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American Etiquette



BEFORE YOU READ

Discuss

1. How do American manners compare to polite behavior in other countries?
2. On what occasions is it traditional to give gifts? Do you think this is the same everywhere?
3. Many workers who perform services for others expect to receive tips (extra money). Name the types of workers that you would tip.

Guess

Try to answer the questions. Then look for the answers in the reading.

1. What is the expected response to the formal greeting, "How do you do?"

Check (✓) one:

"I'm fine." "I'm a student." "How do you do?"

2. What is the polite response when someone sneezes? Check (✓) one:

"My condolences." "Bless you." "Please cover your nose."

American Etiquette

American Attitudes and Good Manners

- 1 How do people know what is considered good **manners** in a particular culture? In the seventeenth-century court of King Louis XIV, it was easy. Visitors were given *une etiquette* (a ticket) listing rules of acceptable **behavior**. And that was the origin of today's English word **etiquette**, which refers to the proper way to behave in social situations.
- 2 "Etiquette?" some people laugh. "With Americans, anything goes." It's true that Americans are rather casual. Still, there are many social blunders that will offend them. Most American attitudes about good manners relate to showing respect and consideration for others.
- 3 Americans believe that all people are entitled to equal opportunity and respect. No one is privileged, and no one is worthless. A person who acts very humble and timid will make his or her American friends uncomfortable. On the other hand, a domineering person will have trouble keeping American friends. A **polite** but **assertive** manner is socially acceptable. No matter what your status is in relation to another person, feel free to look directly into his eyes and speak your true feelings. Occasionally, it is a social necessity to tell a "white lie" and **compliment** someone on something you don't really like. But, most of the time, you can express your true opinions. Americans won't mind if you disagree with them as long as you show respect for them and their ideas.
- 4 Here are some suggestions that may help you make friends, not enemies, in the U.S.:
 - *Don't be "nosy."* Americans, like people everywhere, enjoy talking about themselves. Friendly interest is considered good manners as long as one doesn't ask for extremely personal information such as age, weight, income, or the cost of valuable possessions (home, car, jewelry, etc.). Asking these kinds of questions sounds "nosy," which is an **insult**. It's fine to ask a person's line of work. The question "What do you do?" means "What's your occupation?"
 - *Don't smoke without permission.* Nonsmokers don't want the smell or the health risks of secondhand smoke. In the U.S., many offices, restaurants, and other public places are smoke-free environments. If you don't see ashtrays, that's probably the case. Also,

nonsmokers usually don't like their homes polluted with cigarette smoke. Smokers who must have a cigarette or cigar should excuse themselves and go outside to smoke.

- *Don't get too close.* When conversing with casual **acquaintances**, Americans tend to stand closer than Asians do and farther apart than people from the Middle East, southern Europe, and Latin America. What difference does distance make? Standing too close may give the impression of forced intimacy or an attempt to dominate. Standing too far away seems formal, aloof, and cold. When in the U.S., notice the distances between people in public situations. Keep your distance from others similar to what you observe.
- *Don't touch.* Except for a brief, firm handshake as part of an introduction or a farewell, Americans don't usually touch people they don't know well, so hands off!
- *Don't make ethnic slurs.* The U.S. is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial culture, and there is considerable social interaction among different groups. Don't say anything negative about any ethnic group. Your new friend's spouse or brother-in-law may be a member of that group.



Check Your Comprehension

How do American attitudes affect American manners?

