

ICAA's  
Guidelines  
for effective  
communication  
with older adults

International  
Council on  
Active Aging



*Changing the Way We Age*™

## **ICAA's Guidelines for effective communication with older adults**

An overarching goal of International Council on Active Aging's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign is to shift society's perceptions of aging. As part of the campaign's "Rebranding Aging" objective, ICAA's guidelines for effectively communicating to, and about, the aging population is a tool that can be used to promote a more realistic and complete picture of what it means to become and be old in North America.

People communicate to share their thoughts and perspectives—and often to inform, convince or persuade others. Speech, imagery, body language, writing, hand movements and art are popular tools for communicating messages. Just as the population of people 50 years or older is highly diverse, so are the groups of people who communicate with them: marketers and advertisers; professionals working in health promotion, senior living and social services; teachers and program leaders; family members; health care providers—not to mention peers and friends.

Recognizing the need to match communication with purpose, ICAA's guidelines are structured for multiple groups of users. "Part I: Guidelines for accurately representing older adults"

is an overview of key philosophies to guide decision-making about attitudes, words and images. Part I is a useful tool because it brings together in one place the style guides, opinions and research of multiple organizations and shareholders, anchored in the experiences and viewpoints of ICAA's leadership, advisors and members. Part II will provide more specific recommendations for messaging and print. Part III will concentrate on phrasing and approaches when speaking in person with one or more individuals.

As the guidelines state, language is fluid and dynamic, as are the images and gestures used to communicate. As the association that has been defining and leading the active-aging industry since 2001, ICAA will continue to provide the resources that enable professionals, peers, family members and friends to effectively identify and respond to the needs, dreams, desires, capabilities and expectations of burgeoning numbers of older people.

**Changing the Way We Age® Campaign**  
[www.changingthewayweage.com](http://www.changingthewayweage.com)

## **International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)**

The International Council on Active Aging<sup>®</sup> is the professional association that leads, connects and defines the active-aging industry. ICAA supports professionals who develop wellness facilities, programs and services for adults over 50. The association is focused on active aging—an approach to aging that helps older adults live as fully as possible within all dimensions of wellness (i.e., physical, social, environmental, vocational, intellectual, emotional and spiritual)—and provides its members with education, information, resources and tools.

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# Part I: Guidelines for accurately representing older adults

## I. Basic language and imagery strategies

Avoiding bias in language is always a good practice. Negative stereotypes exist of people solely because of gender, ethnicity, age, religion and other blind categorizations. The stereotypes promote prejudice rather than explain behaviors.

Ageism refers to discrimination against persons because of their age, and implies the tendency to regard older people as unworthy and debilitated.

Avoiding ageist stereotypes in language is in the best interests of consumers and professionals because:

- Ageist stereotypes by their nature are inaccurate.
- Stereotypes offend the populations you are attempting to reach, thus negating your message.
- Ageist language promotes cultural bias against older adults, which is counterproductive.
- No one can say when a person becomes “old.”
- Age alone does not describe a person, behavior or action.

It’s no surprise that there are so many questions being asked about what to call people who are over 45 years old, and that there are as many opinions on the topic as there are about politics. Our society craves sound bites to describe large and complex concepts, and seeks a single word or phrase to convey substantial meaning.

Is there a single word or phrase to describe the population of people 45 or 50 years and older? The short answer is, no. There is no single word or phrase that can possibly describe the diversity of the 40.2 million people ages 65 and older (2010) and the 55.2 million people ages 50-64 years old (2008) living in the US, or the millions living in every other country.

Life expectancy is increasing, which means that within the population of people 50 years and older, there are arguably five generations. Gerontologists may refer to these generations as middle age (45 to 64 years), young-old (65 to 74 years), middle-old (75 to 84 years), old-old (85 to 99 years) and oldest-old (100 years or more). A generation, or age cohort, is simply the group of people who share the same birth years. Clearly, each generation will have different values and perspectives because each is composed of individuals who are guided by heredity, culture, political events and many other influences besides year of birth.

Multiple professional organizations have sought to examine the stereotypes of older ages and recommend approaches that avoid perpetrating ageist language and imagery. Style guides from The Associated Press and American Psychological Association and The Chicago Manual of Style state that stereotypes of any person based on age, gender, ethnicity, religion or other supposed descriptor should be avoided. This admonition is part of the codes of ethics of journalism societies, the American Marketing Association and many newspapers.



In reporting on older adults, or developing marketing messages, unconscious attributes of ageism can appear despite the best of intentions. It is appropriate to pause and consider unconscious stereotypes on the part of the writer, including a potential bias of omitting key groups or people because of a stereotype.

The International Council on Active Aging has reviewed guidelines published by other organizations, searched language guides and tapped the opinions and recommendations of leading experts in active aging. The consensus of the individuals and organizations who work directly with older adults of all ages and cultures, are gathered here to help you choose the wording and messages that will best reach your audience.

