

What Should I Call My Professor?

Academia has its own customs and traditions that can be confusing for students. Even simple things like emailing your professor can seem like a minefield. Should you refer to them as “Professor”, “Doctor” or something else? These tips should help you avoid any gaffes.

Professor: The general rule is if someone’s title includes the word professor, then you can (and should) address them as “Professor Last Name.” This includes assistant, associate, clinical, and research professors, as well as full professors.

Doctor: Anyone who has earned a doctoral degree can be addressed as “Dr. Last Name”. The most common doctoral degree is a PhD, but you might also encounter instructors with other doctoral degrees such as a Doctor of Theology (DTh), Doctor of Public Health (DrPH), or Doctor of Engineering (DEng).

When in doubt, “Dr. Last Name” is the safest way to address an academic you don’t know anything about. It is generally the standard form of address for instructors who do not hold the rank of professor such as lecturers, readers, senior lecturers, and research associates.

While the titles of “Dr.” and “Professor” often overlap, they are not always interchangeable. Not all professors have PhDs. In fine arts, social work, and law, many professors will have an MFA, MSW, or JD (respectively) rather than a doctoral degree. And although some professors might also be doctors, “Professor” is a higher rank and thus tends to be preferred.

Mr. and Mrs.: When you were a kid, you might have been taught that the polite way to address an authority figure was as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” This is generally not true in academia. Calling a professor or someone with a doctorate “Mr.” or “Mrs.” can be disrespectful as it does not acknowledge the years of work they have done to earn the title of “Dr.” or “Professor”. This is especially true for women as “Mrs.” reduces a woman to her marital status and ignores her academic accomplishments.

However, you are addressing an instructor who is not a professor and does not have a PhD (such as a TA or lab instructor) you can call them “Mr.” or “Ms”. Unless your instructor specifically expresses a preference for “Mrs.” or “Miss”, “Ms” is now the standard English title for an adult woman—married or not.

First Names: Some professors prefer that their students call them by their first names while others find it rude and presumptuous. For this reason, it’s best to avoid calling your instructors by their first name unless they explicitly tell you that you can. This includes graduate student instructors as well.

Your instructors will often make this all very easy for you by indicating how they want to be addressed when they introduce themselves at the start of the class. If you still have doubts about what to call an instructor, err on the side of being overly respectful.