

British Social Customs*



The British are said to be reserved in manners, dress and speech. They are famous for their politeness, self-discipline and especially for their sense of humour. Basic politeness (*please, thank you, excuse me*) is expected.

How to greet someone in England

British people are quite reserved when greeting one another. Greeting can be a bright "Hello" 'Hi' or "Good morning", when you arrive at work or at school.

The handshake

A handshake is the most common form of greeting among the English and British people and is customary when you are introduced to somebody new.

The kiss

It is only when you meet friends, whom you haven't seen for a long time, that you would kiss the cheek of the opposite sex. In Britain one kiss is generally enough.

Formal greetings

The usual formal greeting is a "How do you do?" and a firm handshake, but with a lighter touch between men and women.

"How do you do?" is a greeting not a question and the correct response is to repeat **"How do you do?"** You say this when shaking hands with someone.

How do you do? – How do you do?

"How are you?" is a question and the most common and polite response is **"I am fine, thank you and you?"**

How are you? – I am fine thank you and you?

Nice to meet you. – Nice to meet you too. (Often said whilst shaking hands.)

Delighted to meet you. – Delighted to meet you too.

Pleased to meet you. – Pleased to meet you too.

Good morning / Good afternoon / Good evening

Informal greetings

Hi – Hi / Hello

Morning / Afternoon / Evening (The British drop the word "Good" in informal situations).

How're you? – Fine, thanks. You?

Thank you / thanks / cheers

The British sometime say "cheers" instead of "thank you". You may hear "cheers" said instead of "goodbye", what they are really saying is "thanks and bye".

Terms of endearment – names the British may call you

You may be called by many different "affectionate" names, according to which part of the Britain you are in. Do not be offended, this is quite normal. For example, you may be called *dear, dearie, flower, love, chick, chuck, me duck, me duckie, mate, guv, son, ma'am, madam, miss, sir, or treacle*, according to your sex, age and location.

Visiting people in their houses

When being entertained at someone's home it is nice to take a gift for the host and hostess. A bottle of wine, bunch of flowers or chocolates are all acceptable.

Time

British people place considerable value on punctuality. If you agree to meet friends at three o'clock, you can bet that they'll be there just after three. Since Britons are so time conscious, the pace of life may seem very rushed. In Britain, people make great effort to arrive on time. It is often considered impolite to arrive even a few minutes late. If you are unable to keep an appointment, it is expected that you call the person you are meeting. Some general tips follow.

You should arrive:

- At the exact time specified – for dinner, lunch, or appointments with professors, doctors, and other professionals.

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- Any time during the hours specified – for teas, receptions, and cocktail parties.
- A few minutes early – for public meetings, plays, concerts, movies, sporting events, classes, church services, and weddings.

If you are invited to someone's house for dinner at half past seven, they will not expect you to be there on the dot. It is considered good manners to arrive ten to fifteen minutes "late". An invitation might state "7.30 for 8", in which case you should arrive no later than 7.50. However, if an invitation says "sharp", you must arrive in plenty of time.

Invitations

"Drop in anytime" and "come see me soon" are idioms often used in social settings but seldom meant to be taken literally. It is wise to telephone before visiting someone at home. If you receive a written invitation to an event that says **RSVP**, you should respond to let the person who sent the invitation know whether or not you plan to attend.

Never accept an invitation unless you really plan to go. You may refuse by saying, "Thank you for inviting me, but I will not be able to come." If, after accepting, you are unable to attend, be sure to tell those expecting you as far in advance as possible that you will not be there.

Although it is not necessarily expected that you give a gift to your host, it is considered polite to do so, especially if you have been invited for a meal. Flowers, chocolate, or a small gift are all appropriate. A "thank you" note or telephone call after the visit is also considered polite and is an appropriate means to express your appreciation for the invitation.

Dress

Everyday dress is appropriate for most visits to peoples' homes. You may want to dress more formally when attending a holiday dinner or cultural event, such as a concert or theatre performance.

Introduction and greeting

It is proper to shake hands with everyone to whom you are introduced, both men and women. An appropriate response to an introduction is "I am happy to meet you". If you want to introduce yourself to someone, extend your hand for a handshake and say "Hello, I am...". Hugging is only for friends.

Dining

When you accept a dinner invitation, tell your host if you have any dietary restrictions. He or she will want to plan a meal that you can enjoy. The evening meal is the main meal of the day in most parts of Britain.

Food may be served in one of several ways: *family style*, by passing the serving plates from one to another around the dining table; *buffet style*, with guests serving themselves at the buffet; and *servng style*, with the host filling each plate and passing it to each person. Guests usually wait until everyone at their table has been served before they begin to eat. Food is eaten with a knife and fork and dessert with a spoon and fork.

Sending a "thank you" note is also considered appropriate.

Eating

British people eat continental style, with fork in the left hand and the knife in the right.

What should I do or not do when I am eating in Britain?

The British generally pay a lot of attention to good table manners. Even young children are expected to eat properly with knife and fork.

British people eat most of our food with cutlery. The foods they don't eat with a knife, fork or spoon include sandwiches, crisps, corn on the cob, and fruit.

Things you should do

If you cannot eat a certain type of food or have some special needs, tell your host several days before the dinner party.

If you are a guest, it is polite to wait until your host starts eating or indicates you should do so. It shows consideration.

Always chew and swallow all the food in your mouth before taking more or taking a drink.

You may eat chicken and pizza with your fingers if you are at a barbecue, finger buffet or very informal setting. Otherwise always use a knife and fork.

When you have finished eating, and to let others know that you have, place your knife and fork together, with the prongs (tines) on the fork facing upwards, on your plate.



Always say “thank you” when served something. It shows appreciation.

