

Age Beat



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE JOURNALISTS EXCHANGE ON AGING

WORDS TO AGE BY: A BRIEF GLOSSARY AND TIPS ON USAGE

Among the nearly 100 journalists who responded to the Journalists Exchange on Aging survey about the language of covering issues in aging, many referred to *The Associated Press Stylebook*, demonstrating that the AP has established one useful, though limited, guideline in this subject area. Following are a few additional rules of thumb gleaned from survey respondents and other sources. These are intended to help journalists represent midlife and older people in socially neutral language that respects their individuality without appending presumptuous labels to them, either directly or indirectly. This set of principles is a work in progress; readers are welcome to submit their own additions to or improvements on this glossary to JEoA National Coordinator Paul Kleyman at paul@asaging.org. This glossary is part of a full report on the *Journalists Exchange on Aging Survey on Style*, which is available online at www.asaging.org/agebeat.

Preferred synonyms follow alphabetically:

boomer(s): Widely used and accepted by participants in the JEoA language survey, this term nonetheless elicits considerable cautionary notes from journalists in aging who are troubled by its overuse. Although marketers sense a growing excitement around all things boomer, reporters need to keep in mind that the term is only a temporary proxy for middle age, not synonymous with it. The 77 million boomers are a large generation born at a specific time, from the end of World War II to the beginning of the War on Poverty, usually but not always defined as from the start of 1946 through the end of 1964. Journalists who write frequently on aging and retirement advise against its overly broad and liberal application.

elder(s): Use to identify those who are discernibly in later life. *Elder(s)* can seem uncomfortable to some because of its infrequent use, as well as its tribal or group applications (e.g., *elders of the tribe*, *church elders*), but the noun is associated with positive applications and is yet to be used widely enough to be resented as a label for older people.

middle-age(d): Use descriptively (e.g., *those in middle age* or the less acceptable *middle-aged people*), but avoid references to *the middle aged*, which tends to lump people with a group label.

midlife: In his "On Language" column (May 6, 2007), William Safire favors the word midlife, which he traces to the "impeccable coinage source, John Keats, in his 1818 poem "Endymion." Safire anoints the term as not a euphemism but "a usefulness."

References to people in midlife are more inclusive than using *boomer(s)*, a term identifying one birth cohort. Midlife generally identifies the years between people's early 40s and early 60s, but precision is somewhat slippery. Be aware that middle age traditionally was considered to begin at age 35, when 70 was regarded as a typical benchmark for very old age. Increasingly, the large and generally active boomer generation is likely to extend the concept of midlife well into the 60s.

Older (people, adults, individuals, Americans and so on): The top choice, seen by reporters as the more neutral and flexible general term for people in later life.

senior(s): The second most widely accepted group descriptive for older people. Do not use to describe people younger than age 65, though, and be aware that boomers may be increasingly unfriendly to this term as they approach that age.

Mostly disliked terms:

baby boomer(s): Do not use except in discussions relating to the birth years of the postwar baby boom. However much many media outlets preserve the baby fat in this generation, many grate on the gratuitous infantilization this term, in broad use, applies to the entire generation in perpetuity.

elderly: Use only as a modifier (e.g., *elderly people*, *elderly patients*) in referring to people who are discernibly old and frail. More vigorous older people tend to dislike the term when used in general reference to all people in late life. That they find it stigmatizing, as if older people are all frail, has emerged in many studies and anecdotal reports over the years. The noun *the elderly* should be sidestepped entirely. It is the most disliked descriptive term among older adults for its impersonal and stigmatizing manner of penning elders together in an image of frailty and decline.

senior citizen(s): Steer clear of this term. Although a prominent gerontologist noted that this term, initially used in a 1938 issue of *Time* magazine, was the first

phrase to denote the civic position of older adults, that subtle argument in its behalf is lost to most readers. Even though *senior citizen* remains in wide use, it continues to sound euphemistically sour in the ears of many older readers.

Other terms, such as *aging* (*boomers, people, etc.*), *mature* and *old* are discussed in more detail elsewhere in the JEOA survey report.

