

Introduction

Welcome to the USA!

You must be both excited and nervous to be here in this country of more than 300 million people. Try to remember that you will probably find that America and Americans are very different from your own culture and country. Your first few days and experiences in America will not be very similar to what you have seen in movies from Hollywood or in American television programs.

We have taught ESL to adults in the Los Angeles, California area—in a large public adult school in Los Angeles and in a small community college in Glendale, California—for many years. We have met students from more than 96 countries. This book is a collection of letters our students have written to us with their questions about American culture. They share the experiences that have confused them.

The book has nine sections. First, you will read the letters our students wrote (we fixed the grammar and the spelling). Then you will read our answers. Often, when Americans write letters, they add the words P.S. at the bottom. P.S. means that extra information and facts are added to the letter. At the end of each section of letters, we have added a P.S. to show you the most important things to remember. We also have added a few cautions—things to be careful of.

We hope that these questions and answers will help you feel better about being in the United States of America. We hope that we can save you from having some of the embarrassing and confusing situations that our students experienced.

Because you are probably not fluent in English, we have tried to make the vocabulary and grammar as simple as possible. Most of the

language is at an intermediate language level. When we have used a word that you might not know, we have explained it.

Understanding America and Americans (in this book, *America* and *Americans* refer primarily to the United States of America and the people who were born here) will take you a long time. (Yes, others not born here are Americans too, but they are **usually** not part of the **general** descriptions included in this book.) The students who wrote letters for this book and we, the authors, hope that you will enjoy this book and that it will make your experience in the United States more comfortable.

Important!

Please understand that this book includes **general statements** about Americans. The United States of America is a large country made up of many different groups of people whose families have come from all over the world. You will find many differences from what we say, depending on whom you meet and where you live. We have tried to be as accurate as possible in describing the accepted customs of the **average American** from New York to Los Angeles, from Florida to Washington State, and from Hawaii and Alaska. (The authors live in a big city on the West Coast, but the publisher and editor is in the Midwest, and we encountered many areas in which we did not agree on what "Americans" do or think.)

Helpful Hints

Use your eyes! Look at American newspaper comics. Read children's books and newspaper advice columns. Watch television dramas, comedies, and movies. All of this will give you more information about general American culture.



The letters and their answers will help you understand parts of American culture. But even if you read the whole book, you will still have questions and may not understand why Americans do the things they do. The best way for you to learn about Americans—what is considered common, what is considered polite or rude (not polite), what is good or bad, and why Americans do what they do and in which situations—is to pay attention to what happens around you. Ask yourself, “Would this be common in my culture?” “Is it OK here? Why?” “What is the situation?” A helpful reference list of 101 Characteristics of Americans/American Culture can be found at www.press.umich.edu/esl/.

Television

For some people, the easiest and most comfortable way to observe American culture is to watch television. Situation comedies are especially helpful. These programs have the same characters every week, and each week something different and funny happens to them. Popular programs like “Friends,” or “Everybody Loves Raymond” are good examples to help you understand some American values. Be careful! Be sure to ask an American if the programs you are watching show *typical* American culture. Programs like “Married with Children,” “South Park,” “The Simpsons,” daytime soap operas (dramas or stories), and many talk shows and reality shows have situations in which the people are often very rude and not normal. Americans like those programs because they show the opposite of what the average American considers polite and acceptable. (Some daytime dramas, however, can be good for improving language because they repeat language day to day to help viewers follow the story.)

Some programs will help you understand American law and values: what is considered right and what is considered wrong. TV shows like "Judge Judy" or "The People's Court" are examples.

Because television shows change all the time, be sure to ask an American friend or teacher his or her opinions about a particular program. Ask if it shows **typical** American life. You can also ask someone you don't know! As you will discover in this book, most Americans are friendly, and sometimes even strangers will tell you their opinions. Do not feel afraid to ask.

Newspaper Comics

The cartoons and comics in a newspaper are great ways to learn about typical American cultural values. In America, newspaper comics are written for the enjoyment of the educated American adult. Sometimes they are easier to learn from than television because they don't move! You can look at a comic for a long time to help you understand the picture and the words. Find one or two that you like, and read those all the time. Comics are not easy to understand, but little by little, you will start to be familiar with the characters and their relationships to each other. Be sure to look at the pictures very carefully to learn about American body language. Understand that the words in the cartoon balloons (the words above the characters' heads) are written to sound like conversation, so the spelling and grammar will seem strange. For example: *I hafta go* means "I have to go." *Doncha wanna* means "don't you want to." *He's gonna do it* means "he is going to do it."

Newspaper Advice Columns

The advice columns in a newspaper are good sources to help you learn what is considered polite in American culture. The most common



ones in newspapers are “Ask Abby,” “Ask Amy,” or “Ask Carolyn.” Also try a free website called www.dearmrsweb.com. Of course, when you first start reading advice columns, the English in these columns will not be easy for you to understand. The writers use a lot of idioms and slang (informal language) that you might not yet know. Read advice columns every day and, slowly, you will get a very clear idea of what is considered common and polite in American culture.

Libraries and Books

Public libraries in the United States are free and open to everyone. You need some sort of identification to get a library card, and then you can check out books, CDs, videos, or DVDs. You can use computers at the library for free. Check with your local library to see what is available. In the library, go to the children’s book section, and check out (borrow) the classic American children’s books (ask the librarian to recommend some). Try reading American folk stories (“grandmother stories”) and American history. In all cultures, children’s stories provide the foundation of the cultural values, vocabulary, and grammar of the people. Your grandmother’s stories taught you your language and values. The American stories will do the same for the English language and American cultural values.

Music

If you need to improve your English, listen to American popular music of the past 40 years. Our students recommend Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Doors, U2, and Celine Dion. Singers like these sing clearly, and listening to that music will help you exercise your listening skills and increase your knowledge of American culture.



Success!

You will find that by watching television and movies, by reading comics and advice columns and classic children's stories, and by listening to American pop songs, your English will improve and you will find that you understand better why Americans do what they do.



P.S.

Using Websites

For more detailed information on subjects covered in this book, we recommend that you:

- ✓ Do a Google search (www.google.com) by just typing in the name of the subject you are interested in.
- ✓ Go to www.wikipedia.org, and type in the name of the subject you are interested in.
- ✓ Visit <http://shagtown.com/days> to learn about American holidays.
- ✓ Go to www.census.gov for accurate but sometimes confusing statistics about the United States.
- ✓ Get quick facts from the U.S. Census by trying:
<http://quickfacts.census.gov> or www.factfinder.census.gov.

For more detailed information, try:

- ✓ www.infoplease.com or www.factmonster.com.



Caution

You can find thousands of websites with information about the subjects in this book, but be careful. Not all the information found on the different sites is true, and not all websites agree. Always be careful with your sources, and don't trust just one website or one person's opinion.