

A. Smiling Faces

Teacher:

I don't want to be rude, but Americans are so phony. They seem false. They smile all the time. They say "Hi" to strangers. Yesterday an older woman on the bus told me her first name and then talked all about her divorce and her problems with her ex-husband. I had never seen her before! At college, I met a nice classmate, and we talked and talked. We exchanged phone numbers, and she said, "Let's meet for lunch." It's been three weeks, and she has never called.

Natasha

Dear Natasha,

You are not the first student to be surprised by how often Americans smile and talk to strangers. You are asking if friendly Americans are really honest. The answer is that Americans are not phony or insincere when they meet strangers. Most Americans are friendly and do smile a lot. By the way, it's hard to speak clear English without putting your mouth in a smile! Americans are typically happy to meet other people; and you see that in smiles and friendly talk.

In America, it is important to be friendly and curious and to start conversations with strangers. As you have experienced, Americans sometimes ask people (even new people they have just met on the bus, standing in line at the bank, or at a party) personal questions. Of course, Natasha, if it makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to answer the questions. You can quickly change the subject by asking them another question, or just be honest and say, "I feel

uncomfortable talking about that." Most Americans are not afraid of sharing a little bit of their lives with others. Just be careful to never ask Americans about their age, religion, money, or weight. These topics are *taboo* (not talked about) in America. This tradition comes from the first colonists (the people who came to America from England in the 1600s) who wanted freedom to choose a new life that did not depend on their religion, their age, or their class in society.

Often an American you meet will say, "We must get together for lunch soon," but that person never calls you. This is not insincere. At the time the person said it, he or she really meant it. As the days go by, though, there is never enough time to do the things everyone needs or wants to do. So time passes and no call is made. Many Americans work a lot and schedule too many things in too little time. Many Americans do not have the time to just relax and meet friends as much as they would like to.



P.S.

- ✓ Americans tend to smile a lot.
- ✓ Americans are friendly and sometimes talk to strangers.
- ✓ Americans sometimes share personal stories with strangers.

B. "How Are You?"

Dear Teacher,

It took me such a long time to figure out that when Americans say, "How are you?" they don't really care about the answer. It seems so dishonest. People also say, "What's up?" "How you doing?" "What's happening?" and "How's it going?" and it seems like they just mean, "Hi." When I first got here, I thought people actually cared how I was feeling and what was happening in my life. I was embarrassed a few times because I started telling them what was going on with me and they were already walking away! Are Americans really so insincere? If I honestly want to know how someone is doing, what do I say?

Ralf

Dear Ralf,

It is strange that Americans' standard greeting does not really translate word for word. I guess it's just tradition. "How are you?" really just means "I see you and I greet you." It's like a dog wagging (moving) his tail at another dog and then walking away. It's usually a little rude to not say "How are you?" even when you see the same people every day. People often have this type of conversation while walking past each other. It is simply a form of greeting and not a question about health at all. Asking how someone is feeling isn't really the purpose. The important thing is not the question. What is important is that when you see people, you immediately greet them with a smile and some words. Often, people will start a conversation with "How are you?" and, if there is time, begin to talk seriously. If

you really want to know how someone is feeling, you can ask a second question after the first:

"Hi, how are you?"

"Good, how about you?"

"I'm all right. So what have you been up to?" Or "Is everything going well with you?"

When a second question is asked after the first greeting, it becomes clear that it isn't just an ordinary greeting but a real question and the beginning of a conversation.



P.S.

- ✓ Asking "How are you?" is simply a greeting and not a question about your health.

C. Eating in Restaurants

Teacher,

I went to my first American restaurant and it was so confusing! Just as I sat down a man put ice water and bread and butter on the table. I hadn't ordered that, so I immediately sent it back. When he explained that there was no charge for water or bread, I felt so embarrassed! Then the waitress came and was smiling and she was very friendly. She said "Hi, my name is Susie and I will be your server tonight." Teacher, in my country the waiters never act like that. And then when she asked if I wanted soup or salad she made me crazy. The choices! There were four kinds of soup, and when I decided on a salad, she wanted to know what dressing and there were six different kinds. She asked me how I wanted my steak cooked: "well, medium, or rare." I didn't understand that at all. She asked if I wanted a baked potato, boiled potatoes, fried potatoes, mashed potatoes, or rice. I was exhausted by all the choices and so nervous. It was like taking a test! Teacher, is this normal?