A Few Good Principles

The *AP Stylebook* states: “*Elderly*. Use this word carefully and sparingly. It is appropriate in generic phrases that do not refer to specific individuals: *concern for the elderly, a home for the elderly*, etc. If the intent is to show that an individual’s faculties have deteriorated, cite a graphic example and give attribution for it.” This AP rule is the most widely cited among journalists and its general point is well taken here. However, reporters should note that the phrase *the elderly* was among those JEOA survey respondents rated as one that they and their audience members most disliked. *Elderly* used as an adjective is acceptable, though (see below).

Gannett Newspapers adds to the AP admonition in its stylebook section on age that reporters should “be specific when possible, *reserving senior(s)* for those cases when no other descriptive will work. . . . Use accurate descriptive terms. Avoid being patronizing, demeaning or using stereotyping terms such as *feisty, sly, sweet, little, feeble, eccentric, senile, grandmotherly*, etc. Don’t describe an older individual as *active*, implying that this is some deviation from the norm. Instead describe the individual’s activities. Don’t gratuitously mention family relationships when there is no relevance to the subject: ‘Golda Meir, a doughty grandmother, told the Egyptians. . . .’”

Don’t mention a person’s age unless it’s germane to the story. A report stating that “An 84-year-old driver struck three cars during rush hour” should cite facts establishing that the driver’s age was relevant to the accident. (Who were the other drivers? Was a mechanical failure at issue? What were driving conditions?) Another example: “Rep. Nancy Pelosi, age 65, held her latest grandchild as she announced that preschool education would be among her top issues.” For group identifications, be as specific as possible, especially in first references, such as “people 65 or older.”

When in doubt, ask sources what terms they prefer.

When certain, ask anyhow.

When assured by a source that a doubtful choice is fine, such as *geezer*, quote the person directly if needed, and apply good sense: Qualify awkward word choices, such as *geezer* or other reclaimed epithets, in ways that will not result in your having to answer complaints. Keep in mind that some will grumble about any group descriptive applied to them, and that is their right. Maintain a sense of proportion about terms of identity and gauge over time how well audience response serves

as a barometer of popular usage—a subject that can occasionally provide material for good copy.

Avoid words and phrases that automatically date people or convey extraneous connotations, such as *of a certain age, curmudgeon or feisty*. Writers who do not do so in this rapidly aging society will increasingly risk dating themselves as being immature and out of touch. Even common slang, such as *the golden years*, may carry unintended shades of meaning. The word *golden*, for instance, was once meant to convey the colors at sunset, but the connotation has changed over the years, now also suggesting the affluence of many retirees.

Medicare and Medicaid: Know the difference—and see that your copy desk and headline writers do, too. These huge programs are not interchangeable, but people frequently confuse them with one another. *Medicare is a universally available federal program* for all people 65 or older and many people with disabilities. *Medicaid is a federal and state poverty program restricted to low-income individuals*. An intelligent article on changes in Medicaid will look foolish to knowledgeable readers under a headline about Medicare.

Be alert to political spin in phrasing associated with public policy elements of news stories. Casual use of the “burden” of Social Security or, more generally, of an aging society, plays into one side of a heated political debate. A report about proposals to reduce social spending should not then refer to “savings of \$66 billion,” when opposing parties would argue that claimed “savings” would be offset by hidden losses in money and human consequences. The neutral alternative, even for broadcast: “a federal reduction of \$66 billion.” When in doubt, reporters should—as always—consider the source and ask whether there might be another side to the story behind a word choice.

Housing types: Emulate the stylebook of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* by learning the official designations of various types of eldercare settings in each state discussed. Assisted living facilities are not nursing homes, board-and-care homes are designated by as many as 30 terms around the United States, and continuing-care retirement communities are specific kinds of developments. When in doubt, ask residents or staff about the correct term for their site. For precise definitions, check with the state licensing authority for long-term care facilities.

Avoid the gee-whiz tone in stories about older people. “At 76, Yamoto remains an active (fill in the blank: gardener, worker, hang glider, teacher, marathoner).” Without specific information and context, stating that an older person is *still* active or *remains* lively at 74 implies that the individual’s vigor is merely a vestige of his or her waning powers. References to preserved attributes can be appropriate: “At age 79, Barbara Cook’s voice has deepened and matured but surprisingly retains the freshness of her original cast recordings of *Candide* from four decades ago.” The emphasis is on the person and her skill, not on the writer’s naive sense of wonder.