

## Curious Questions - Ms

Transcript

Maura: Hello everyone! This is Maura

Harp: And Harp...

Maura: with the Curious Questions podcast where we answer your English language questions.

Harp: Little things come up all the time that confuse us when we are learning another language. Do you have a question that you have been dying to ask?

Maura: Is there a question burning inside you?

Harp: Please ask us! You can email your questions to [questions@culips.com](mailto:questions@culips.com) or go to our website [culips.com](http://culips.com), [C-U-L-I-P-S.com](http://C-U-L-I-P-S.com) for more information.

Maura: This next question is an interesting one. And the answer is easy too. As a teacher I am correcting people all the time who mispronounce and misuse the formal titles. These titles are used in business or formal situations, often between people you do not know. These titles are Mr. Mrs. Miss and Ms.

Harp: The question we received is from Junko in Hiroshima. Junko asked:

***Ms., Miss, Mrs.*** When you call a woman you are not familiar with, do you say “***Ms.***”, “***Miss***” or “***Mrs.***” Is it safe to use “***Ms.***” all the time?

Maura: The answer is a resounding yes! It is safe to use Ms. all the time. Ms. is spelled M-S. The s is pronounced with a z-sound.

Harp: For all males, boys and men, everywhere at anytime in their life, married or otherwise Mister is the title used.

Maura: For females it is a bit more complicated. Historically we had two choices for females. **Miss** M-I-S-S was for any female unmarried and young. Once married the woman took her husband’s last name and was then missus, actually spelled M-I-S-S-U-S, but more commonly written as an abbreviation as **M-R-S**.

So women had two distinctions: married or single. But nowadays there are so many different kinds of statuses for women, married, single, divorced, separated, common-law, widowed.

Harp: In case you don't know those last two terms Maura mentioned...

A widow is the name for a woman whose husband has died. For a man the term is widower.

And common-law means that a couple is living together, like they are married, but are not actually married. In the province of Quebec where we are podcasting from, we have the lowest rate of marriage anywhere in the world, so we have a lot of couples who are living as common-law.

Maura: As I was saying, women have many different kinds of statuses. Therefore, we need **Ms.** M-S. **Ms.** can be used for divorced and separated women. It can be used for married women and single women too! It suits every woman.

This is especially helpful, like our friend asked, when you don't know whether the woman is married or not. With **Ms.** you can't go wrong!

Harp: It is also important to note, even though **Ms.** is getting more and more popular, you will still hear **Miss** and **Mrs.** being used. Married women are still generally referred to with **Mrs.** but it is completely fine to use **Ms.** if you don't know. And some people still use **Miss**. This either refers to a very young girl, or is being used by someone who is older, or just hasn't figured out that **Ms.** is being used more and more.

Maura: One last note of warning: be careful with your pronunciation. **Ms.** and **Miss** can easily be confused because they both have s's at the end. M-I-S-S has the soft s and M-S sounds like a z - **Ms.**

To check your understanding of this podcast, you can quiz yourself or read the transcripts at lipservice at culips.com.

Harp: I hope this time we have answered a question that helps you improve your English. I also hope even if you didn't ask the question, you also found it useful.

Maura: Please keep your questions coming. We're always happy to answer them.

Bye!

## Detailed Explanations

### Pronunciation of Ms. versus Miss.

#### **Ms.**

Pronunciation is Miz

#### **Miss.**

Pronunciation is Mis

### History of Ms.

**Ms.** came into existence around the 1950s. It became more and more popular in the 70s with the rise of feminism. Feminism is the movement for women's rights, in that they should be treated equal to men. There is even a feminist magazine with the name MS.

<http://www.msmagazine.com/>

As I said in this episode **Ms.** is the equivalent to **Mr.**; it doesn't reveal a woman's marital status.

This title is especially used in a professional and formal sense. You can always ask a woman if they are a **Mrs.** or **Ms.** if you feel comfortable. If you don't feel comfortable or you must address the woman, **Ms.** is always ok!

You may notice that depending on the source there are different opinions about using these titles, especially about using **Miss** and using **Ms.**

In my opinion, I do not think **Miss** has much use, except maybe for female children. I am not married but I prefer to be referred to as **Ms.** Some other single women my age might say they don't care or even that they prefer Miss.

It depends on the person who is speaking as well. Some people don't use **Ms.** at all. But what I said in the episode is most definitely true: Using **Ms.** is always fine!

### More info on Mrs.

In the past women would often use their husband's first name as well. For example, "**Mrs.** John Smith." This is generally no longer done.

Also, when a woman chooses not to use her husband's family name, then she usually doesn't use **Mrs.**

**Dr.**

This is a title that is higher in rank and so is used over **Ms.** **Miss** or **Mrs.** If a woman is a doctor she generally uses **Dr.** in place of another other title.

**Writing and Punctuation Tip**

**Miss** is not usually followed by a period. **Mrs.** and **Ms.** both take a period in the U.S. and Canada. A period is not necessary in the U.K. Either way, it is not a big error to include or to forget this little bit of punctuation.

**Miss with complete strangers**

Sometimes **miss** is used alone to address a woman you don't know at all. When we use this to talk to strangers who we do not know the last name of, it is not necessary to use a capital M.

Examples:

In a store – “Excuse me **miss**, would you like a bag?”

On the street – “Oh **miss**, you dropped your hat.”

In this way and in these examples you can also use **ma'am**. **Ma'am** is an abbreviated, or shortened version of madam.

**Widow**

If a woman's husband has died, she is still able to use **Mrs.**

**Common-law**

Couples living together (**common-law**) before they are married, or never married is becoming more and more common. It is so common now that it is more rare, and traditional, for a couple to live apart until the wedding day.

Women in **common-law** marriages almost always use **Ms.**

**One last note**

Depending on the region and culture sometimes these titles are more popular than others. I personally don't feel like I use them very often. (I live in Montreal, Canada) But I know that in parts of the United States they are very popular. Listen and learn!

**Quiz** (see the answers at the bottom of this lipservice)

**1. Is it ok to use Ms. all the time for a woman?**

- a) yes
- b) no

**2. What kind of sound do we hear at the end of Miss?**

- a) z
- b) s
- c) x
- d) sh

**3. What does common-law mean?**

- a) that a couple is going to be married
- b) that it is a new couple
- c) that a couple is living together
- d) that a couple has a child

**4. What does widow mean?**

- a) that a person is divorced
- b) that a person is common-law
- c) that a woman is living alone
- d) that a woman's husband is dead

**5. What is the equivalent of widow for a man?**

- a) widower
- b) widowen
- c) widowel
- d) widow

**6. Which female formal titles are still being used?**

- a) Ms. and Mrs.
- b) Ms. and Miss.
- c) Ms. , Miss. and Mrs.
- d) only Ms.

**7. Which title is most commonly used for young girls?**

- a) Ms.
- b) Miss.
- c) Madame
- d) Girlie

Answers: 1-a 2-b 3-c 4-d 5-a 6-c 7-b