

Содержание:

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Introduction

Etiquette is the code of polite behaviour in society. Knowing a little bit about British etiquette will help you ensure that your behaviour is polite and appropriate while you are in the UK.

Whilst the English penchant for manners and socially appropriate behaviour is renowned across the world, the word etiquette to which we so often refer actually originates from the French estiquette – “to attach or stick”. Indeed the modern understanding of the word can be linked to the Court of the French King Louis XIV, who used small placards called etiquettes, as a reminder to courtiers of accepted ‘house rules’ such as not walking through certain areas of the palace gardens.

Every culture across the ages has been defined by the concept of etiquette and accepted social interaction. However, it is the British – and the English in particular – who have historically been known to place a great deal of importance in good manners. Whether it be in relation to speech, timeliness, body language or dining, politeness is key.

British etiquette dictates courteousness at all times, which means forming an orderly queue in a shop or for public transport, saying excuse me when someone is blocking your way and saying please and thank you for any service you have received is de rigueur.

The British reputation for being reserved is not without merit. Overfamiliarity of personal space or behaviour is a big no-no! When meeting someone for the first time a handshake is always preferable to a hug and a kiss on the cheek is reserved for close friends only. Asking personal questions about salary, relationship status, weight or age (particularly in the case of more ‘mature’ ladies) is also frowned upon.

Traditionally, one of the best examples of the British etiquette is the importance placed on punctuality. It is considered rude to arrive late to a business meeting, medical appointment or formal social occasion such as a wedding. As such it is advisable to arrive 5-10 minutes early to appear professional, prepared and unflustered as a mark of respect to your host. Conversely, should you arrive too early to a dinner party this could also

appear slightly rude and ruin the atmosphere for the evening if the host is still completing their preparations. For the same reason an unannounced house call is often frowned upon for risk of inconveniencing the home owner.

Should you be invited to a British dinner party it is customary for a dinner guest to bring a gift for the host or hostess, such as a bottle of wine, a bouquet of flowers or chocolates. Good table manners are essential (particularly if you want to be invited back!) and unless you are attending a barbeque or an informal buffet it is frowned upon to use fingers rather than cutlery to eat. The cutlery should also be held correctly, i.e. the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left hand with the prongs pointing downwards and the food pushed onto the back of the fork with the knife rather than 'scooped'. At a formal dinner party when there are numerous utensils at your place setting it is customary to begin with the utensils on the outside and work your way inward with each course.

As the guest it is polite to wait until everyone at the table has been served and your host starts eating or indicates that you should do so. Once the meal has begun it is impolite to reach over someone else's plate for an item such as seasoning or a food platter; it is more considerate to ask for the item to be passed to you. Leaning your elbows on the table whilst you are eating is also considered rude.

Slurping or making other such loud noises whilst eating is completely frowned upon. As with yawning or coughing it is also considered very rude to chew open-mouthed or talk when there is still food in your mouth. These actions imply that a person was not brought up to adhere to good manners, a criticism against not only the offender but their family too!

Social classes

Rules of etiquette are usually unwritten and passed down from generation to generation, although in days gone by it was common for young ladies to attend a finishing school to ensure their manners were up to scratch. An attribute which was felt particularly crucial in securing a suitable husband!

Whilst today good manners and etiquette are seen as a sign of respect, particularly to those more senior (in either age or position), in Victorian England when the class system was alive and well, etiquette was often used as a social weapon in the interests of social advancement or exclusion.

Apologising

In the UK, people have a tendency to over-apologise. For example, if you tell someone about something unfortunate which has happened to you, it's quite likely that they will apologise. E.g. "I'm so sorry to hear that you have been unwell".

British people cannot resist the urge to apologise, for example, if someone accidentally bumps into you, it would be common for you to apologise and say "I'm sorry" as though you are sorry for being in their way. If you have reserved a seat on a train but somebody is sat in it, it would be common to say "I'm so sorry but you appear to be sat in my seat". If somebody spills your coffee, again it's quite normal for the victim to apologise. Of course, the person to blame would apologise as well, but apologising as the victim is a very English thing to do.

