

Don't call me "old": Avoiding ageism when writing about aging

This blog post was written for the National Institute on Aging (part of the National Institutes of Health) and is also posted on their [NIA Insider Blog](#). It offers guidance for writers on avoiding ageist language and stereotypes when discussing older adults, promoting respectful and inclusive communication.

Ageist messages are everywhere — you need only to browse a greeting card aisle to see countless quips about being a “geezer” or “over the hill.” Ageist content is so prevalent in our society that too many people may not recognize it as problematic.

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) defines ageism as a combination of stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) directed toward people on the basis of their age. Research has shown that ageism has serious implications for the health of older people, associating it with poorer physical and mental health, reduced quality of life, and even earlier death.

Because ageism is so pervasive, it's easy for well-intentioned writers to inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes about older adults. Whether you're writing a blog post, grant application, or journal article, making a few subtle but intentional word choice changes can help people of all ages think more positively about aging.

Language to use

Help increase awareness of ageism and its impact by choosing terminology that promotes a respectful, positive attitude toward older people and aging while still being descriptive and accurate. For example:

- Choose neutral terms such as “older adults,” “older populations,” and “people over age X” to describe groups of people.
- When possible, describe the population or age group more specifically, such as: “This study focused on disease risk in Black women between the ages of 65 and 75.”
- Use “we” and “us” instead of “they” and “them” when appropriate. We are all aging, and many issues that affect older adults also affect younger populations.

As in many fields, preferred terminology will continue to evolve over time. Refer to the [NIH Style Guide](#) or other guides such as the [AP Stylebook](#) for the latest guidance.

Language to avoid

It's also important to recognize terminology that reflects damaging stereotypes about older adults and aging. Certain words and phrases, although intended as benign or even positive, may inadvertently perpetuate negative attitudes. For example:

- Don't use words that may have negative connotations, such as "the aged," "elderly," "senior," "senior citizen," and "boomer."
- Avoid the term "elders" except when referencing American Indian/Alaska Natives, for whom this term may be preferred and culturally appropriate.
- The term "geriatrics" refers to the branch of medicine that deals with the medical care and treatment of older people. Avoid using "geriatric" to describe individuals or groups of people.
- Consider that terms including "aging well" and "successful aging" imply there's a right way and a wrong way to age, placing the responsibility for healthy aging on the individual.
- Euphemisms like "of a certain age" might suggest there's something shameful about aging.

The bottom line

While ageism is deeply ingrained in our society, there are opportunities to counter common but misguided assumptions about the later part of life. Using respectful and inclusive language, and avoiding words that reflect implicit biases, can help change the narrative.

If you have tips to share on avoiding ageism, or appropriate ways to respond to it, please leave a comment below. You may also want to check out these resources for more information:

- [WHO Quick Guide to Avoid Ageism in Communication](#)
- [WHO Communications Toolkit: Global Campaign to Combat Ageism](#)
- [Age-inclusive language guidelines from the Gerontological Society of America](#)
- [Reframing Aging Initiative](#)