### Guiding principles

- There are no “bad” words, but there are words that will not be successful in attracting and representing older adults.
- There are no “bad” images, but there are images that stereotype and inappropriately portray the incredible range of individuals in the “older” age cohorts.
- The more language and imagery reflects the needs or wants of people being targeted, the more successful the communication.

The goal is to be inclusive.

### Key points

**Effective messages appeal to a life stage.** For example, appeal to an anniversary, or relocation or change from prior profession to new profession, or the birth of a grandchild.

**Effective messages appeal to a need or interest.** Functional ability, attitude and behavior are far more critical than chronological age when describing an incident or constructing messages.

**“Old” words have new meanings that must be defined.** Terms that are so familiar they are part of the national vocabulary carry new meanings. For example, the word “retirement” formerly meant leaving a job one held for one’s working life and, with a guaranteed pension for income, sitting in a rocking chair. Today, “retirement” often means either finding (or creating) a new job, working full or part time as a volunteer and engaging in personal interests. The concept of “retirement” has changed, and so the meaning of the word has changed.

**Age alone is not a reason or need, but it may be a point of entry.** For example, the ability to vote requires an age of 18, but 18 does not describe the reasons why a person votes. Age 55 may be required to rent an apartment in an age-qualified community, but age 55 does not describe a person’s interests, economic status or motivators for renting in that particular place. When age is relevant, use specific ages. For example, the ability to draw Social Security at ages 62 or 67 or the ability to reside in an age-qualified community at age 55.

**The problem is the problem; age is not the problem.** Simply knowing that a given problem is associated with older populations is not a reason to assume that your target market will be attracted by an age-related message. For example, diabetes is more common in people 50 years and older. People do not have diabetes because of their age, however. Most people with diabetes acquire it because of poor quality diets, obesity and sedentary lifestyles. Lifestyle is the primary issue, not age.

**Demographics are not a target market.** Age, socioeconomic status, geography, gender, marital status—all of these demographics are the ground for surveys and market research. Demographics are a tool for sorting information, not for making decisions. Other methods, such as psychographics, product/service solutions, focus groups and similar are needed to understand and hone in on the needs, interests and attitudes of the target market.

**Avoid cliches.** It is no longer accurate or helpful to act as if it were cute or unusual for an older person to mend fences on a ranch, tutor kindergarteners, run a marathon, lead a Fortune 500 company, bake chicken instead of frying it, or fight City Hall. These actions are common and normal.

**Perception of age is key.** The boomers and their parents tend to perceive themselves as being 10 years younger than they really are. And the aging population is indeed more healthy and active than prior generations. A challenge for seniors centers, for example, is overcoming the barrier that

older adults don't perceive themselves as being old enough to benefit from the center. If older adults don't think of themselves as old, age-based marketing won't be effective.

**There is no such thing as “anti-aging.”** It would be useless to try; we start aging from the moment of birth. The issue is not opposition to aging, the issue is living as well as possible through all the ages in a life span.

**One group does not represent an entire population.** Government agencies, research organizations, foundations and similar places collect information on their areas of interest, then report their findings and advocate their points of view. Typically, agencies and organizations focus on socioeconomic conditions, health conditions, safety and similar topic areas. It is extremely appropriate for organizations to report on the number of older adults at the poverty level; it is not appropriate to extrapolate that all older adults are poor and needy.

**The jargon of a profession is not a communication tool outside of that profession.** Medicine has a unique language to describe disease and patients; governments use terms to describe population groups; researchers use language that is specific to research. The languages of these groups enhance communication among their professional peers, but these languages may be highly ineffective for communicating to people of any age or to other professions. A doctor may see a geriatric patient, but the grocery store clerk sees a friendly regular

customer who often buys flour and fruit, and the customer sees herself as an environmental activist who bakes award-winning cakes while moving around the kitchen using a walker.

**Objective and subjective are two different things.** Facts are accurate and perception is reality. The objective fact is that chronic health conditions are prevalent among people who are 65 years and older (percentage varies depending on the disease). Yet, 75% of people ages 65 and over rate their health as good, very good or excellent. People have chronic conditions, but that is one part of life, not their whole life. Many people with physical limitations (at any age) adapt and live happy and productive lives. Some people do not.

**Be careful with humor.** Portraying older adults with the purpose of ridicule and derogatory humor is never appropriate. What is humorous to one person is offensive to another.

**Reaction to language is individual.** A word that one person finds neutral may be considered negative or harmful by another person. The best practice is to appeal to needs, interests and issues rather than age. Ask your target audience what they prefer to be called, and use that as your guide.

### **Words and phrases**

There are many opinions on appropriate and inappropriate words. Professionals and older adults may have different opinions on what is the best term to describe people of various ages. An

important consideration is that people in their 50s and 60s may not like a word that people ages 85 years and older do prefer. It is always best to define the target audience before finalizing wording.