When eating rolls, break off a piece of bread before buttering. Eating it whole looks tacky.

When eating soup, tip the bowl away from you and scoop the soup up with your spoon.

In a restaurant, it is normal to pay for your food by putting your money on the plate the bill comes on.

Things you should not do

It is impolite to start eating before everyone has been served.

Never chew with your mouth open. No one wants to see food being chewed or hearing it being chomped on.

It is impolite to have your elbows on the table while you are eating.

Don't reach over someone's plate for something, ask for the item to be passed.

Never talk with food in your mouth.

It is impolite to put too much food in your mouth.

Never use your fingers to push food onto your spoon or fork.

It is impolite to slurp your food or eat noisily.

Never blow your nose on a napkin (serviette). Napkins are for dabbing your lips and only for that.

Never take food from your neighbours plate.

Never pick food out of your teeth with your fingernails.

Things that are “ok” to do

It is “ok” to eat and drink something while walking down the street, unless you want to seem posh.

It is “ok” to pour your own drink when eating with other people, but it is more polite to offer pouring drinks to the people sitting on either side of you.

It is “ok” to put milk and sugar in your tea and coffee or to drink them both without either.

I am not used to eating with a knife and fork. What do I need to know?

The British eat continental style, with fork in the left hand and the knife in the right (or the other way round if you are left handed). At the top of your plate will be a dessert spoon and dessert fork.

If you are eating at a formal dinner party, you will come across many knives and forks. Start with the utensils on the outside and work your way inward with each subsequent course

How to eat with a knife and fork in England

The fork is held in the left hand and the knife in the right.

If you have a knife in one hand, it is wrong to have a fork in the other with the prongs (tines) pointed up.

Hold your knife with the handle in your palm and your fork in the other hand with the prongs pointing downwards.

When eating in formal situations, rest the fork and knife on the plate between mouthfuls, or for a break for conversation.

If you put your knife down, you can turn your fork over. It's correct to change hands when you do this, too, so if you are right handed you would switch and eat with the fork in your right hand.

If it is your sole eating instrument, the fork should be held with the handle between the index finger and the thumb and resting on the side of your middle finger.

How to eat peas

To be very polite, peas should be crushed onto the fork – a fork with the prongs pointing down. The best way is to have load the fork with something to which they will stick, such as potato or a soft vegetable that squashes easily onto the fork. It's sometimes easier to put down your knife and then switch your fork to the other hand, so you can shovel the peas against something else on the plate, thus ensuring they end up on your fork.

How to eat pudding (desserts)

To eat dessert, break the dessert with the spoon, one bite at a time. Push the food with the fork (optional) into the spoon. Eat from the spoon. (Fork in left hand; spoon in right.)

How to use a napkin or serviette

The golden rule is that a napkin should never be used to blow your nose on. This is a definite “no-no”. Napkins should be placed across the lap – tucking them into your clothing may be considered “common”.

Do's and Don'ts (Taboos) in England

"Stand in line"

- **Do stand in line:**
In Britain people like to form orderly queues (standing in line) and wait patiently for their turn e.g. boarding a bus. It is usual to queue when required, and expected that you will take your correct turn and not push in front. 'Queue jumping' is frowned upon.

"Take your hat off"

- **Do take your hat off when you go indoors** (men only)
It is impolite for men to wear hats indoors including restaurants and churches.
- **Do say "Excuse me":**
If someone is blocking your way and you would like them to move say "excuse me" and they will move out of your way.
- **Do pay as you go:**
Pay for drinks as you order them in pubs and other types of bars.
- **Do say "Please" and "Thank you":**
It is very good manners to say "please" and "thank you". It is considered rude if you don't. You will notice that the British say 'thank you' a lot.



- **Do cover your mouth:**
When yawning or coughing always cover your mouth with your hand.
- **Do shake hands:**
When you are first introduced to someone, shake their right hand with your own right hand.
- **Do say "sorry":**
If you accidentally bump into someone, say "sorry". They probably will too, even if it was your fault! This is a habit and can be seen as very amusing by an "outsider".

Smile

- **Do smile:**
A smiling face is a welcoming face.
- **Do drive on the left side of the road**
- **Do not greet people with a kiss:**
Except close friends and relatives.
- **Avoid talking loudly in public**
- **It is impolite to stare at anyone in public:**
Privacy is highly regarded.
- **Do not pick your nose in public:**
The British are disgusted by this. If your nostrils need de-bugging, use a handkerchief.
- **"Take your hat off"**
- **Avoid doing gestures such as backslapping and hugging:**
This is only done among close friends.

Don't spit

- **Do not spit:**
Spitting in the street is considered to be very bad mannered.
- **Do not burp in public:**
You may feel better by burping loudly after eating or drinking, but other people will not! If you can not stop a burp from bursting out, then cover your mouth with your hand and say 'excuse me' afterwards.
- **Do not pass wind in public:**
Now how can we say this politely? Let's say that you want to pass wind. What do you do? Go somewhere private and let it out. If you accidentally pass wind in company say 'pardon me'.
- **Do not speak with your mouth full of food:**
It is considered impolite
- **Do not ask personal or intimate questions:**
British people like their privacy. Please do not ask questions such as "How much money do you earn?" "How much do you weigh?" or "Why aren't you married?".
- **Never eat off a knife when having a meal.**

Women in Britain are entitled to equal respect and status with men in all areas of life and tend to have more independence and responsibility than in some other cultures. Women are usually independent and accustomed to entering public places unaccompanied. It is usual for women to go out and about on their own as well as with friends. Men and women mix freely.

- **It is "ok"** for women to eat alone in a restaurant.
- **It is "ok"** for women to wander around on their own.
- **It is "ok"** for women to drink beer.