

# How to Address People in English

English learners often feel confused about how to address people properly. Many feel uncomfortable asking the question, "What should I call you?" Even native English people find this question awkward. For example, many women don't know how to address their boyfriend's mother. On the other hand, some parents don't know what to call their children's teacher.

first name	surname, family name, last name
William	Shakespeare
Sarah	Palin

Why is "What should I call you?" such a difficult question to ask? Perhaps it's because you are asking the other person to provide their status or position in the world in relation to yours. This position may involve age, job, education, religion and even marital status.

Note that:

for Mr we say "Mister"

for Mrs we say "Misses"

for Miss we say "Miss"

for Ms we say "Mizz"

In some English speaking countries it is traditional for a woman to change her last name when she gets married. However, not all women do. If a woman you know has been recently married do not assume her name will change. You can safely ask, "Are you going by the same name?" This question gets trickier when a woman gets divorced or becomes a widow. Some women will change their name back to their maiden name. A widowed woman often keeps her husband's name unless she remarries. A divorced woman often changes her name back to her maiden name. If you don't know the woman well, wait for her to tell you if her name is changing.

Since English is a language, rather than a culture, it is difficult to teach English learners exactly how to address people. There will always be some people and some professions that require more formality than others. Addressing people in writing has different rules and formalities than in speaking.

## Asking the question

If you are unsure of what to call someone, it's best to use a formal address or simply ask one of these questions:

- What should I call you?
- What should I call your mum / the teacher / the manager?
- Can I call you [first name] ?
- Is it okay if I call you [the nickname you've heard others use] ?
- What's your name? (use in a casual situation like a party or classroom where first names are used)

## Answering the question

You might not be the only person wondering about titles. Students, colleagues or acquaintances may not know what to call **you**. If they seem unsure about how to pronounce your name, or you want them to call you something more casual, help them out:

- Please, call me [first name]
- You can call me [nickname or short form]

## Formal Titles in English

In business situations, use formal titles unless the people you meet tell you otherwise. To get someone's attention you can say: "Excuse me, Sir" or "Pardon me, Madam/Ma'am." To greet someone you can say: "Hello Sir" or "Good morning, Madam/Ma'am."

The phrase "Yes, Sir!" (or "Yes, Madam/Ma'am!") is sometimes used by native speakers in a sarcastic way. For example when a young child tells his father to "close his newspaper" the parent might say, "Yes, sir!" and laugh. You might also hear a mother saying, "No Madam/Ma'am" to her daughter's request for something unreasonable.

Here are the formal titles English speakers use (listen to the pronunciation):

1. **Sir** (adult male of any age)
2. **Ma'am** (adult female - North American)
3. **Madam** (adult female)
4. **Mr** + last name (any man)
5. **Mrs** + last name (married woman who uses her husband's last name)
6. **Ms** + last name (married or unmarried woman; common in business)

7. **Miss** + last name (unmarried woman)
8. **Dr** + last name (some doctors go by Dr + first name)
9. **Professor** + last name (in a university setting)

When you are writing to someone for the first time, use a formal address: Mr or Ms + the person's last name if you know it. If you can't find the last name, use a generic title such as Sir or Madam. The respondent may address you by your first name and sign off with their first name. In today's business world, the following correspondence is usually more casual. If you write back a second time you can use the respondent's letter as a guideline. If they address you by your first name and sign off with their first name, you can do the same. (See more about [salutations and closings in letters](#).)

Occasionally you may have a close relationship with someone who typically gets called Sir, Madam, Mr or Mrs (for example, a business executive, a celebrity, a professor or a person older than yourself). At some point this person may give you permission to use his or her first name. In English we use the phrase "on a first name basis" or "on first name terms" to describe a relationship that is not as formal as it seems it should be. To describe this you would say, for example: "Pete's mom and I are on a first name basis" or "My teacher and I are on first name terms."

## Informal Titles in English

Casual or very close relationships require an informal form of address:

- First name (friends, students, children)
- Miss/Mr + first name (sometimes used by dance or music teachers or childcare workers)

## Titles of Affection

When addressing a child, a romantic partner, or a close friend or family member (usually younger) people often use these terms of endearment, also known as "pet names":

- Honey (child, romantic partner, or younger person)
- Dear
- Sweetie
- Love
- Darling
- Babe or Baby (romantic partner)
- Pal (father or grandfather calls male child)

- Buddy or Bud (very informal between friends or adult-to-child; can be seen as negative)

## Frequently Asked Questions:

How you address people may also change depending on your own age and status. If you are unsure, use a formal address. If your form of address is too formal, the other person will invite you to use an alternative form of address, such as a first name.

