

How Russian Names Work

Russian names seem to change all the time. Just when you thought you'd gotten used to Ivan Ivanovich, you suddenly run across Vanya Ivanov, who seems to resemble Ivan. He could be the same person.

Here's a quick and very basic guide to Russian names.

Each Russian has three names: a first name, a patronymic, and a last name/surname. For example: Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov.

1. First Names

The problem with first names in Russian is that people use endless diminutive forms:

Ivan	becomes Vanya, Vanyusha, Vanka...
Aleksandr	becomes Sasha, Sanya, Shurik, Shura, Aleksandrushka...
Dmitrii	becomes Dima, Mitya, Dimulya...
Nataliya	becomes Natasha, Nata, Talia, Natulia, Tashenka...
Elena	becomes Lena, Lenulia, Lenusia...

Even more confusing, some diminutives are used for more than one personal name. One of the most common diminutives, Sasha, could refer to Aleksandr, a man, or Aleksandra, a woman. What is to be done? I don't know. But I will say this: most diminutives are derived from syllables of the full personal names, as I've shown above in bold. So my best advice is to look carefully at the diminutives and first names to see if you can determine what they might have in common.

More often than not, full Russian first names (i.e. not diminutive forms) that end in -a are women's names. Of course, there are notable exceptions, like Nikita and Kuzma.

2. Patronymics

Patronymics are derived from a person's father's name. So Ivan Ivanovich is Ivan SonofIvan. His sister Nataliya would be Nataliya Ivanovna.

This part is easy:

- Male patronymics end in -ovich or -evich
- Female patronymics end in -ovna or -evna

Patronymics are generally used together with given names, especially in formal situations: "Ivan Ivanovich, do you want some tea?" But some Russians call each other by their patronymics, though usually only if they know each other well: "Ivanovich, want tea?"

3. Surnames

Surnames can be confusing because some are classically Russian-sounding – like Ivanov – but I’ve run across Russians with names like Blyukher or Melville. Here are the most typical types of Russian last names:

- ending in –ov, like Ivanov. A woman would be Ivanova
- ending in –in, like Pushkin. A woman would be Pushkina
- ending in –oi (or oy), like Tolstoi. A woman would be Tolstaia
- ending in ii, like Dostoevskii. A woman would be Dostoevskaia.

(A caveat: transliteration can change the spellings a lot... Dostoevsky is the same guy as Dostoevskii.)

In general, surnames that end in –enko are Ukrainian.

4. And...

One other thing. Many Russians in 19th-century literature also use foreign (usually French) names, so Elena may end up as Helen, and Elizaveta may call herself Elisabeth or, heaven forbid, Betsy.

In the end, my advice on names is: Don’t stress out about it. If a writer is good, the characters will be well enough developed that you’ll eventually know who’s who by the ways they act and speak. I have problems when writers – in English and in Russian – introduce a lot of characters and information all at once, so this isn’t a problem unique to Russian literature.