SEÑORA VS SEÑORITA VS DOÑA

Señora vs Señorita vs Doña: Spanish-speaking Ways of Making some Tactless Remark

This can happen anywhere, at a bank teller, in a supermarket checkout line, even when buying a newspaper:

– At your service **ma'am** ***(señora)***, the amount to be paid is $10

– What do you mean, ma'am? I am a **lady** ***(señorita)***!

– Excuse me, I'm so sorry! I didn't intend to offend you.

Too late my friend, you are already in the middle of a problem, you just insulted that woman and didn't see it coming. Relax, after a couple of eye rolls and a very awkward goodbye you will have time to understand what just happened, after that, you will grab your cell phone / laptop / pc, get into a great article like this and learn the subtleties of dealing with a lady whose marital status you don't know.

This topic has many edges ranging from whether it is a formal or informal conversation, formal RAE definitions, culture, marital status, social position and the context of the site where you use it. But what are we waiting for? Let's start with this social debate to save you from uncomfortable situations.

Definitions and Differences of Señoras and Señoritas

The most important thing in this debate is to know how to identify who we are talking to and the social context. It is very similar to the debate that arises when calling someone "tú" or "usted": there are many factors that can cause some kind of aggravation or, on the contrary, a compliment.

The formal definitions of Spanish that are used even when children start school are governed by the Real Academia Española (RAE), our Merriam-Webster. However, in the Latin American case, many times licenses are taken or the rule is not taken so strictly in informal conversations.

It is important for you to know that all the cases you encounter may vary according to the country and the state of the country. In general, the rules are usually followed by everyone, but there are some exceptions.

According to the RAE dictionary, we have these concepts:

Señorita definition:

- As a courtesy, treatment applied to unmarried women.
- As a courtesy treatment given to schoolteachers, teachers, or also to many other women who perform some service, such as secretaries, administrative or commercial employees, etc.

Señora definition:

- A respectable person of a certain social standing.
- Person of a certain age.
- As a term of respect with which to address a person superior in age, dignity, or position.
- As a term of courtesy with which to address a person or mention her before her last name.

Doña definition:

- Similar to Señora, in that it is reserved for a lady of particular standing. You would usually say the person's first name after as well, for example, "Señora Gloria".
- It is not used as often as Señora, but if you would like to show respect, this is a good way to address someone.

The main **differences** are found in the age of each one: Señoritas are young people, and as you could notice, not even the Real Academia Española is able to say the age of a Señora. They explicitly say "Person of a certain age", that is an example to follow. In Latin America bragging about a woman's age is a delicate subject, you could both insult and flatter and the odds are almost never in favor of those who choose to say the word "señora".

If we know that she is a married person, she probably has no problem with being called Señora, however, that implies a certain degree of knowledge about whom the person is.

Now, imagine that someone is serving a woman at the bar of a coffee shop, this young

person sees that the girl they are serving has a wedding ring and decides to say “Here is your coffee, señora.”, this girl is not going to be upset, certainly she is married, but most probably she will spend the whole afternoon thinking that she needs to apply Botox or change her makeup because she was called “señora” and she felt that she was called old.

And, on the other hand, saying “señorita” to a woman who is about 55 years old will surely make her smile because she feels young again.

I know, it’s a bit tricky. On behalf of the entire Spanish-speaking community: I’m sorry.

Polite Titles

Hey there. Welcome.

I'm Kéllyta Quijada - and I wrote this article.

Stuck on this topic? Hire me for just 1 hour to start mastering it. Pass a test, improve basic vocabulary or improve your conversational level in Spanish.

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Polite titles are all those words that go before the name or replace it in order to add a code of formality (or not) to the conversation. Señora and Señorita fall into this category of titles. If you come across any of these titles, you will have the basis to know how and to whom to respond appropriately.

There was a time when every person had to be called according to some noble title, and if you omitted to use it, it could mean trouble for you. In these more recent years, you won’t get into really serious trouble, but it could mean anything from your in-laws liking you or making friends more easily.

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Surely, you could notice that there are many details to be able to name a woman in the

right way. The ideal will always be to have all the cultural information you can, that represents a fundamental factor when you are beginning to learn to socialize among Spanish speakers.

One last tip? A polite way that almost always comes across in a good way to the other person is to ask them what they want to be called, a casual and empathetic etiquette rule.

See you soon!