

Don't miss this prefix primer

Written by By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 16 February 2024 00:00



I'm doing the best I can over here. I'm proud to say my wife and I have been married for 16 years, but I still have plenty to learn (understatement of the century).

When it comes to addressing a woman, we have several prefixes to choose from. I previously investigated "Mr." and "Master." Today, we'll tackle how to address women formally.

As a born and bred Okie, I still call an elder female "ma'am." This polite way to address a woman comes from the Old French phrase "ma dame" (my lady). Ma dame became "madam," and then, as it often does, the word got shortened. Generally, madam (or ma'am) was used to address a married woman.

Let's talk about the term "mistress," and — no — I'm not talking about the type who receives hush money from crooked politicians. Mistress is the female equivalent of "Master." A mistress was traditionally the master's wife in a household that employed servants. Although "mistress" continued to reflect a woman of higher social standing, a second definition arose by the 17th century, denoting a woman who was engaged in a long-term extramarital affair.

We can't look at female prefixes without comparing them to their male ... counterpart. Men have one term at this point — "Mr.," while women still have three. "Miss" has historically denoted unmarried women and girls. The double standard here is that a "Mr." can be married or unmarried, while a "Miss" is an unmarried woman. Up until very recently, a woman's social status was tied to her marital status. Married? Good. Not married? Not so good.

Don't miss this prefix primer

Written by By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 16 February 2024 00:00

The prefix “Mrs.” indicates a married woman, usually one who uses her husband’s last name. While “Miss” and “Mrs.” both came out of the term “Mistress,” by the 18th century, “Miss” emerged as a title for unmarried women, while “Mrs.” began to be associated with married women.

Although the prefix “Ms.” (now pronounced “mizz”) began as an abbreviated version of “Mistress,” its modern iteration comes out of the 1950s feminist movement. The aim of “Ms.” was to offer an alternative to “Miss” and “Mrs.,” that avoided tying a woman’s marital status to her title. The argument was that a woman’s worth isn’t measured based on whether she was married or not.

While traditional folks didn’t like the female-empowering “Ms.,” the term has gained widespread acceptance and now serves as a de facto title for a woman. Some women still prefer to indicate “Mrs.” or “Miss” when writing their full names, although “Miss” is less common.

How did I do, ladies? Was this a swing and a miss, or did I do a decent job here? Regardless, I’ll always open the door for a woman, and I’ll always say “yes, ma’am” to someone my mom’s age or better.

— Curtis Honeycutt is an award-winning syndicated humor columnist. Connect with him on Twitter (@curtishoneycutt) or at curtishoneycutt.com.

By Curtis Honeycutt

Guest Columnist