

On Curb Cuts and Pronouns and Honorifics in Email Signatures (and elsewhere!)



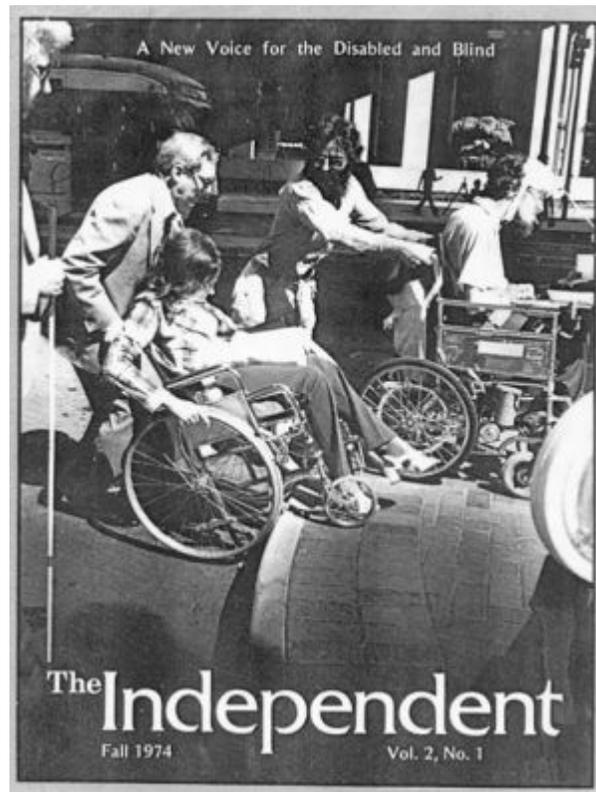
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An upfront note: I am sadly less familiar with the vocabulary in disability discourse than I am in others. If I've stumbled, I sincerely apologize, and will very much appreciate any corrections.

In this piece, I want to briefly recount some of the curb cut story, then talk about how the widespread adoption of pronouns—and if I have my way, honorifics—in email signatures already has some easily identifiable curb cut effects.

“Curb Cuts,” and the “Curb Cut Effect,” in the sense beyond the actual cuts into the sidewalk curb that wheelchair riders use sidewalks safely and without assistance, refer to the idea in [Universal Design philosophy](#) that certain pieces of good and accessible design benefits everyone. In the literal curb cut case, the list of people who unexpectedly benefited from the widespread use of curb cuts is massive (parents with strollers, travelers with luggage, cyclists, delivery people with packages and trollies, the elderly, etc.). Upfront, I will also admit that this is on my mind because one of my absolute favorite podcasts recently [did an episode about curb cuts](#).



A 1974 magazine cover featuring the Rolling Quads.

I. Cutting the Curb.

So! Let's talk about actual cuts in the curb. Because they source so *damn well*, I'm going to just refer you to [99% Invisible](#) for references here, because I am leaning on their research. Much of how common curb cuts have become can be traced back to the activism of a small group of disability advocates—the Rolling Quads—at U.C. Berkley in the 1960's and 70's. The Quads lead a revolution in accessibility, taking actions ranging from sit-ins and protests to midnight, illegal, amateur curb-cutting:

The story that there were midnight commandos is a little bit exaggerated, I think. We got a bag or two of concrete, and mixed it up and took it to the corners that would most ease the route [across the Berkley campus]."

—Eric Dibner, a disability attendant at Berkley in the 70's.

Through the 80's and 90's, disability advocates were able to convince governments at all levels to begin implementing curb cuts as a standard piece of urban design, in part peaking with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (so, of course, the current

Republican party is attempting to destroy that). George H.W. Bush, in signing the ADA, referenced the fall of the Berlin Wall:

*“And now I sign legislation, which takes a sledgehammer to another wall, one which has for too many generations separated Americans with disabilities from the freedom they could glimpse but not grasp. And once again we rejoice as this barrier falls, proclaiming together, **we will not accept ... excuse [or] tolerate, discrimination in America.**”*

Curb cuts, especially alongside the development of powered chairs, were a goddess-send for many wheelchair riders. They allowed people to navigate cities and communities alone, without attendants or needing assistance, and made whole parts of modern life accessible. A major narrative thread here (that the 99% Invisible episode I’ve referenced picks up very well) is the emergency of a popular view of disability that does much more than simply look down on folks with pity.



Ed Roberts’—a major disability activist and member of the Rolling Quads—powered chair, now in the Smithsonian Museum’s permanent collection.

