

Be a Table Etiquette Superstar!

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The world was my oyster, but I used the wrong fork. — Oscar Wilde

Your resume may get you the interview, but your personal skills will get you the job. One set of personal skills is table manners or etiquette. Etiquette is simply a set of rules to add enjoyment to any meal or social occasion. Table manners play a vital role in making a favorable impression on those around you. And while times change, good etiquette will always be in vogue. Manners are a sensitive awareness of others. They help you be polite and respectful of the feelings, culture, and values of others and will help you avoid behavior that might be considered rude. Of course, good intentions are always more important than which fork to use. But a knowledge of table etiquette will help you feel comfortable at special occasions such as family celebrations, awards banquets, and weddings or when a potential employer invites you to lunch or dinner.



Before the Meal

Follow the dress code suggested by your host or hostess or printed on the invitation. Ask if you are unsure, if possible. If not, business casual is usually the best choice. Jeans, shorts, short skirts, spike heels, or tennis shoes are probably not the best choice. Before the event, check out the restaurant on the internet and become familiar with the location and menu. Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early, never late.

Turn off your cell phone and put it away; do not leave it out on the table. When you meet company officials, shake hands firmly and introduce yourself, if necessary. If you are given a name tag, place it on your right shoulder where it is visible even if you are shaking hands. Try your best to remain relaxed and confident, and always keep a respectful manner. From there, take cues from your host or hostess.



Napkins

Once seated at a table, remove your napkin from the place setting. Unfold it, but do not shake it, and place it on your lap. If you are attending a private luncheon or dinner, wait until the host or hostess unfolds their napkin before you unfold yours. Your napkin should rest in your lap until the meal is over, unless you need to wipe your mouth. Never use your napkin to blow your nose or mop up spills. If you must leave the table during the meal, loosely fold the napkin, and place it to the left or right of your plate. Simply say, "Please excuse me for a minute." You do not need to announce you are going to the restroom or need to make a call; both are private activities. It is impolite to answer a phone call during a meal. When the meal is finished, loosely fold the napkin, and place it to the left or right of your plate. Napkins should never be wadded up, refolded, or placed on your plate or in your chair.

Service

Beverages and bread may be served before the meal. If the bread is in a basket, take one piece and pass the basket to your right. Place your piece of bread on the bread plate, located to your left. If butter is passed around the table, use the serving knife that comes with the butter to place a pat on your bread plate. If there is a butter knife on

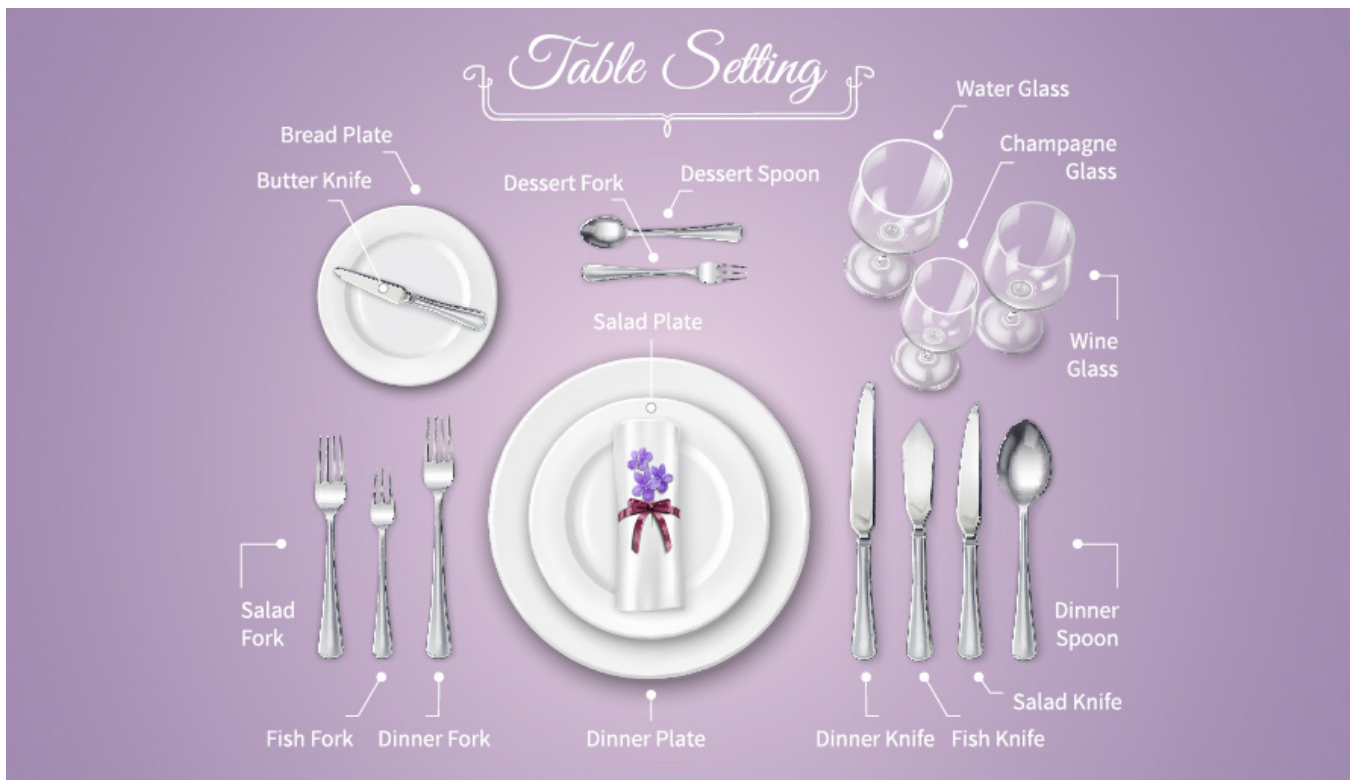
your bread plate, use it to spread butter on your bread. Leave the butter knife on your bread plate throughout the meal. If there is not a butter knife, use your dinner knife to spread butter on your bread.