In the UK, we like receiving warm heartfelt apologies as well as giving them. If you have done something to upset or offend someone, it is important to offer them a genuine apology. A half-hearted apology will not go down well.

If you are offered an apology, it is considered good grace to acknowledge and accept it. In some cases you may still be a little upset over the incident, but by not accepting the apology the situation will escalate. A typical way of accepting an apology is by saying "it's okay", "don't worry about it", or for more serious incidents, "I forgive you".

Queuing

In the UK, wherever there is a mass of people you will find an orderly queue. British etiquette dictates that when you arrive, you join the back of the queue so that each person receives the service in the order that they arrived. We 'wait our turn' in queues. The notion of an orderly queue relies on everyone in the queue agreeing that this is fair. It is seen as unfair if someone doesn't join the queue and pushes in.

Queuing can seem very strange if you are not used to it however if you are seen to 'push in' it is considered very rude and unfair to other people who have been waiting. If in doubt ask "is this the back of the queue?" to avoid offending anyone.

A common British trait is that despite everybody in the queue being annoyed with someone who has pushed in, very few people will ask that person to go to the back of the

queue. British people do not like to cause a scene by arguing, but likewise, we like people to know we are annoyed in subtle ways. Instead people will shake their head, roll their eyes, tut, and/or have an angry facial expression. They may also complain to the person next to them in the queue.

Please and thank you! Minding your PS and QS

Many people from outside the UK find it strange that we say please and thank you as much as we do. It is considered polite, well-mannered and is a regularity of British speech. What may surprise you is when we are in a shop, restaurant or anywhere we are receiving customer service, we say thank you to the person serving us e.g. when they give you change, the bill, or come to give you your food and drinks. In Britain, every social transaction is eased by reiteration of these phrases from both parties.

Remembering to say please and thank you is very important, if you are not doing it you may be told to 'mind your p's and q's' or, more specifically, to say both 'please' ('p's) and 'thank you' ('thank q's).

Being tactile

Britain isn't a particularly tactile country. Because of this, some cultures perceive British people as being completely unemotional whilst others perceive us as having a 'stiff upper lip'. This refers to the fact that British people do have emotions, they're just very good at hiding them. When a person's upper lip begins to tremble, it is one of the first signs that the person has experienced deep emotion. The 'stiff upper lip' is an idiom to our ability to conceal our emotions and keep a straight face.

Whilst you may be hugged and kissed 2 or 3 times by a total stranger in some European countries, it's unlikely that you would receive the same reception in the UK. Social kissing is becoming popular in Britain, but it is by no means an accepted norm. For example it is rare for men to kiss in the UK- this is usually a gesture reserved for women. Kissing is not appropriate in many professional situations. If you are unsure, stick to a handshake.

Holding hands as friends in the UK is quite unusual. Instead, more common for female friends is to link arms. For male friends, there is usually no contact. Holding hands is usually reserved only for parent-children relationships, or between partners (e.g. girlfriend & boyfriend, husband & wife).

Discussing money

Unlike in most countries, discussing how much you earn or how much something costs (anything from the cost of clothes, up to the price of a house) has traditionally been a strictly taboo subject according to British etiquette. Sometimes British people find it embarrassing to discuss money and it can be seen as rude.

If you are having a conversation with someone new, money and personal wealth are subjects best avoided. Only discuss money if the other person has raised this – then you know they feel comfortable talking about it. Definitely do not ask somebody how much they earn. If you talk about how much money you have and all of things you bought, it can be seen as bragging, particularly when it heightens the difference between your financial situation and that of the person you are talking to.

However, things are changing and British people are more open to discussing things such as house prices or how much their holiday cost. But usually this is if the item they have bought is perceived as a bargain, for example if they bought their house below market value because the seller wanted a quick sale or got a really good deal on their holiday package.

Chivalry

Chivalry is seen as a very British trait and a distinguished feature of a gentleman. In old English Literature, women swoon over chivalrous men!