### **Words and phrases to avoid:**

Anti-aging  
Aged  
Codger, geezer, and similar  
Grandmotherly

“he looks good for his age”  
“despite her age...”  
“even older adults can...”  
“is active even at that age...”

### **Words and phrases to avoid or use sparingly:**

Senior (may be appropriate for people 70 years or older in certain circumstances)  
Senior (considered old-fashioned and stereotypical: is never appropriate for people at approximately 65 years and younger)  
Golden, silver  
Golden agers  
The elderly (may be used for a group, eg, concern for the elderly)  
Elderly (do not apply to an individual)  
Senior citizens  
Retiree (do not use as a noun; more accurate is “people who are retired”)  
Middle age (do not use as a noun: more acceptable is “people in middle age”)  
Third age (this term is not widely recognized)

### **Preferred words and phrases:**

Adults ages 60 and older  
People ages 55 and older  
People with dementia  
People in middle age

Aging adults  
Midlife  
Older adults  
Older persons  
Older people  
Older patients  
Older population  
Prime time  
Experience, experienced  
Independent  
Mentor, coach

### **Words and phrases that are accepted by some groups and rejected by other groups:**

Elder (respected term in some cultures, used for the older age groups)  
Frail, frailty (used and defined in research and government; inappropriate in other communication unless it is defined explicitly)  
Mature, maturity (may be perceived as old-fashioned and overly neutral)  
Baby boomer (people in this age cohort do not consider themselves babies)

### **Age cohorts**

Using a nickname for a generation (eg, Baby Boomers or Matures) may or may not be appropriate. These terms assume that readers/viewers have memorized the age groups being referenced, and

imply that the millions of people in this age range are all the same, which is inaccurate.

Care should be taken when naming a group of people to define a market that the name and characteristics are descriptive, but not ageist. For example, the terms used in the gerontographics segmentation model of adults ages 55 and older include, Healthy Indulgers, Healthy Hermits and Ailing Outgoers (developed by George Moschis at Georgia State University). These terms describe behaviors, and they do not reference the age group.

### **Image recommendations**

- Show older people across the full range of interests and functional abilities. Older adults represent many functional levels, abilities, socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Showing all of these in imagery is fair, as well as effective.
- Portray people engaging in a range of behaviors, roles and activities.
- Avoid portraying a person in a manner that implies ridicule, prejudice or a negative stereotype.
- Show the breadth of interests of older adults, including using computers and taking classes, socializing, traveling. Older adults who use assistive devices (such as canes, walkers and wheelchairs) are involved in all these activities and should be included when selecting images.
- Portray older adults in well-kept, contemporary and fashionable (as appropriate) clothing and eyeglasses.



- Show older adults adhering to universal guidelines, such as wearing helmets when bicycling, wearing closed shoes in gyms, and hats in bright sunlight.

Be cautious of a boomerang effect of exclusively showing only beautiful, fit and apparently wealthy older adults. This is also not a realistic or fair image of aging and the older population.

### **Presentation**

When preparing materials directed to older adults, clarity is a high priority. Along the aging process, vision changes affect near vision, contrast between light and dark, and perception of color.

- Use a basic typeface or font, such as Times Roman, at 12 points or larger. Avoid ornate and complex typefaces.
- Avoid italics and all caps.
- Use bold for emphasis, and minimize underlining.
- Use plenty of space (leading) between lines of type to increase readability.
- High contrast (dark text on a light background) works best. Do not reverse out type.
- Rely on more saturated, intense colors.
- Use plain backgrounds and clean, simple images.
- Choose a single image rather than building collages of images.
- People and objects in the image should be clear and easily identifiable.
- Set text margins to flush left and ragged right.

- On website, make text scalable so users can increase the size easily.
- Keep websites free of clutter.
- Follow best practices for clear, easy to find and follow navigation. Dropdown menus can be challenging; build navigation without them.
- Minimize scrolling by placing most important text or imagery at the top of the page.
- Avoid scrolling images and text, which are hard to follow and annoying.

### **Language and imagery evolve with society**

Society is constantly changing as new knowledge, technologies and philosophies surface. The concept of aging likewise is expanding and evolving as the older population demonstrates its many aspects and contributions.

Language and imagery evolve along with culture and people. Isn't that what makes culture and language both exciting and challenging? New ideas and concepts come into being all the time, which means that new words and meanings emerge while other words and meanings recede and disappear.

In today's society, the stage is set for the language and imagery that provide a fair, accurate and positive view of aging.

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## Resources

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Outlook 2010  
Research and perspective on 50+  
population  
International Council on Active Aging  
[www.icaa.cc](http://www.icaa.cc)

Media Takes: On Aging  
Style guide for Journalism,  
Entertainment and Advertising  
International Longevity Center – USA  
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2009  
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The Art of the Positive  
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Words to age by: a brief glossary and  
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