

**Things to Eliminate
in Your Writing:**

**Referring to the Author
By Given Name**

Part I: What is it?



The *given name* is also called the *first name*, *Christian name*, or *forename*.

The *surname* is also called the *last* or *family name*.

For example, in the name of American poet Elizabeth Bishop, *Elizabeth* is her given name and *Bishop* her surname.

When writing about her work, refer to her initially by her full name *Elizabeth Bishop* and thereafter by her surname *Bishop*.



Part II:
Why is this a problem?



Did you know Elizabeth Bishop? Did you have some kind of personal relationship with her?

If the answer is, “No,” why in the world would you even think about calling her *Elizabeth* when writing about her poems? You’re not on a first name basis.

It’s a respect thing and a convention in the culture. If you don’t know someone (particularly an important someone), you refer to them by surname-- with a Mr., Ms., or other title when addressing them directly.

To do otherwise is both to show a lack of respect and to display an incredible amount of presumption. You are not Elizabeth Bishop’s peer. You are just a kid in a high school class.

I am also not Elizabeth Bishop's peer. I am just a high school teacher. Even if I went back to school and earned a doctorate, even if my hypothetical dissertation was about the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, I would still not be her peer. I would still refer to her by surname when writing about her work in a literary context.

If I were writing her biography, I might consider referring to her by given name, but when discussing her work she would still be *Bishop*.

Even if I travelled back in time, was personally introduced to Elizabeth Bishop, and we became friends: *then* I might call her *Elizabeth* in real life, *but* I would still refer to her by *Bishop* when writing about her work.



Pleased to meet you time-traveling English teacher. You may call me Lizzie-poo. However, you still have to call me *Bishop* when writing about my poems.



Oh, social conventions-- will I never be free of you?

Part III: What to do Instead



The General Rule

The first time you mention the author, give the complete name.

Thereafter, refer to the author by surname.

Example:

The initial descriptions in “In The Waiting Room” are prosaic, almost documentary in their matter-of-fact attention to seemingly insignificant details. For example, *Bishop* writes:

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist’s appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist’s waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.

Complication One: Author as Character

If you were clever, you might have guessed why I chose the last example. The poem is seemingly autobiographical in narrative, and the point-of-view character of the narrative is a little girl-- precisely the sort of person one would normally address by given name. Does that mean that it is now okay to refer to *Elizabeth* when writing about this poem (since it's a first person narration, almost certainly autobiographical, and from the point-of-view of a young person)? Hell, the speaker even calls herself "Elizabeth" later in the poem.

The answer is, "No"-- at least, not when giving quotes or discussing the craft of writing the poem (presumably your writing task).

First, *author* does not equal *character*. Never assume there is a one-to-one correspondence between a first person narration and the author.

Second, I lied when I said little Elizabeth was the point-of-view character. Sure, the memory is related as it was experienced by a child, but the actual point-of-view is an older version of little Elizabeth. The poet forms the third layer, artistically arranging the details of an experience (from the point-of-view of an older woman describing a memory of her younger self) to say something about the nature of personal identity. You can refer to the character as *Elizabeth*, but it is *the speaker* who relates the experience, and *Bishop* who writes the poem.

Complication Two: Traditional Spanish and Portuguese Naming Patterns and Other Multiple Part Surnames

Spanish and Portuguese surnames may have more than one component-- usually with two, and sometimes more, parts. There is also more flexibility about what names one adopts as a surname. A husband sometimes takes his wife's surname, for instance. Siblings with the same parents do not have to possess the same surnames, or they do not have to be arranged in the same order or manner. Portuguese naming rules, in particular, are incredibly flexible.

The rule about writing about them, though, is simple: when referring to an author by last name, if there are multiple parts to the surname, use them all. The exception to this is when the person in question prefers/preferred a single surname (e.g. *Picasso* for the artist Pablo Ruiz y Picasso-- not *Ruiz y Picasso*).

For example, consider the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. His father's family name was *García*, and his mother's family name was *Lorca*. Following our rule, when referring to him by surname, you would write *García Lorca* (the entirety of the multi-part surname). However, for this particular poet, you can also refer to him simply as *Lorca*, since the poet sometimes did this himself.

Other multi-part and hyphenated names work the same way. Use the entirety of the surname unless you have a specific, justifiable reason to do otherwise.

Complication Three: East Asian Surnames

This is less a complication than a heads up. In the West, surnames are the last part of a name, but in many East Asian cultures, the surname goes first.

This isn't usually a problem because in translation, most of the time, the name will be regularized according to Western conventions. I always do this, for instance, when I format stories and poems for class.

However, some English speaking critics or translators (particularly those that specialize in East Asian literature) will keep the original naming pattern. This doesn't change how you refer to them (still by surname), but it can sometimes be confusing to students for whom both the given and surname are sufficiently exotic that they're not sure which is which.

The rule of thumb is to pay attention and not make assumptions. When in doubt, look it up. Wikipedia is usually good about this; just look at how the name is listed in parentheses after the bold-faced name entry (it will give the name with the original naming conventions if it differs from the Western standard).

You do not have to worry about honorifics and other surname appendages in the East Asian languages that feature them. These only govern interpersonal communication and do not apply to how you refer to an author in English.

Part IV: Conclusions



Conclusions

When you first refer to an author, refer to them by the entirety of their name (excluding middle names unless the author is widely known by both given and middle names).

Thereafter refer to an author by surname. For Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, she is *Bishop*-- and never *Elizabeth*.

This is true even if the narration is written in first person and seems to be autobiographical.

Be aware that some Spanish, Portuguese, and other multi-part surnames will require you to list the entirety of the surname when referring to them. The Columbian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, for instance, would be condensed to *García Márquez* (not *García*, and especially not *Márquez*).

Also be aware that sometimes English translators will not regularize East Asian surnames according to Western conventions. Most do, but there is no universal standard here. Pay attention and be alert to the possibility that the surname may be listed first.