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THE USAGE PANEL

The Usage Panel is a group of nearly 200 prominent scholars, creative writers, journalists, diplomats, and others in occupations requiring mastery of language. Annual surveys have gauged the acceptability of particular usages and grammatical constructions.

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la·dy  (lā dē)

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n. pl. la·dies

1. A woman of high social standing or refinement, especially when viewed as dignified or well-mannered.
2. A woman who is the head of a household: *Is the lady of the house at home?*
3.
 - a. A woman, especially when spoken of or to in a polite way: *Ladies, may I show you to your table?*
 - b. Used as a form of address for a woman, often with sarcasm or irritation: *Look, lady, I was ahead of you in line.*
4.
 - a. A woman who is the object of romantic or chivalrous love: *a knight serving his lady.*
 - b. *Informal* A wife or girlfriend: *a man kissing his lady at the airport.*
5. A lady in waiting: *the queen and her ladies.*
6. **Lady** *Chiefly British*
 - a. A general feminine title of nobility and other rank, specifically as the title for the wife or widow of a knight or baronet.
 - b. Used as a form of address for a woman of high rank, especially for a marchioness, countess, viscountess, baroness, or baronetess.
7. **Lady** The Virgin Mary. Usually used with *Our*.

[Middle English, mistress of a household, from Old English *hlāfdige*; see **dneigh-** in the Appendix of Indo-European roots.]

Usage Note: The word *lady* goes back to Old English and was traditionally used for a woman of social standing or rank. Perhaps because of the word's association with high society, today *lady* is most acceptable in parallel with *gentleman*, as in the sentences *Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please!* and *At the opera for the first time, they were dazzled by all of the ladies in ball gowns and gentlemen in sharp tuxedos.* This latter sentence was approved by 91 percent of the Usage Panel in our 2016 survey. By contrast, the sentence *Nancy Brown will be the first lady to serve as chair of the committee* was accepted by only 29 percent of the Panel, with many panelists commenting that the use of *lady* where *woman* would easily do can be taken as offensive. The degree to which *lady* is or isn't considered offensive has become dependent on context. When presented with a range of sentences using *lady* in formal and informal contexts with both male and female speakers, many members of the Panel stated that they found *lady* to be acceptable and inoffensive when used ironically or jocularly. · The use of *lady* as an attributive to modify another noun, as in the phrase *lady doctor*, is widely considered offensive. When the sex of the person is relevant, the preferred modifier is *woman* or *female*. See Usage Note at [female](#).

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Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

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The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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