### **Q. What should I call my teacher?**

**A. Start formal.** He or she will probably tell you on day 1 during the introduction. If not, use a formal title, until he or she tells you otherwise. Don't use the generic term "Teacher". This sounds as if you do not know your teacher's name. (You wouldn't want to be called "Student", right?) Even if you have a substitute teacher, make sure to address the instructor by a specific name.

### **Q. What should I call my fellow students?**

**A. Depends on ages.** In most classroom situations, students call each other by first names. You may have a few older students in your class. To show respect, address these people by their last name (unless they ask you to use their first).

### **Q. What should I call my child's teacher?**

**A. Start with Mr or Mrs.** Call your child's teacher the same thing your child calls her. The teacher may give you permission to use her first name when your child is not present.

### **Q. How should I address people online?**

**A. Depends on the situation.** On a social network you can usually use first names, even with teachers and administrators. In an email, use a formal form of address the first time you contact a person. The other person will likely respond by signing with just a first name. In your next email you can safely address that person by their first name.

### **Q. What should I call our school administrator?**

**A. Formal.** Use a formal address until he or she tells you differently.

### **Q. What should I call my homestay parents?**

**A. Start formal.** Use Mr or Mrs/Ms + last name until he or she tells you differently.

### **Q. What should I call my neighbours?**

**A. Depends on your ages.** Neighbours usually address each other with first names, though it depends on your age and theirs. Introduce yourself using your first name and wait to see how they introduce themselves. If your

neighbour is older you can ask the question during the second meeting, "Is it okay if I call you [first name]?"

**Q. How should I address my colleagues?**

**A. Depends on the industry.** In many businesses people go by their first names. If you are the new employee, other people will introduce themselves to you.

**Q. What should I call my manager or supervisor?**

**A. Start formal.** Even if this person calls you by your first name, address them as Mr or Mrs/Ms + last name until they invite you to use their first name.

**Q. How should I address the bus driver?**

**A. Formal.** Use Sir or Madam/Ma'am for any type of travel or transportation worker who is not wearing a nametag. Don't say: "Excuse me 'bus driver'." That is his or her job, not title.

**Q. What should I call my (boy)friend's parents?**

**A. Formal.** Children and youth should use Mr or Mrs/Ms + last name. If your friends say it's okay to call their parents by their first names it is still polite to ask the adults, "Is it okay if I call you [first name]?" If you and your friend are also adults you can probably use their parents' first names.

**Q. How do I address a waiter/ waitress/ flight attendant?**

**A. Formal or first name.** Use Sir or Madam/Ma'am if you don't know their first name. Do NOT use "Hey waiter!" or "Hey waitress!" This is considered rude by the restaurant staff and you will likely not receive friendly service. If you are a regular customer you will build a relationship with the restaurant or cafe staff. Then you can call staff by their first names.

**Q. What should I call my hairstylist or beauty care worker?**

**A. First name.** In the beauty industry most people go by first names. Some may have nicknames they will tell you to use.

**Q. How do I address a customer service clerk?**

**A. Check for nametag.** Some clerks (or restaurant servers) wear name tags. A name tag might say, "Hi, my name is Danny." In this case it is okay to address this clerk by his first name: "Thank you, Danny" or "Danny, could you help me find the hamburgers?" If there is no nametag, use Sir or Ma'am.

**acquaintance** (noun): someone you know casually (e.g: a friend of a friend)

**address** (verb): to name someone in a specific way (when speaking or writing)

**awkward** (adj.): feeling uncomfortable

**colleagues** (noun): people you work with

**customer service** (noun): help for shoppers, buyers, members

**divorced** (adj.): not married anymore

**executive** (noun): manager or high level employee in a company or business  
**first name terms** (BrE) / **first name basis**: having a close enough relationship to disregard formalities such as age or status  
**formal** (adj.): showing respect for rules, forms and traditions  
**formality** (noun): something that has no real purpose other than being a tradition  
**generic** (adj.): describing many; not specific  
**maiden name** (noun): a married woman's surname at birth  
**nickname** (noun): a short or cute name used by friends or relatives  
**pet name** (noun): a name used by close friends and family to show their love  
**respondent** (noun): the person who writes back or responds  
**sarcastic** (adj.): ironic; typically having an opposite meaning, often to show contempt or to prove a point  
**terms of endearment** (noun): words or names that show feelings of care for someone  
**trickier** (adj.): more difficult to understand or do  
**widow** (noun): a single woman whose husband has died

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZVKN-Zk3BY>