Introductions and Titles

- 5 Making introductions (presenting two strangers to each other) is one of the most common social duties. There are traditional rules for doing this properly. When introducing people of different sexes, it's polite to say the woman's name first; for example, "Mrs. Fox, this is my assistant, Mr. Wolf." But if the man is older or famous, then his name or title should come first: "Mr. President, I'd like you to meet my sister, Luisa Rivera." When two people of the same sex are introduced, the older person is named first: "Grandfather, this is my friend Narish Patel. Narish, this is my grandfather, Mr. Kim."
- 6 **Appropriate** responses to an introduction include "How do you do?" or "It's nice to meet you" or simply "Hello." When introduced to a stranger, Americans usually shake hands (each using the right hand). Handshaking is not reserved just for men. Women also shake hands—with men and with other women. According to tradition, the woman, the older person, or the more important person is expected to extend a hand first. Today, however, this formal rule of etiquette is not always followed. The custom of handshaking is not limited to introductions. In business or social situations, acquaintances and friends may also shake hands when they meet and when they conclude a conversation.
- 7 At the end of a conversation with a new acquaintance, it's polite to say, "Good-bye. It was nice meeting you." One might also add some appropriate remark that wishes the person a good time or good luck, such as "Enjoy your visit to our city" or "Good luck with your new job."
- 8 Proper forms of **address** are often a puzzle to foreigners. In the U.S., people in the same general age group tend to get on a first-name basis quickly. Coworkers, class-

mates, and neighbors often call each other by first names. But adults are likely to continue to call doctors, lawyers, teachers, religious leaders, and bosses by their titles and last names. Mr. is a title of respect for a man. It is pronounced *mister*. Miss is used for a single woman. Mrs. (pronounced *missus*) is the correct form of address for a woman who is married, divorced, or widowed. However, some women prefer to be addressed as Ms. (pronounced *miz*), a title which does not indicate marital status. Ms. is also useful when writing or speaking to a woman whose marital status is not known. In addressing a stranger, it's customary to use *sir* for a man and *miss* or *ma'am* for a woman. It's **rude** to call a man *mister* without the last name or a woman *lady*. The title *doctor* (Dr.) is used not only for medical doctors but also for dentists and people with academic doctoral degrees (a Ph.D.). Very few titles are used as forms of address without the last name (family name). Those that can be used alone include *Doctor*, *Professor*, *Officer*, *Captain*, and some titles for religious leaders (such as *Father* or *Rabbi*). It is *not* correct to call a teacher *Teacher*. In elementary and high schools, students address their teachers as Mr., Ms., Miss, or Mrs. plus the last name. In American colleges and universities, some instructors and professors are quite informal and encourage students to call them by their first names.

**Check Your
Comprehension**

When you introduce two people, what are some rules about whose name goes first?

Congratulations, Condolences, and Apologies

- 9 In general, it's polite to say "**Congratulations!**" (with a lot of enthusiasm) when a person has accomplished something. Examples of these kinds of occasions include graduation, job promotion, the birth of a child, and the purchase of a home. When congratulations are in order, it is sometimes also appropriate to give a gift, especially when invited to a birthday, graduation, wedding, or anniversary party.
- 10 An invitation may say RSVP on the bottom, an abbreviation that refers to a French expression meaning "respond, please" (write or phone to tell the host whether you can come). If the invitation says, "RSVP regrets only," it means "respond only if you cannot come."
- 11 Equal attention must be given to good manners on sad occasions. If a coworker, classmate, or neighbor experiences a death in the family, it is appropriate to express sympathy (**condolences**). In doing so, the words *die* or *death* should be avoided. It is best to simply say, "I was so sorry to hear about your loss" (or " . . . about your father"). It's also customary to send a sympathy card, but if you don't know the mourner's religion, be sure to select a card without religious symbols. Most customs regarding mourning relate to the family's religion and vary from one group to another, so don't send flowers or food unless you know it's appropriate.
- 12 The simple words "I'm sorry" display good manners in a great many difficult social situations. "I'm sorry" has two main uses: (1) to express sympathy to someone who has had a bad experience and (2) to express regret for bothering someone or causing a problem. Other expressions of apology are "Excuse me" and "Pardon me." Use one of these

expressions when you are trying to get out of a crowded elevator or stopping a stranger to ask directions.



**Check Your
Comprehension**

Name several occasions when it's appropriate to say "Congratulations!"