In modern day British etiquette, chivalry is still an admired trait however men must be careful that their chivalrous behaviour isn't patronising to modern independent women. For example, taking of one's coat and placing it in a puddle so a lady may step on it and not get her feet wet (a classic feature in Jane Austen novels) may not receive the gratitude it would have had in 1800.

Some examples of modern chivalry for the 21st century include:

- offering a lady your seat on the train if she is standing
- opening the door for a lady
- offering to carry a heavy bag for a lady if it looks as though she is struggling
- offering your jacket to a lady if she is cold

Respect authority figures

When a teacher, your homestay or anyone in a position of authority asks you to do something, you must respect them and do it. It is very rude to disrespect people in authority. If you do not understand something about UK culture then please just ask!

In your country, it may be considered respectful to look at the floor when you are being told off. In the UK, this would be considered a rude and disobedient gesture. When people are talking to you, even to tell you off, they expect eye contact.

Handshakes

A good firm handshake is a common way to greet someone in a business or social situation. People might make assumptions about you based on your handshake so it's important to get it right. For example, if you offer a limp handshake, it can give people the impression that you are disinterested and/or not confident.

To give a good handshake:

- Firmly grasp the other person's hand
- Get the pressure right - do not crush the other person's hand but equally do not offer a limp hand
- Check that your palms are not sweaty. Pat lightly and discreetly on your clothing before shaking someone's hand if needed.
- Keep it brief. Shake the hand just two or three times before letting go.
- Accompany the handshake with direct eye contact and a smile.

Helping around the house and school

In school you may have tasks and chores in your boarding house, it is polite and helpful that everyone does these equally to make the boarding house nice and clean for everyone to live in. Whilst you are at a homestay you should offer to help with the washing up and other household chores. Your homestay may not need you to help but it's always polite to ask.

Switch off your mobile

We understand that technology is very important in today's society but when you are talking to someone it is polite to put down your mobile or iPad so you can have a conversation with them. It is especially rude to use your mobile when eating at the dinner table. In the UK dinner time is a time for talking and chatting with family or friends.

Weather

In Britain, we love to talk about the weather! Perhaps it's due to the unpredictability of the weather in the UK and our inability to prepare for extreme weather conditions. For example, the UK grinds to a halt if there is more than a few inches of snow fall.

Talking about the weather serves as an ice-breaker. When a British person meets a stranger a 'safe' subject of discussion is the weather. The function of the conversation is to initiate contact between two individuals. The conversation will usually take a diversion once a shared common ground is discovered but the weather in the UK provides us with a variety of topics as a starting point.

British humour and jokes

British humour errs of the side of sarcasm and is often centred on real life, sometimes painful observations of ourselves and others. The British use humour to make the best of a situation and to lighten the mood. For example, if you spend a lot of time in your bedroom, your homestay might sarcastically ask "Why are you hiding in your room? Has your hair turned pink?!" In this case, your homestay does not really think your hair has turned pink. They have noticed that you are spending a lot of time in your room and they are joking that this could be because your hair has turned pink.

You may find it difficult to get used to it at first, but most important is that you don't take British humour seriously. If you can laugh at yourself, you will be well liked and respected.

If you tell good jokes you will be very popular here as British people love jokes! They even have a day devoted to them - April Fools' Day on the 1st April.

The key to telling a good joke is not always the joke itself but pitching it to the right audience. A joke can alienate or cause offence in the wrong context. Telling a joke can be a good way to break the ice and make new friends. Just make sure that your audience will appreciate the joke you tell.

Conclusion

SEF (Speech Etiquette Formula) serve to represent in the first place politeness of the interlocutors, since it is a kind of universal device of establishing contact between interlocutors belonging to different cultures. In most societies there are specific ways of behaving and speaking which are considered polite (the word 'polite' means having or showing good manners, sensitivity to other people's feelings and/or correct social behaviour.) Sometimes, the English express politeness in the ways, which are not commonly used in other languages. For example, speakers of British English often use indirectness or tentativeness in order to be polite in situations where other languages are more direct. Speakers of American English tend to be more direct in similar situations.