

Dr v Prof: Academic Titles in the UK and US

This survey is to help establish the best ways to politely address academics in Britain and the US e.g. in formal emails (job applications, PhD applications, invitation to speak at a conference). I am particularly interested in what recipients themselves perceive to be polite. Let's assume our recipient has a PhD and carries out research as part of their role, they probably also teach.

Many academics are not especially keen on hierarchy, status, titles, but some express concern when they are addressed by people they've never met in an overfamiliar ("Hey Bob!"), sycophantic or otherwise inappropriate manner since it may reflect wider problems in interacting with peers or colleagues. For this reason it may be advisable to use more formal language in initial contact with academics that you have not previously met. But what is appropriate or optimal in one cultural context may not be the same in another. In particular the titles Dr and Prof seem to have subtly different connotations in the UK and US. In the UK Prof is unambiguously a higher status title, but this does not appear to be the case in the US (or at least, I'd like to know whether and how Prof is perceived).

In Britain and some other commonwealth countries, Professor is "reserved only for the most senior academics at a university, typically a department chair, or an awarded chair specifically bestowed recognizing an individual at a university or similar institution". whereas "In the United States and Canada the title of professor is granted to most scholars with Doctorate degrees (typically PhDs) who teach in two- and four-year colleges and universities, and is used in the titles assistant professor and associate professor, which are not considered professor-level positions elsewhere, as well as for full professors". The quotes come from wikipedia entry Professor. I am interested in responses from other countries too, but it is difficult to accommodate all possibilities, so please add any additional information in the comment box provided.

* Required

Your role *

We need this to understand how different participants might respond to different forms of address, focus on UK, US to keep things simple, other nationalities please provide comments relevant to your system.

- PhD qualified UK - non-professorial research position
- PhD qualified UK - non-professorial faculty position (lecturer, senior lecturer, reader)
- PhD qualified UK - other non-professorial teaching position
- PhD qualified - UK Professor
- PhD qualified - US assistant professor
- PhD qualified - US associate professor
- PhD qualified - US (full) professor
- PhD qualified - US other non-professorial teaching/research position (title does not include "professor")
- PhD qualified - US other professorial teaching/research position (title includes "professor")
- Other country, PhD qualified, title includes "professor"
- Other country, PhD qualified, title does not include "professor"
- Non PhD qualified, academic/university setting
- Non PhD qualified, non-academic setting
- PhD qualified, UK, other university/academic setting (e.g., editor)
- PhD qualified, US, other university/academic setting
- PhD qualified non-academic setting

What would be the best way for a PhD applicant to approach you? *

For example, how would you advise a relative to approach potential supervisor they have never met?

- Dear Dr <Surname>,
 Dear Prof <Surname>,
 Dear <Firstname>,
 Hi <Firstname>,
 Hey <Firstname>! (or other informal address)
 Other:

Which is more polite when addressing a (full) professor you've never met: *

i.e., which language would *you* use in a formal email

- Hi <Firstname>,
 Dear Prof <Surname>,
 Dear Dr <Surname>,
 Other:

Imagine you receive an approach from a potential PhD student you have never met beginning "Dear Dr <Surname>": how appropriate is this greeting?

1 2 3 4 5

Highly Inappropriate Ideal

Imagine you receive an approach from a potential PhD student you have never met beginning "Dear Prof <Surname>": how appropriate is this greeting?

1 2 3 4 5

Highly Inappropriate Ideal

Imagine you receive an approach from a potential PhD student you have never met beginning "Hi Dr <Surname>": how appropriate is this greeting?

1 2 3 4 5

Highly Inappropriate Ideal

Imagine you receive an approach from a potential PhD student you have never met beginning "Hi <Firstname>,". How appropriate is this greeting?

1 2 3 4 5

Highly Inappropriate Ideal

Imagine you receive an approach from a potential PhD student you have never met beginning "Hey <Firstname>": how appropriate is this greeting?

1 2 3 4 5

Highly Inappropriate Ideal

Imagine you receive a personal approach from a fellow academic you have never met inviting you to speak at a conference. The email begins "Dear Dr <surname>": how appropriate is this greeting?

1 2 3 4 5

Highly Inappropriate Ideal

If a PhD applicant you've never met or been in contact with used what you consider overfamiliar language in an email how would you feel?

Tick any that apply

- Unconcerned, I really don't care about this type of thing
- It might indicate that the applicant was not giving much thought to the way they might be perceived by others
- I'd be concerned they might tread on other people's toes, or make a bad impression
- I'd be personally offended
- I'd be mildly irritated
- It would affect my impression of the way they might interact with peers and supervisors in professional settings

Any other thoughts or comments?

Is this trivial and silly? Is it important for students to have good advice on etiquette? If not from the UK/US, how does it work where you are?

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