9 When Do Titles Matter and Why? A Guide for Graduate Students in Political Science

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What Do You Need To Know?

What to call your professors might be the most minor and awkward topic addressed in this guidebook. To paraphrase Woodrow Wilson, perhaps the debate is so fierce because the stakes seem so small. After all, does it really matter? Many professors are explicit in how they wish to be addressed in their course syllabi. Most professors will gently correct a student who is too formal or informal in their interactions. Surely this kerfuffle is a superficial and insignificant part of graduate student training. The truth is more complex. As recent debates over how to refer to Jill Biden given her EdD suggest, questions of honorifics are freighted with meaning (Epstein 2020; Jabour 2020). Learning how to recognize and navigate multiple expectations for formal and informal professional interactions is essential for success in graduate school and post-graduate employment. How to address professors is a perfect example of the hidden curriculum contained within any PhD program (Margolis and Romero 1988).

Graduate school—and graduate students—occupy a liminal space between undergraduates and academics. The zones of uncertainty are considerable, as are the stresses involved in passing comprehensive exams, conceiving an idea for a dissertation, and researching and writing said dissertation. Clear guidelines on how to address more senior scholars in the field will hopefully free up your scarcest and most valuable resource—i.e., your brain—to concentrate on the more scholarly dimensions of your training.

Our golden rule is a simple one. Whenever there is any uncertainty in initial interactions with professors both inside and outside your department, default to formality and then adjust accordingly over time. In other words, when first contacting professors, begin by calling them "professor." It is the easiest, most risk-averse move. In many settings the honorific will quickly be set aside—but not always.

Why Does It Matter?

In many US political science PhD programs, graduate students are encouraged to call their professors by their first name.[1] The logic is straightforward: in training PhDs, professors are attempting to mentor students who will eventually become peers. One way to signal this process is to have everyone call each other by their first names. Why bother with formality in a collegial environment?

One reason, which applies to all the situations described below, is that not all graduate programs operate this way. In some graduate schools, particularly public policy programs like the Fletcher School at Tufts, the bulk of the students are pursuing a terminal master's degree. The assumption that these

students will enter the academy does not hold.

Another reason is that some faculty may be less willing to disregard their honorifics. Whether one looks at citation patterns, student evaluations, or faculty surveys, the evidence for gender and racial bias in academic political science is considerable (Maliniak, Powers, and Walter 2013; Mitchell and Martin 2018; Chávez and Mitchell 2020). These biases extend to variations in the use of honorifics. Women and faculty of color are more likely to be called by their first name in professional settings (Files et al 2017). This jibes with first-person accounts by professors in these categories (Berry 2014). Using a first name without invitation could be viewed as an unintentional slight. Furthermore, junior faculty are also closer in age to that of the median graduate student. Honorifics can serve as a reminder of the appropriate boundaries that should exist between professors and graduate students.

What Should You Do?

Written Correspondence

Virtually all written engagement with professors will take place electronically. Therein lies a potential problem. As early as 1985, observers noted that compared to other forms of communication, electronic mail was far more likely to generate miscommunications, misperceptions, and impulsive emotional responses (Shapiro and Anderson 1985). For younger generations who are digital natives, the informalities of texting and social media are simply taken as given. Many professors also have social media accounts, blurring and multiplying the channels of communication even further. Switching from informal arenas to more formal modes of contact means that opportunities for unintentional missteps abound.

Given this kind of environment, the safest and surest way to proceed is to start any new interaction with a bias toward formality. In emailing professors both within and without your department for the first time, open with "Dear Professor [last name]" rather than opening with "Hi [first name]!" If they use their first name in any of their responses to you, then that is the appropriate social cue to reciprocate and use their first name in any future correspondence. If they do not, however, then that should be interpreted as a signal to continue using the "professor" honorific.

The worst-case scenario with this approach is a professor gently chiding you to call them by their first name. Opting for informality, however, can create a bad first impression. As Laura Portwood-Stacer (2016) observed: "An honorific is a title used to communicate respect for a person's position. Whether or not you, as a student, actually respect your professor's authority or position, it's a good idea to act like you do." If this seems like kowtowing to a professor's perceived insecurities, bear in mind that they earned their title by completing the very degree that you are now pursuing.

Are there exceptions to this rule in written correspondence? Over time, yes. If advanced graduate students show excessive deference, they might cause a professor at another institution to mistakenly believe that they are more junior than is actually the case. For example, if advanced graduate students are organizing conference panels and need to solicit faculty at other institutions, opening with "Dear [first name]" and adding "(if I may)" just afterward would be the best approach.

