

## (U) Zelda and the Grammar Geek Jointly Cure the "Dr" Dilemma

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues, and  
Gabby, the Grammar Geek  
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(U) Editor's note: This question fell somewhere between the purviews of Gabby the grammar geek and Zelda the advice giver, so they BOTH took a shot at answering... The article below is unclassified.

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Hello, Gabby (the Grammar Geek) here. The following question was sent in to *SIDtoday* for either Zelda or Grammar Geek--the writer wasn't sure of which way to go. I'm happy to answer it, but I think a joint response would be nice for this one. After having my say, I'm going to lob it over to Zelda, to give her the opportunity to add some advice. Here we go...

Dear Zelda,

I have many co-workers who have earned a PhD but do not think it is appropriate to refer to them as "Dr. Jones" or "Dr. Zaius" in writing. I had always been under the impression that the title "Doctor" was reserved for those who had medical degrees, whereas placing PhD after a name is the preferred way of addressing a non-medical doctorate holder. This may be a question for the Grammar Geek, but I wanted to try here first to find out what the NSA-culture answer is. Thank you!

Signed, Mr. ...

Dear Mr. ...,



I believe that anyone who has earned a Ph.D., MD, Ed.D., or any doctorate has earned the right to be called "Dr. [last name]." It is true that "Ph.D." or "MD" (or "Ed.D." or whatever) after the name is an equally valid way of displaying their name, but never both. (You don't say, for example, "Dr. Marcus Welby, MD." It's just "Marcus Welby, MD" or "Dr. Marcus Welby.") Just to be sure that I'm not mistaken, I checked with Emily Post, one of the foremost authorities on etiquette. She said that a doctorate degree is usually used professionally (either as John Smith, Ph.D., or Dr. John Smith) but often not socially, so you should ask what the person prefers. She

added, "When in doubt, it's never wrong to acknowledge the degree."

You mentioned NSA culture. Here in our often informal environment, where peers are usually on a first-name basis, I'd hope that "Dr. Zaius" wouldn't expect the honorific in casual conversation around the office, but I suppose there could be an office here where everyone is "Mr. Smith," "Ms. Jones," and "Dr. Cooper." In any case, to answer your core question, no, the title of "doctor" is not reserved only for medical doctors.

What I don't like are the people who place "Dr." in front of their name without the credentials. I once visited the office of a "naturopathic doctor" who proudly explained to me that she had completed a whole six-month course in this field, which seemed to include mainly learning how to operate the computer and interpret some scores. She went by "Dr. [first name]." I really don't mean to knock this form of alternative medicine, but it seemed to me that she didn't really deserve that title.

Now, even though I've been at NSA for quite some time, I feel like I'm invading Zelda's turf. So let's see what she has to say...

Oh, Zelda, are you over there? Could you take a look at this question?

[Zelda takes the keyboard.]



Dear Mr. ...

I cannot speak for the entire NSA culture, but I believe you should call these people whatever they wish to be called. In some cases, very senior-level people at NSA with multiple doctorates prefer to be called "Joe" or "Jill"; while other, lower-level workers insist on going by DrXX. For day-to-day communication, you should just call them by their preferred form of address... even if their "doctorate" is in Creative Abbreviating from The Internet School of Texting.

Now, if there is a formal roster or speakers listed on a program, you should standardize the titles:

- Dr. Jill Jones
- Dr. Abraham Zaius
- Mr. Cornelius Chimp
- Ms. Zira Panzee
- Dr. Joseph Schmoe

Rather than

- Joe Schmoe
- Dr. Jill D. Jones
- Dr. Zaius
- Cornelius Chimp
- Z. Panzee

As for the NSA culture, I think it depends on where you work and the position of the person. I have worked in some mostly-military organizations where we used **only** people's ranks and titles--never first names, and others where the military and civilian staff all went by first names only and no titles or ranks. I also believe it is more common to use someone's title if they are a high-ranking person in the organization, regardless of what that title is (e.g., **Ms.** Shea, **GEN** Alexander, **Mr.** Inglis, **Mrs.** Fleisch, **Dr.** Wertheimer).

I agree with Gabby that the title Dr. is not reserved just for medical professionals. But it should not be abused, and by that I mean used as a club to wield clout. True story: I received a postcard advertisement in the mail from a realtor who prominently displayed his picture and name, John C. Doe, PhD. I happen to know this man was a former psychologist who became a real estate agent after he retired. Yet his ad seemed to suggest that he held a doctorate in real estate!

So my recommendation would be to use the title Dr. only in situations involving the subject you got your doctorate in. But then again, I'm a bit of a socialist...

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