Joey

Dear Joey,

It was wonderful for me to read your letter because I have never thought of these things before. Yes, your experience was normal, and I hope the next time you can be prepared for the differences in culture and enjoy yourself and your meal. Servers earn most of their money from their tips, so they try to be very friendly and helpful. Because America is the land of choices, Susie gave you choices on types of soup or dressings. It is also common for the customer to ask the server for details of the ingredients and his or her opinion about

the food. Americans commonly ask the server, "What would you recommend?" or "Is there anything special tonight?" or "What is in that?"

If there is something wrong with the food, you should send it back. You will not be expected to pay for it. It's considered polite to leave a tip of 15–20 percent of the total bill. (It is not normal for the restaurant to include the tip in the bill unless it is a large group of people.) If the service is bad, some people don't leave a good tip. Be sure to tell the manager about the poor service. When it comes to ordering meat at a restaurant, the server will ask, "How do you like the meat cooked?" *Well* means that the meat is cooked a long time and looks almost brown inside, *medium* means there is a little pink color on the inside, and *rare* means that it is not cooked very much—brown on the outside but red on the inside.

Teacher,

I met an American at my church, and she invited me to meet her at a restaurant for lunch. She seemed like a very nice, polite woman, but her manners were very bad! When her food came, she just sat there talking to me and did not start eating. She didn't eat until my food came. Then, she had her fork in her right hand and her left hand was under the table! My mother always taught me that both hands must be above the table when we eat. I know I was rude, but I kept staring at how she ate. First, the fork was in her right hand, then, when she cut her food, she put the fork in her left hand and her knife in her right. When she was finished cutting, she put the knife on her plate and her fork in her right hand, her left hand back under the table, and then she ate. It made me dizzy (to feel like the room is moving around). And, she kept talking while we were eating. She would ask me a question, and then put food in her mouth. That is very

rude in my country. First we eat, and then, when we are finished, we can talk. She asked the waiter to put the food she didn't finish in a "doggie bag" (little box to take home). I felt so ashamed. We would never do that in my country. It shows that you are poor. Is she polite or rude?

Shoshana

Dear Shoshana,

Thank you for your detailed observations. Yes, your new American friend sounds very polite by American standards. My mother always taught me to eat with one hand under the table when I wasn't cutting my food. I think that Americans are the only people who eat that way! It may seem odd how Americans keep changing hands using forks and knives, but if that's what our mothers taught us, then that's the right thing to do! It is considered rude to start eating before anyone else at the table. This is why she waited for your food to be served to you. She was probably waiting for you to tell her, "Please start eating before me or it will get cold," and then she could eat. It is common to take food home. If it tastes good, we don't want to waste it, and we will eat it later as "leftovers." We call it a doggie bag because we used to pretend we were taking it for our dog. Now we are proud to say that because the food is so delicious we want to finish it later.

Americans often meet people for breakfast, lunch, or dinner because we work a lot, and meal times are often the only chance we have to talk. So we ask a question, put the food in our mouth, chew, and listen. It's kind of like a dance. One eats while the other talks, and vice versa. It is polite (and expected) to talk while eating, but *never* when there is food in your mouth.

Dear Teacher,

I can't believe how rude my American friend is. He said that he wanted to have dinner with me. Then, when the bill came, he looked surprised when I didn't put down any money. He told me how much my share was! In my country, the man always pays for the woman. Also, he's older than I am. If I had known I was going to have to pay, I would not have ordered the steak or had a second glass of wine. I can't believe how impolite he is and I told him I don't want to see him again.

