

California Assisted Living

CALA

Association



Elevate Aging through Language:

A USAGE AND STYLE GUIDE

Introduction

California's senior living communities provide a high quality of life for residents because they practice a person-centered philosophy, as found in [a 2016 study by ProMatura](#). According to study authors, one of the factors intrinsic to quality of life is a sense of belonging—a feeling that you are acknowledged and recognized as a person of value.

The antithesis of a sense of belonging is being stereotyped and seen as “other.” When speaking about older adults, this othering is called **ageism**. Like other prejudicial views such as racism and gender discrimination, ageism essentially takes away the individuality of older adults and reduces them to a stereotype.

In 2018, CALA partnered with Elder Care Alliance on the Elevate Aging Project as a way to begin the shift away from ageist beliefs and toward more aging-friendly thoughts and actions. The project took the form of an interactive display at Elevate: CALA's Conference & Trade Show, where visitors were asked to respond to these questions:

- What are the words you dislike that are used around aging and senior living?
- What are the words you love that are used around aging and senior living?

The responses from this initial event and subsequent events of aging professionals resulted in a robust data set of words and phrases, both those that are considered by the field to be ageist and those that have a positive connotation.

Based on the recommendation of CALA's Elevate Aging Task Force, this language use and style guide uses data from the Elevate Aging Project to identify words and phrases that perpetuate ageist views and suggest replacements that promote positive views of aging. In addition, this guide covers the use of an inclusive, person-centered philosophy which should be kept in mind when writing about older adults.

General Guidelines

FOR AGING-FRIENDLY LANGUAGE

When writing about older adults, whether an individual or a group, it can be helpful to keep in mind three guiding concepts: **person-centered**, **positive**, and **precise**.

In the same way that senior living professionals provide care and services in a person-centered environment—meaning that the care and services are personalized to the particular wants and needs of individual residents—language should be **person-centered** as well. As you write, ask yourself, “Is the age of the person pertinent to the story?” If the answer is “not really,” then use age-related words sparingly—or avoid them altogether. Remember that the people you are writing about are people, first and foremost.

The data from the Elevate Aging project revealed a pretty clear distinction in the types of words and phrases that aging professionals disliked and preferred. Overwhelmingly, aging professionals want others to avoid words that over-medicalize, patronize, or highlight incapacity and disability. Instead, they prefer words and phrases that focus on a person's capabilities, wisdom, and experience. Similarly, language around senior housing and services should be crafted with the understanding that these are not places we put people, but rather *homes where people live*. As you consider language usage relating to age, when possible, choose words with **positive** connotations. For instance, use “community” rather than “facility” when writing about assisted living or memory care. When positive wording is not appropriate, words with neutral connotation are preferred. Rather than saying someone is “suffering from Alzheimer's,” you can say they are “living with Alzheimer's.”

We are often taught to find synonyms for frequently-used words and vary our usage as a way of avoiding repetition. But such practices can lead to using words that do not mean the same thing, which can cause confusion in readers and highlight biases. On the other hand, **precise** writing makes a piece both informative and easy to read. For instance, if an article

changes back and forth between “retirement home,” “assisted living,” and “nursing home” when talking about a single location, it avoids repetition, but it also makes it seem as if these three different types of housing are all the same. This effectively groups the residents of these very different communities together into one—the assumption being that all people over a certain age are the same. By making sure which term is the correct one for the community they are writing about, authors can avoid this stereotyping of older adults and inform readers at the same time.

Finally, when in doubt, *ask*. Does the person you are interviewing prefer to be called a “senior” or “older adult?” What is the precise term for the community they live or work in? You will be surprised at how open people are to talking about age and aging, and it may get you thinking about your own aging process in a new way.

Usage Suggestions

FROM THE ELEVATE AGING PROJECT

Here, we have gathered the most often cited negative or ageist words and provided some suggestions for alternates pulled from the Elevate Aging data set.

	INSTEAD OF:	CONSIDER USING:
Chronological Age		
Adjective	Old, elderly, aged, ancient	Older, elder, aging, mature
Noun	Old person, senior citizen	Older adult, elder
Identification		
Noun	Folks, overly-familiar terms (honey, sweetie, dear, grandma/grandpa, mom/dad)	Mr./Mrs., the individual’s name
Seniors Housing		
Noun	Facility, old folks home, convalescent home, institution	Community, senior living, assisted living
Noun	Units, beds	Apartment, residence, home
Noun	Patient	Resident
Disability		
Adjective	Dependent, incapable, needy	Receiving assistance, needing
Adjective	Demented, senile, suffering from dementia	Living with dementia, living with cognitive impairment



In addition to these one-to-one comparisons, the following types of words should be avoided when possible as they feed into stereotypical views of aging. Instead of language that devalues older adults in these ways, consider supporting concepts that honor and value them through word choice. According to the aging professionals who participated in the project, *these* are the words and concepts that more accurately portray what aging is like. Here are some suggestions from the Elevate Aging data:

INSTEAD OF:		CONSIDER USING:	
Words describing a loss of capacity or self	Frail, declining, deteriorating, fragile, invisible, diminished, gone	Words describing an older adult's capabilities	Engaged, adventurous, thriving, independent, capable, wellness
Words describing a negative demeanor or attitude	Difficult, stubborn, non-compliant, cranky	Words describing an older adult's sense of self-worth	Empowered, enabled, fulfilled, self-assured, confident, acceptance
Words that devalue	Burden, drain on the system	Words describing the value of an older adult's experience	Experienced, wise, contribution, guidance

A Note

ABOUT "SENIOR"

The word "senior" appeared frequently in both the data set for disliked words and preferred words. This mirrors other resources that say the term, which was once seen as a preferred replacement for "senior citizen" or "elderly," is now joining their ranks. In some instances when referring to housing, such as "senior housing and services" or "senior living," it is still acceptable. However, when referring to a group of people, the term "older adult" is the preferred descriptor.

About CALA

The California Assisted Living Association (CALA) is the only association solely representing the state's Residential Care Facilities for the Elderly (RCFEs), which encompass Assisted Living, Memory Care, and Continuing Care Retirement Communities. CALA is dedicated to the betterment of these communities through: leadership to providers and other stakeholders in these residential settings; advocacy to protect the interests of providers and the people they serve; and education to support high-quality programs and services.

Resources for Further Reading

This style guide is based solely on data collected from the Elevate Aging Project; it reflects the ageist language that aging professionals often see in their day-to-day work and the aging-positive words they prefer to use instead. But it is by no means a comprehensive list. For a deeper dive into ageism in language and media, we recommend these resources:

- [CALA News & Views Issue 31: Elevate Aging](#)

This issue of CALA's award-winning member magazine includes a deep-dive review of data from the Elevate Aging Project as well as information on ageism and combatting negative stereotypes.

- [Media Takes: On Aging](#)

This style guide produced by The International Longevity Center – USA and Aging Services of California outlines the ageist depiction of older adults in media, entertainment, and advertising, and provides tools to help proactively combat stereotypes.

- [Dementia Language Guidelines](#)

This guide from Dementia Australia promotes the consistent use of appropriate, inclusive, and non-stigmatizing language when talking about dementia and people with dementia.

- [The Power of Language to Create Culture](#)

While medical terminology may be appropriate for skilled nursing facilities, a more person-centered approach to language in these settings is being encouraged as well, as this paper from the Pioneer Network explores.