Dining Etiquette

- 13 When invited to an American friend's home for dinner, try to arrive on time, but not early. It's okay to be 10 or 15 minutes late but not 45 minutes late. Dinner might be overcooked and ruined by then. If you are going to be late, it is a good idea to call the host to tell him. When you go to someone's home for a meal, it's customary to bring a small gift, such as flowers or candy.
- 14 What do you do if you're served food you don't like or can't eat for religious or medical reasons? In situations like these, eat whatever you can and hope that no one notices what is left. If questioned, admit that you don't eat meat (or whatever), but say that you've enjoyed the other foods and have had "more than enough" to eat.
- 15 How long should you stay? Don't leave immediately after dinner, but don't overstay your welcome, either. When your host yawns or runs out of conversation, that's a good time to leave. The next day, phone or write to express your thanks again.
- 16 Dining out? It's a good idea to phone the restaurant and make a reservation to avoid waiting for a table. When you invite someone out to dinner, be prepared to pay the bill and reach for it when it arrives. However, if your companion insists on sharing the bill, don't get into an argument about it. In most American restaurants, a tip for the server (waiter or waitress) is not added to the bill. The word *tip* is an acronym for "to insure promptness." If the service was good, leave a tip equal to about 15% of the bill. In expensive restaurants, leave a little more.
- 17 American table manners are easy to learn by observation. A few characteristics to note: The napkin should not be tucked into the collar or vest but should be placed across the lap; the **silverware** placement is quite different from the European style. In general, Americans use the pieces of silverware farthest from the plate first and work in toward the plate.



**Check Your
Comprehension**

What are two things you should not do when you are a dinner guest at an American friend's home?

Manners between Men and Women

- 18 In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. went through a social revolution commonly referred to as the women's liberation movement. The movement has benefited women in many ways, especially in terms of job opportunities and advancement. But it has also created

great confusion regarding manners. Formerly, men were considered the stronger and dominant sex, so etiquette required them to adopt a protective attitude toward the so-called weaker sex. That meant helping women on and off with their coats, opening doors for them, allowing them to exit from elevators first, and so on. Today, American women, who outlive (and often outearn) men, do not consider themselves weak and in need of male protection. Their self-sufficient attitude has led men to wonder whether traditional etiquette is still appropriate. Most men continue to perform many of the traditional courtesies, but both sexes are more casual about them. If a man does not help his date into and out of her chair in a restaurant, no one will think he's rude.

- 19 Traditionally, when a man invites a woman out on a date, he picks her up at home, pays the expenses for the evening, and takes her home at the end of the evening. Prior to women's liberation, the woman was expected to sit at home by the phone and wait for the man to call. Today, it is common for a woman to invite a man just about anywhere. If she does the inviting, she pays for the evening's expenses. When a man and woman who are just friends go out together it is usually *Dutch treat*, which means they share expenses.
- 20 Today, many men working in the U.S. have a female boss. Men who come from countries in which the woman's place is still in the home may find it difficult to take orders from a woman. But in the U.S., many women are judges, doctors, business executives, college presidents, and entrepreneurs. Men must show respect for a person who holds a position of responsibility and authority, whether that person is male or female.
- 21 On the job, it is important to treat others as coworkers, not as prospective romantic partners. Many sexual **harassment** lawsuits have been won in the U.S., so many companies mention this matter as part of their training for new employees.

Check Your Comprehension

How has women's liberation affected manners between the sexes?

Classroom Etiquette

- 22 The relationship between student and teacher is less formal in the U.S. than in many other countries, especially at the college level. American college students do not stand up when their teacher enters the room. Students are generally encouraged to ask questions during class, stop by the professor's office, phone, or e-mail if they want to discuss something. Most teachers let students enter class late or leave early when necessary.
- 23 Despite the lack of formality, students are still expected to be polite and considerate of their teacher and classmates. When students want to ask questions, they usually raise a hand and wait to be called on. But if a professor is giving a lecture, that is the wrong time to interrupt with a question. When the teacher or a student is speaking to the class, it's rude to begin whispering to another classmate. When a test is being given, talking to a classmate is not only rude but also risky. Most American teachers assume that students who are talking to each other during a test are cheating. The result may be a test grade of zero.