Ofelia

Ofelia,

I am glad you told me about this. Americans normally think that everyone will pay for him or herself, even if it is a date (and I am not clear if it was or not). In the USA, remember that Americans value equality. The words "Let's meet for dinner," "Let's have dinner together," or "Please join me" don't necessarily mean that the other person will pay. The words that usually mean the person wants to pay are, "It's my treat" or "I'm taking you to dinner." If someone "treats" you, that means that he or she plans to pay for everything. In America, treating the other person is usually done for special occasions like a birthday or to thank the person for something he or she did. Who pays does not depend on gender or age. In America, we are all equal.

There is a general idea in America that the bill will be shared or split. This is called *going Dutch*. Americans don't often mention this before the meal because it is generally understood.

If someone does offer to *treat* you, it's polite to be careful about what you order. You might want to ask what the other person is ordering and then order something that is the same price or less

expensive. It is considered very impolite and rude to order the most expensive thing on the menu because the other person is paying. If someone offers to pay at the end, it is polite to try to argue at first: "No, no, let me get it," or to question the person: "Are you sure?" A compromise is to ask if you can pay for the tip or buy dessert, coffee, or a drink at the next location. It's also okay to simply say, "Thank you," as long as you don't act like you were expecting it.



P.S.

- ✓ Ice water is typically served when you sit down in restaurants. However, this may begin to change due to concerns about wasting water.
- ✓ Bread is often put on the table, and there is usually no charge.
- ✓ The server should be very friendly and helpful and often will tell you his or her name.
- ✓ When the service is good, tipping is expected to be 15–20 percent of the bill.
- ✓ You will be offered many different choices in your order—choices of soup, salad dressing, potatoes, vegetables, how your meat will be cooked, etc.
- ✓ Salad is eaten before the main course.
- ✓ Coffee is often served with and after your meal.
- ✓ It is normal for servers to ask you if you want to take your uneaten food home in a *doggie bag*. If they don't ask, you can ask them.

- ✓ If the food is not good, send it back. Don't eat too much of it.
- ✓ If there are any problems with the food or service, politely tell the manager.
- ✓ In most states, smoking is not allowed inside any restaurant or bar. Be sure to ask before lighting your cigarette.
- ✓ Polite Americans eat with one hand, while the other one is under the table on their laps.
- ✓ Usually, when friends meet at restaurants, they each pay their share of the bill or split the bill in half: It's called *going Dutch*.
- ✓ When you want the server to bring the check, make a writing gesture with one hand as if you are holding a pen and hold out the other hand as if it were paper. If you just want the server to come, try to make eye contact and raise your hand when he or she looks your way.
- ✓ If you are confused about how or what to order when you are in a restaurant or about tipping, ask the server.



Caution

- ✓ If you are in a very nice restaurant and the server asks if you want water, be sure you say "tap" water (city water from the kitchen faucet). If you don't, you might get bottled water, which could cost about \$5–7. The city water throughout the USA is healthy to drink.



P.P.S. Tipping for Other Services

- ✓ Leave 15–20 percent of the bill if you receive good service in a nice restaurant.
- ✓ A tip for a taxi driver is usually 15 percent of the bill. You can give 20 percent if the driver gets you there quickly or 10 percent if the ride is bad. If the driver is rude or a bad driver, leave no tip. Be sure to copy the driver's name to contact the taxi company (but be sure to get your suitcases out of the trunk of the taxi first).
- ✓ If you are staying in a nice hotel and someone carries your luggage to your room, the tip is usually \$1–2 a bag. This is also true for baggage handlers at the airport or train station.
- ✓ If you need to check your coat at a restaurant, and there is no charge to do that, a tip of \$1 per coat is nice.
- ✓ For barbers, hair stylists, masseuses (someone who rubs your body for relaxation or to remove pain), or manicurists (someone who decorates nails), a tip of 15 percent of the bill is expected.
- ✓ For valet parking, the tip is usually \$1 over the parking charge.
- ✓ At the holidays Americans generally leave a card with \$5–20 for their letter carriers, newspaper delivery persons, gardeners, pet sitters, house cleaners, or anyone who provides a service throughout the year.