If there is not a fixed menu, order food that is easy to eat. If you are in doubt about what to order, follow the lead of your host or hostess. If you have dietary restrictions, now is not the time to discuss them with your host or hostess. When it is your turn to order, discuss your concerns with your wait staff. It is best not to complain about your food. If you drop a utensil, leave it on the floor and quietly get the wait staff's attention to bring you a replacement. To get their attention, simply say, "Excuse me." Do not snap your fingers or yell across the room.

The wait staff will usually serve your plate from the left and remove it from the right. However, each restaurant may have its own way to serve the meal. Always say please and thank you every time you receive anything from the staff. Consider them part of the team of the host or hostess. When your host or hostess picks up their utensil to eat or when everyone has been served, begin to eat. If someone asks you to pass the salt, always pass the salt and pepper together. Do not use the salt or pepper on its way to the intended person.

Eating Styles

Be aware of different eating styles. Continental or European style includes the fork in your left hand and the knife in your right hand to cut food. The fork stays in the left hand, to bring food directly to your mouth. American style includes cutting the food with the right and holding the food with the left, then switching hands to eat with the right hand. Whatever method you use, cut and eat one piece of food at a time. If you eat using the American style, learning the correct use of a knife to cut food may take practice. Hold the knife in your right hand and the fork in your left. Use the fork to



hold the food item. Using the serrated (sharp) side of the knife, saw the food, pressing gently as you cut a few bite-sized pieces at a time. Place the knife on the edge of your plate with the blade facing in. Eat by switching the fork to your right hand (unless you are left-handed). Do not shovel or stab your food.

The Place Setting

The place setting is often your roadmap of the meal. You travel from the outside of the setting to the inside. For the first course, choose the outside fork, unless soup is served, in which case choose the outside spoon. A salad fork has smaller tines than the dinner fork that is used for the main dish. The soup spoon is always larger than the spoon used for coffee. A spoon for iced tea has a long handle. Continue eating the next course with the new outside fork. If a course requires a knife, use the knife farthest to the right. The dessert spoon or fork may rest above the plate or be served with the dessert itself. The bread-and-butter plate is located on your left, and beverage glasses are on your right. Any dinnerware to your left is yours and any glass to the right is yours. You may leave unused silverware

on the table, but used silverware should never touch the table.

When you finish the meal, place your used silverware on your plate with the handles resting at 5 o'clock and the ends resting at 10 o'clock. This is the universal sign that you are finished with your meal.

Table Manners

Remember to bring your best self to the table. While you are dining, speak at a normal volume and pay as much attention to your dining partners as you do your food. Use conversation and etiquette to make others feel comfortable with you. Smiling, erect posture, and eye contact are all activities that will make you stand out from your peers. The following are common mistakes that with practice you can avoid at the dining table.

- Do not speak with your mouth full.
- Do not chew with your mouth open.
- Do not crunch ice, chew gum, or smoke.
- Do not slouch or rest your elbows on the table.
- Do not refresh your lipstick or lip balm.
- Do not use a toothpick.
- Do not stack your plates.

Conversation

Conversation is an important element of making your dining partners feel comfortable with you. Even if you are nervous, try to employ the keys to good conversation.

- Pause and think before you speak.
- Respond to the body language and expressions of the person you are talking to.
- Listen to what is said.
- Maintain eye contact, if appropriate, and pay attention to the person with whom you are talking. In some cultures, eye contact may be viewed as disrespectful so lack of eye contact may not indicate that a person is not paying attention.
- Be prepared to make your one-minute or three-minute elevator speech. Rehearse in front of friends to ensure a smooth, natural delivery. At the very least, know what you need or want to convey during a business interview.

Even if you do not know the people you are with, small talk can fill the voids in conversation and set others at ease. If you are familiar with current events, you will be able to discuss topics such as news events, famous people, current best-selling books or movies, travel, or sports. You can also ask people about themselves or their family, work, or hobbies. If you find a common interest,

the conversation will become easier. Avoid talking about touchy or personal topics such as religious beliefs, financial situations, politics, illness, divorce, or someone's weight, height, or shoe size. Do not tell racial, ethnic, or sexually oriented jokes. If you are uncomfortable with a topic, change the subject or simply indicate you are not comfortable with the topic. If you are unsure what to talk about, smile and act like you are enjoying your meal and the company of those around you.

After the Meal

After the meal is over, be sure to thank your host or hostess for the meal and the good company before you leave, even if you must find them in a crowd. Always follow up with a timely handwritten thank you note, preferably within 24 to 48 hours.

Being familiar with proper table etiquette can set your course for a good experience and make a positive impression about you and your manners. It takes practice to become a table etiquette superstar!

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