**Check Your
Comprehension**

Name some things students can do and shouldn't do in an American classroom.

Language Etiquette

- 24 Americans are usually tolerant of nonnative speakers who have trouble understanding English. But they become a little annoyed when a person does something incorrectly because of misunderstanding what was said. No one wants *soap* when he asked for *soup*. So if you don't understand what is said to you, politely ask the person to repeat or explain.
- 25 For the confused nonnative English speaker, there are several ways to ask for help, for example, "Could you please repeat that?" or "Would you please speak more slowly?" If a definition is needed, ask "What does the word _____ mean?" To find out how to express a particular idea in English, ask "How do you say _____ in English?"
- 26 Here are a few more polite English expressions that must be part of your English vocabulary. The polite response to a compliment is "Thank you." (A smile and a nod are not enough.) The response to "Thank you" is, of course, "You're welcome." If someone asks "How are you?" don't start talking about your medical problems. Just say, "Fine, thanks. How are you?" What do Americans say when someone sneezes? Believe it or not, they say "God bless you" or simply "Bless you."
- 27 One final point: When in a group, it is quite rude to converse in a language that some of the people cannot understand. Those who don't speak the language will feel left out. If it becomes necessary to switch to a language that not everyone present understands, then it's polite to translate or summarize what was said.
- 28 This short review of good manners in the U.S.A. will help you be polite in English. And that will encourage American friends to be polite to you.
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AFTER YOU READ

I. Getting the Message

- A. Discuss or write answers to these questions on a separate piece of paper. Write complete sentences. Reread the paragraphs indicated if you need help.
1. What are three questions that a casual acquaintance should *not* ask an American? (4)
 2. When should you send a sympathy card to a friend? (11)
 3. What are two things you should *not* do in an American classroom? (8, 23)
 4. What three things should you do when invited to an American friend's home for dinner? (13, 15)

5. Has women's liberation made life better or worse for women? What does the reading imply? (18-21)

B. What are the polite responses in the following situations? Check (✓) the correct answer.

1. Your friend says, "I missed class because my grandfather died." What do you say?

a. _____ "I'm so sorry."

b. _____ "How did he die?"

2. Your friend says, "I bought a new car a few weeks ago." What do you say?

a. _____ "How much did it cost?"

b. _____ "What kind of car?"

3. Your friend asks, "How are you?" What do you say?

a. _____ "I have a headache, but I just took an aspirin, so I'm hoping to feel better soon."

b. _____ "Fine, thanks. How are you?"

4. The elevator is crowded, and you're standing in the back when it arrives at your floor. What do you say?

a. _____ "Move over. I have to get out."

b. _____ "Excuse me, please. This is my floor."

5. Your friend tells you your sweater is very attractive. What do you say?

a. _____ "Thank you."

b. _____ "Do you really like this old thing?"

6. Your friend introduces you to his sister. What do you say?

a. _____ "It's nice meeting you."

b. _____ "It was nice meeting you."

II. Building Your Vocabulary

A. These are the 15 key vocabulary words for this chapter. They are boldfaced in the reading. Pronounce these words after your teacher and discuss their meanings.

acquaintance

address*

appropriate

assertive

behavior

compliment*

condolences†

congratulations†

etiquette

harassment

insult*

manners‡

polite

rude

silverware

*These words can be used as nouns or verbs.

†*Congratulations* and *condolences* are always plural.

‡*Manners* is plural when it refers to social behavior or etiquette.

