer exploits devastated pensioner” ✓ “Love-bombing scammer manipulates woman into transferring funds”	Avoiding language that blames victims and reinforces shame reduces the stigma associated with scams. This encourages victims to seek support, increases reporting, and raises community awareness of scams.

Include support and next steps

Providing this information alongside scam-related content ensures readers know exactly what steps to take if they’ve been affected, turning awareness into action. It also connects people with trusted support services, reducing harm, and helping victims recover both financially and emotionally.

Use evidence and statistics responsibly

- Always cite reputable sources: ACCC Scamwatch, AIC, IDCARE, AFP
- Provide context: “Australians were defrauded out of \$139.9m in romance scams in 2025, but this is likely underreported due to stigma.”
- Avoid ‘cherry-picking’ extreme cases that suggest only certain people are affected.
- Show patterns and methods (e.g., grooming stages, sextortion, crypto scams).

What to do if you’ve been scammed

1. Act fast to prevent further losses

Contact your bank or card provider immediately to report the scam. Ask your bank about any steps they can take to help recover the money.

2. Get help and recover

IDCARE is Australia and New Zealand’s national identity and cyber support service.

Call 1800 595 160 or visit idcare.org

3. Warn others and report the scam

Once you have secured your bank accounts and personal information, you can help stop the scam or warn others by reporting to [Scamwatch](https://scamwatch.gov.au) or to the police through [ReportCyber](https://reportcyber.gov.au).

4. Watch out for follow-up scams

If you’ve had money stolen in a scam, look out for new scams, especially someone offering to help you get your money back.

5. Get support

Anyone can become the victim of a scam. If you want to talk or need advice, contact one of these organisations:

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au

13YARN: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support on 13 92 76 or visit 13yarn.org.au