

Etiquette for Those Who Choose to Be Civilized in an Uncivilized World

By Robert Ing, DSc, DLitt, FAPSc, CPO


In my life I have dined and partied with Presidents, Prime Ministers, Diplomats, the creme de la creme of society and have had soup with the people in the hood. Whether your circle in society is one of diplomats or ordinary people just trying to survive, how you behave and present yourself will either move you on to better things in your life or make you the one left behind. As well, how you present yourself will reveal who and what you truly are. You will find the uncouth and inept at the top and in positions of power but they are only there because of the benevolence of their often inherited or short-term financial wealth. So unless you have infinite financial resources or no desire to make your mark, then you really need to consider what follows.

In business and personal relationships the appearance of being intelligent, respectful of others and civilized is a must. While it would be possible but improbable, and impractical to take every individual and instil within them perfect etiquette, the best one can strive for in our 21st century is to offer up À la carte etiquette items that represent the most common errors in business and daily life. In this way, one may select those items they feel they may easily incorporate or be mindful of, as they conduct themselves in the world. In doing this, you will not only be improving yourself but doing your part to be civilized in an uncivilized world!

When sitting at a table to eat:

(formal restaurant, fast-food, or at the home dining table)

- Do not play with the table utensils or crumble the bread.
- If there are several sets of knives or forks, start from the outside set working your way inward towards the plate.
- Do not put your elbows on the table, or sit too far back, or lounge.
- Do not whistle or hum at the dinner table.
- Never, if at all possible, blow your nose, cough or sneeze at the table.



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- At the first opportunity, once seated at the table or after the order is given to the waiter, the napkin is to be placed on the lap.

- Do not break your bread or crackers into the soup or chilli, nor mix with gravy.

- Do not mix food on your plate.

- A gentleman dining with a lady should wait for her to take the first bite before he begins his meal.

- If a dish is presented to you, place to your left, serve yourself first and then pass it on.

- Gentlemen never wear a hat at the table, will remove it before being seated, and must not place it on the table. The best places for a hat are a hat rack, an unoccupied side chair by the table or as a last resort on the lap with a napkin placed over it.

- Gloves are never worn at the table, unless there is a legitimate medical reason for this.

- Break your bread, do not cut it.

- A gentleman must help a lady whom he has escorted to the table, to all she wishes; but it is improper for him to offer to help other ladies who have escorts.

- Use a napkin only for your mouth. Never use it for your nose, face or forehead.

- It is very rude to pick your teeth at the table. If it becomes necessary to do so, hold your napkin over your mouth.

- Upon completion of your meal, place the knife and fork together at six o'clock with your fork on the left (tines facing down) and knife on the right, with the knife blade facing in, towards the fork. This indicates to the bus staff that you are finished and the plate and utensils may be collected.



When eating:

- Do not talk when your mouth is full.
- Never make a noise while eating.
- Do not open your mouth while chewing, but keep your lips closed.



Business or Formal Dress:

- Do not wear a digital or oversized watch with business attire.
- Men should not wear lapel pins that have no significance. Acceptable pins are schools attended, clubs - associations belonged to, family coats of arms – crests, flag of wearer’s citizenship and awards. Unacceptable pins are fan pins, the flags of foreign nations, religious pins unless the wearer is a member of the clergy and promotional pins
- Do not wear excessive jewellery (no more than three rings, no more than two lapel pins) with business attire. A large chain with a medallion unless an award issued by a sovereign nation or military decoration must never be worn with formal business attire.
- Do not wear extra strong cologne or perfume with business attire.
- Ladies should not wear skirts or dresses that go more than 1" above the knee, or open toed footwear in a business environment.
- The colour of a gentleman’s leather belt matches the colour of his leather shoes or boots. He never wears white socks with business attire.



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Face-to-Face with People:

- Do not shake hands without removing your gloves.
- When introduced to, or shaking hands with a business associate, if you are sitting, stand up to acknowledge them.
- When accepting someone's business card, offer yours in exchange.
- A gentleman always lets a lady enter or exit an elevator first.
- Never offer a client an inexpensive plastic pen (under \$20) to sign a deal worth thousands. If you're worried about losing, or someone accidentally pocketing your favourite pen, have your initials or name engraved on it. Engraved pens seem to stay with their owner longer!
- Never greet, address or carry on a conversation with someone where the distance between the both of you is greater than twice your height. To have a civilized exchange of words you must be closer (within a maximum of approximately eleven feet of each other).
- When asking for the name of a person on the telephone or in person, do not use the phrase "What was the name?" This is a definite cultural faux pas and an indirect insult to the person you're speaking with.
- Do not call a business or sales meeting without providing each attendee with a meeting agenda at least 24 hours in advance.
- When charging a business lunch or dinner, leave a cash tip; do not put the tip on the credit card charge.
- Avoid the use of vacuous phrases in conversation such as, "first things first," "as you know" and "...that's a good one."
- When in a group of people, do not carry on a conversation in a language that fewer than 60% of the group would understand. If you must speak to someone in a different language excuse yourself and the other person from the group and carry on your conversation.



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•If on an airplane, bus or train do not put on cologne, perfume or aromatic creams. Not everyone in the enclosed cabin may appreciate your choice of scents or even worse, may be allergic.

The Telephone:

•Do not call people whose telephone numbers you obtained from your "Caller ID" service, if they did not leave you a voice mail message requesting a call back.

•Turn your mobile telephone off or put it on silent mode during a business meeting, and if it should ring during a meeting; do not take the call.

•When calling someone always identify who you are, your company if applicable and the name of the person you wish to speak with.

•Do not conduct a telephone conversation while you are eating. No one wants to hear you chew your food on the telephone.

•Always leave your telephone number and a detailed voice mail message on why you are calling, even if you "know" the person has your number and has an idea why you are calling.

•Do not leave long voice mail messages (lasting over 180 seconds).

•Do not put the person you called on hold. If you initiate a telephone call, you are obligated to complete it without interruption.

•Do not leave more than two consecutive voice mail messages. If you didn't get a call back on your first message, or have to update it, leave a second message. However, if you haven't received a call back from your second message, put at least 24 hours distance between your second and third message.

•Do not leave a voicemail message that tells the recipient to call you but does not give any hint of the purpose or general subject of the call. By doing this you can be assured that your call will not be handled as a priority and when you finally do get a call back, your caller will not have the necessary files or information on hand to make the call productive.



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E-mails and FAX:

- Do not send FAX of more than six pages without informing the recipient beforehand.
- Do not send a three page or less text document as an attached file to an e-mail message but do paste it in the body of the message. Maximize productivity and efficiency by minimizing effort! It will get read and handled faster in less time, and the recipient won't have to worry about whether they can open it.
- Do not put people on your e-mail distribution list without asking them first. You may e-mail them a request to be put on your list with a first edition of the material you are distributing, but they must respond to be placed on the list to receive further mass e-mail.
- Always respond to e-mail messages within 24 - 36 hours.
- Do not send a FAX without a cover sheet that does not indicate your name and contact information.

About the Author

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