B. Complete these sentences with some of the key vocabulary words on page 43.

1. Titles such as *Mr.*, *Dr.*, or *Mrs.* are polite forms of _____.
2. When someone dies, you should express your _____ to the family.
3. When a couple gets engaged, it is polite to say "_____!"
4. Americans believe people should not be afraid to ask for the things they want. In other words, people should be _____.
5. Four uncountable nouns in this vocabulary list are _____, _____, _____, and _____.
6. The opposite of *polite* is _____. The opposite of an *insult* is a(n) _____.
7. Knives, forks, and spoons are pieces of _____.
8. A classmate or neighbor that you don't know well is a(n) _____.

III. Sharpening Reading Skills

Pronouns Pronouns generally refer to a noun that appeared earlier in the sentence or in the preceding sentence. Remember that gerunds and infinitives are also nouns, so pronouns can refer back to them.

Examples

This cake is delicious. I love *it*. (*It* refers to the noun *cake*.)

We enjoy swimming, and we're good at *it*. (*It* refers to the gerund *swimming*.)

Write the noun that each of the following pronouns refers to. It may be an infinitive or a gerund.

1. In paragraph 3, the last sentence, what does *them* refer to? _____
2. In paragraph 5, sentence 2, what does *this* refer to? _____
3. In paragraph 18, sentence 4, what does *them* refer to? _____
4. In paragraph 19 sentence 1, what does *her* refer to? _____

IV. Understanding Idioms and Expressions

Match each expression in column 1 with the phrase in column 2 that means the same thing by writing the correct numbers on the lines. The numbers in parentheses give the paragraphs in which the expressions are used.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|--|
| 1. go Dutch treat (19) | _____ | What's your occupation? |
| 2. go through something (18) | _____ | Consider this possibility. |
| 3. Hands off! (4) | _____ | stay too long |
| 4. keep your distance (4) | _____ | a harmless untruth |
| 5. overstay your welcome (15) | _____ | don't get too close |
| 6. run out of something (15) | _____ | Don't touch. |
| 7. a white lie (3) | _____ | share expenses |
| 8. What do you do? (4) | _____ | use something all up |
| 9. What if . . . ? (14) | _____ | experience something (often something difficult) |

V. Taking Words Apart

A. Verb or Noun

Write in the correct word forms to complete the sentences. When the word is a verb, use the correct tense.

1. That child doesn't know how to _____ . His _____ is terrible. (*behave / behavior*)
2. Did you _____ him on his marriage? (*congratulate / congratulations*)
3. The boss _____ me on the good job I did. (*compliment / complimentary*)
4. It's difficult for me to _____ in English. But yesterday I had a long _____ with an American friend who speaks my language. (*converse / conversation*)

B. The Prefix *mis-*

The prefix *mis-* means *wrong(ly)* or *bad(ly)*. Write the meanings of these words:

1. *misunderstand*: _____
2. *misspell*: _____

VI. Practicing Sentence Patterns

Imperative Sentences Because this chapter gives advice to the reader, many sentences are written in the imperative. The subject (*you*) is not in the sentence; it is understood. Here are two examples of imperative statements:

Imperative, affirmative: Arrive on time.

Imperative, negative: Don't arrive late.

Now write imperative sentences giving advice to someone going to visit your country.

1. Affirmative: _____
2. Negative: _____

VII. Sharing Ideas

A. Issues

Debate these issues in small groups. Then choose one and write about it.

1. You have a new job in a nice office. However, an assistant at a nearby desk eats a sandwich with a lot of onion in it every day. The smell bothers you all afternoon. What is the best thing to do about this problem? Consider these possibilities: (a) complain to the boss and ask for a different desk; (b) ask the assistant to stop eating at his desk; (c) tell the other workers in the office and hope that your complaint will get back to the assistant; (d) buy an air-freshener spray and use it every day after lunch; (e) suffer in silence.
2. What differences have you noticed between American manners and European or Asian manners?

B. On a Personal Note

Write about one of these topics.

1. Tell about a time when you were embarrassed because you realized that you had done something socially improper.
2. Read a chapter in an American book on etiquette and summarize it. (Some famous authors in this field are Emily Post, Amy Vanderbilt, and Letitia Baldrige.)
3. What do you like about American manners? What do you dislike?