Use of Titles in the Classroom

As with written communication, having a bias toward formality in the classroom is recommended. Taking and teaching classes as a graduate student requires multiple levels of preparation, and determining how to address faculty—and be addressed by undergraduates—can be very stressful. Guidelines are helpful if provided by individual instructors, but, in the absence of official guidance, these informal recommendations can establish a comfortable and professional classroom dynamic.

Graduate seminars are very different from undergraduate courses in that there is an understanding that everyone in the group is actively engaged in classic and contemporary debates in the scholarly literature. Ideally, the professor will establish at the start what the protocol will be for names. Many graduate school faculty expect that "Professor" or "Dr" will be used until students complete their comprehensive exams, after which first names are more common while students conduct doctoral research. Some faculty may say first names should be used from the start, but if not, then using a title is recommended.

Do not assume, regardless of whether the professor has just completed their dissertation and started teaching, or is a senior scholar in the discipline, that use of first names will be welcome.

That said, attention to classroom dynamics also is important. Graduate students begin their programs with varying degrees of academic and professional expertise—some start directly after college, while others join a doctoral program after working for some time, or earning a graduate degree from another institution. They may have different assumptions about titles in the classroom, particularly if they have been working in a field where use of first names is standard. If some graduate students address faculty by first name and faculty do not object, then an informal norm of no titles appears to be established. Having the professor determine what the classroom protocol will be is preferred, and inquiring is reasonable. In the absence of clear communication, titles are recommended unless an informal practice of first names develops. In that case, using a title is still fine, but making sure that some students are not perceived as more senior than others because they use first names is important. Again, professors should establish guidelines, and if they do not, then asking is the best way to have clarity on the topic.

Graduate students who teach a small-group section of a course, or their own course entirely, should consider how they want to be addressed by undergraduates and make that clear from the beginning of the term. In a course with multiple sections, some discussion among graduate students and instructors will be helpful. Instructors who have completed their doctorate may prefer to use a title, while graduate students who are working on their dissertations may not object to first names. Above all, ensure that you are comfortable with the use of titles, or not, and then inform undergraduates accordingly to establish the classroom structure.

As with informal dynamics in a graduate seminar, graduate student instructors should be prepared to address the possibility that some undergraduates will assume that first names are acceptable. If this happens, then gently letting your students know that you prefer a title—professor, dr., etc.—is fine. Making this clear will be helpful for all students in the classroom, and students should follow your direction. If a student repeatedly uses your first name when you have requested otherwise, then a direct discussion may be productive. If there is continued resistance (unlikely, but can happen), then you will want to raise the issue with your department chair to determine how best to proceed.

Use of Titles in Individual Interactions and at Formal Events

Similar to the use of titles in classrooms and written communication, settings such as a seminar series, conferences, and workshops can also serve as sources of angst for graduate students about how to address faculty. Students begin encountering external faculty early in their programs, and, over time, students are called upon to introduce departmental and external faculty at different events. The same rules of the road outlined for written communications apply for occasions in which students individually introduce themselves to faculty, but more formal introductions require a different set of considerations. While no universal rules exist for the use of honorifics, following three general guidelines can help to avoid embarrassment or rebuke when introducing oneself to speakers or introducing speakers to others.

The same default to formality recommended for written correspondence represents the most conservative of the three guidelines for a graduate student's introduction to and of faculty. This approach conveys a degree of titular deference that minimizes the risk of a student being perceived as flippant or brazen. More importantly, it allows the senior person to set the terms of subsequent interactions by either accepting the formality or by responding with "Please feel free to call me [name]." From this exchange, students may adjust their language accordingly.

The second guideline is specific to the introduction of speakers at seminars, workshops, or conferences. It is the most effective method of mitigating confusion with introductions, but assumes the benefit of time. Graduate students often are charged with coordinating departmental seminar series and workshops and frequently serve as conference discussants. In such roles, they can and should use the benefit of time before the event to specifically ask faculty how they wish to be referenced during an introduction. The language then used in the introduction provides a strong signal for other graduate students to follow. There is a distinct difference between "It is my pleasure to welcome Professor [first name, last name] to our seminar. Professor [last name]..." and "It is my pleasure to welcome Professor [first name, last name] to our seminar. [First name]..."

Observing before acting serves as the final guideline for these interactions. This involves mirroring the language used by peer-level graduate students in their interactions with a faculty member. While an approach available to students, it should be considered a last resort, as it is fraught with ambiguity and does not provide important context. A fellow student may have an existing relationship with a particular faculty member that affords them liberties not available to other students. The student being observed could be a co-author with the faculty member and may be introducing them to another potential co-author.

Endnotes

1 This norm varies widely across the globe. In some locales, such as Australia, England, or Scandinavia, the norm is to always use first names. In other regions the norm is more formal.

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