

Older versus elder – it's an age-old argument (29, 09, 12)

Do seniors prefer the term older or elder?

Right off the bat (I can almost hear it crack), I associate elder in a religious sense, you know, an older person who is now considered an elder (often elected, sometimes appointed - see Stephen Harper's ad hoc senate philosophy), a leader in the church, and goodness knows, we can always use a few more leaders in the church.



These two terms are named comparative adjectives; however, the second term, elder, can also be used as a noun, so in baseball parlance, it's really a switch-hitter. If we narrow our grammatical scope to associate the aforementioned terms with the concept of 'more advanced in age;' which then is the preferred usage? My grandpa is older or my grandma is elder?

Well, sonny, if you are smart, you would not use either term in referring to your wonderful, aging grandparents. Try to use the term, nicer instead.

Those who prefer elder and its superlative eldest, tend to be older; of course, once you get into the starry realm of superlatives, your ego can run a bit crazy. Smartest, dumbest, thinnest, fattest, nicest, baddest, you get the idea Eldest seems to carry more weight which is precisely what one should not carry when one gets older or elder.

One can easily progress from old to older to oldest, but try that with elder; Another problem with elder is that it has further limitations as do most people when they age. I can write, "Joan has an elder brother" and "Bob is the elder of the two" but not "She is elder than Hortense" In addition to "Joan has an older brother" and "Bob is the older of the two;" conversely, "Joan is older than John" is considered proper, but-rather confusing at this point because I seem to have lost Hortense.

Unfortunately, it gets worse for elder. Elder and eldest can apply only to people, but older and oldest is much more versatile, referring to either people or inanimate objects (like chairs), some of which act like people.

Miriam would often say that I act like an inanimate object when football games are on TV, which applies now to Monday, Thursday and Sunday with Saturday optional because I do not really enjoy college ball much but if I'm feeling like an inanimate object, heck, I might watch a few more hours of ball.



Elder does possess a regal association. For example, Alfred the Great adopted the title King of the Anglo-Saxons and by the early 10th century, his son Edward the Elder controlled southern England. Edward the Older just doesn't do it The British rulers often employed these comparative adjectives. There was Arnold the Fearful, Rudolph the Red-nosed, William the Conqueror, Justin the Obese and so on.

Really, it's unfortunate that we have not maintained this regal tradition. We could have had Craitor the Oppositional, McGuinty the Obstinate, Hudak the Heckler, Horwath the Hospitable and so on, which is much more fun than arguing about elder and older.