II. Universal Design and the “Curb Cut Effect.”

The idea of “universal design” is that when buildings and objects are designed to be as usable as possible for everyone, regardless of age or

ability, they will be useful not only against the evil they are directed at, but against many others as well. See, analogously, Zarda v. Altitude Express, 2d Circuit (2018) (Observing that “Title VII covers not just the principal evils Congress was concerned with when it enacted the statute in 1964, but also reasonably comparable evils” and holding that the prohibition of “discrimination because of ... sex” covers discrimination because of the fact that a person is gay/lesbian). This Medium piece lays out a number of the ways this happens.

Looking at how useful curb cuts themselves are provides an illustration. Curb cuts make life easier for parents who need to push their children in strollers (don't need to take their kids out or lift the stroller off the ground every block), for people traveling or taking wheeled luggage anywhere, for musicians (many amplifier cabinets are on wheels!), for the blind (some curb cuts now have little nubs to tell people when they are walking towards the street!) and many others.

Similarly, closed captioning has proven to have utility well beyond making television accessible to the deaf. Among other things, you can watch TV in a bar without the sound, and it's easier for everyone to retain and absorb information when subtitles are on. Indeed, even the football practice of huddling between plays began at Gallaudet in 1892 as a way for deaf footballers to hide their play calls from other deaf teams (as sign language can easily be understood from much farther away than verbal speech).

So, the principal in practice means that we should often pursue accessibility for its own sake, because it will yield unexpected or unanticipated benefits, in addition to more visible or obvious side benefits.

III. The Curb Cut Case for Pronouns and Honorifics.

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honorific / pronouns: [mx.](#) / [they](#), [their](#), [them](#)

My email signature, as an example, with phone numbers hidden. The honorific and pronouns are hyperlinked and each lead to different explanatory resources regarding singular they and the use of "Mx."

As far as pronouns and honorifics go, the primary case for adding them to email signatures (as well as name tags, speaker name tents, office nameplates, online biographies, internal company directories, &c.—collectively let's call this "pronoun/honorific disclosure") is one that benefits trans folk: if you are not cisgender and binary, people *often* use the wrong pronouns, maliciously and otherwise. One way to cut down on that difficulty (and do both some education and some normalization) is to add pronouns and honorifics to email signatures and other disclosures.

Now, I'm not here to make the primary case for pronoun/honorific disclosure—it's been well made elsewhere. Instead, I'm here to offer some thoughts on what additional, unexpected benefits pronoun/honorific disclosure might have.

First, you may have noticed I've added "honorific" to the phrase. As someone who works in legal spaces, honorifics are important in my life. Whether it be addressing a letter to an adversary/potential employer/new client or arguing before a court, incorrect honorific use can be fatal. It can also be extremely embarrassing when it comes from the powered-having side of a power dynamic. See OutLAW Survey at WashU. A Washington University law school survey juxtaposed the comments from one (presumably cisgender) student:

I like the Ms. Mr. before a name. It is professional. We call our Professor by his or her title, and they call us by ours. My professional title is Ms. (last name). What are we are doing is serious work and calling people by their professional title indicates that.

with a description of what this experience might be like for some transgender students:

Since professors who employ [the practice of cold-calling students using honorifics] must often assume students' gender identities based on appearance and name, this practice risks "misgendering" transgender students. When this happens, a transgender student is forced either to stay closeted and perpetuate misinformation about their identity, or to "out" themselves when they may not feel safe or ready to do so.

In short, honorifics are *very* important. I will also note, however, that a student's being transgender is **not** the only reason professors got honorifics wrong. I had a number of classmates with doctorates who received "Mr." and "Ms." instead of "Dr." and married classmates who changed names and vastly preferred "Mrs." but received "Ms.," and, of course, there are married women—like author Chimamanda Adichie—who don't change their names and feel strongly about their rejection of Mrs.

On a personal note, technically "Rev. Green, esq." is appropriate for me, though I prefer "Mx. Green" or "Mx. Green, esq."

Moreover, *many* women in academia and medicine report issues with getting people to use the correct title, particularly when that title is "Dr.," "Dame," or "Prof."

So, curb cut one: add honorifics, and we help with formal address for any number of people. As an example, personally speaking, when I was first interviewing with law firms, it was a nightmare trying to figure out how to address the law firm partners I spoke to in my thank you notes.

Curb cut two is that folks with less Anglicized names often get misgendered, even if they are cisgender. The same goes for women with advanced degrees and androgynous names, when they are introduced in paper rather than in person. See e.g., that one Scrubs episode. This is, of course, an experience that is largely invisible to people with more common names, but that makes it no less frustrating. This point is applicable to both honorifics and pronouns. (i.e., "Dr. Elliot will be taking care of you today."/"Great, I look forward to meeting **him**." vs. "Dr. Elliot (Dr., she/her/hers) will be taking care of you today.")

I think there are likely many more instances where this practice has a curb cutting effect, but these are two big ones that occur to me.

I would be very interested to hear about it (and will update this piece) if anyone else sees others.

