

Getting along with Americans

General Characteristics of Americans

As a newcomer to the United States, you will notice many different social customs. Yet, after a period of time, you may realize that many of the fundamental behavioral criteria are the same everywhere, and the differences are not all that great. Usually American society includes people representing diverse ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, age, occupational, and other types of groups. The following remarks are generalizations, and you will find individuals who are exceptions to some or all of them.

On Time: The saying that "time is money" perhaps best expresses the American concept of time; it exemplifies the work ethic. Generally Americans, like people in most industrial nations, are highly conscious of the value of time and use it quite efficiently. The American attitude toward appointments is indicative of this philosophy. Since most of their daily activities are well planned, it is customary to make advance appointments for any visits to business or professional offices or to meet with most faculty, research colleagues, or administrators. Once you have made an appointment, punctuality is essential. If you fail to keep an appointment or are late for it, it is extremely important for you to call and give an appropriate explanation. In addition, if you know you are going to be late, it is a good idea to call and inform the person you are meeting with that you are going to be delayed. If you are late, and have not called ahead, you may find the person you are meeting with to be abrupt and even unpleasant. Sometimes the person will cancel your appointment if you are not on time. If the professional involved is a doctor or dentist you may in rare cases be charged for a missed appointment. Finally, since public lectures begin on time, it is good to be punctual for these events as well.

Cooperation: It is important to keep in mind that Americans, although competitive, also engage in cooperative behavior. Though a large part of cooperation stems from liking and wishing to help others, it may also be a way of obtaining a goal. The idea behind this is to help the entire group accomplish its task. While this may appear opportunistic, the goal is to get things done and learn in the process so that in the future the individual may achieve on his or her own. Another form of cooperation is the American system of lining up; despite an apparent lack of a queue in some instances, everyone is very aware of the next person in line to receive service.

Competition: The high value placed on achievement and equality leads Americans to compete with each other, and you will find both friendly and not so friendly competition everywhere. The American style of friendly joking, getting the last word in, and the quick reply are subtle forms of competition in America. Although such behavior is natural for Americans, it may appear overbearing to other nationalities. . It is also important to note that the American strong sense of individualism and "freedom of speech" commitment allow them to voice freely their political and religious beliefs.

Communicating with Americans

Conversation: Americans treat each other in what can be considered informal ways. Informal, relaxed postures are commonly assumed by Americans when they are standing or sitting, even when they are conversing with others; lack of formal posture is not a sign of inattention or disrespect.

For most Americans silence is discomforting. "Small talk" or casual conversation is usually preferable to quiet. It is therefore common to hear people casually talking about the weather, sports, parties, food, clothing, jobs, people they both know, or past experiences, especially those they have in common.

While talking, Americans are often made uncomfortable by extreme physical closeness. Eighteen inches is the minimum closeness they will usually tolerate, so don't stand very close to people when you are talking with them. Informal physical contact during conversation is also not encouraged by most Americans.

When they are talking to someone, Americans alternate between looking briefly into the listener's eyes and looking slightly away. When they are listening to another person, they look almost constantly at the speaker's eyes. Americans tend to distrust people who do not look into their eyes while talking to them.

Americans often tell jokes and are joking, which makes a conversation relaxed and enjoyable. Yet, this informal manner may puzzle foreign newcomers. At some important part of the conversation, you should ask the person with whom you are talking to clarify, so that you will not take a joke seriously, or vice versa. The American ritual parting remark, "See you later", means "goodbye" and does not mean that the person saying it has a specific intention to see you later.

Asking Questions: Because of language barrier or cultural background, some foreign newcomers are reluctant to ask questions or express themselves explicitly. It is important that you ask questions about any assignments or procedures you do not understand, and make sure you understand what you are expected to do before you start to do it. If you encounter difficulties in carrying out an assigned task, tell your supervisor or lab head immediately.

Asking For Help: Although most Americans are friendly and willing to help, they generally believe that the ideal person is a self-reliant individual. Most Americans see themselves as separate individuals, not as representatives of a family, community, or other group. They dislike being dependent on other people, or having others overly dependent on them. It is better to establish early in the working relationship who is the person(s) that you should be talking with when you need help with a problem. This will prevent you from becoming overly dependent on a single individual and possibly creating an uncomfortable situation for yourself and the particular individual who may feel you are taking up too much of their time.

Confrontation: Discussing issues or ideas openly with other individuals is considered not only proper but often a responsibility as well. Americans, particularly in a business situation, may appear abrupt or harsh and do not spend the time on polite social talk that many other nationalities do. You may be surprised to find the briefest of introductions is immediately followed by getting right to the point.

Guideline for Practical Situations

Invitations: Americans believe that invitations should be answered as soon as possible. Whenever an invitation is extended to you formally through a note or informally by telephone, you will be expected to respond quickly and candidly. When accepting an invitation, make sure you have the correct time and place. It is also wise to have the host family's phone number in order to call and notify them in the event you must change your plans or are delayed by some unforeseen circumstances. While social affairs are more flexible than business appointments, you should try to arrive as close to the scheduled time as possible, particularly if you are invited to dinner. Nothing annoys a host or hostess more than having food all ready to serve and finding that some of the guests have not yet arrived.

It is normal to thank a person or family for this hospitality by a telephone call or by mailing them a brief note after the visit. If you are invited to stay in an American home for a few days, giving a small gift to your host or hostess is greatly appreciated. An inexpensive gift from your own country is particularly nice. An expensive gift is not necessary and often tends to embarrass your hosts.

Eating Out: It is often customary to tip the waiter or waitress in a restaurant 15 to 20 percent of the amount of the check if the service is satisfactory. However, tips are not expected in cafeterias or "fast food" establishments. If an American invites you for a meal or snack in a restaurant, the American might expect you to pay for your own food. You cannot assume that the American will pay just because he or she invited you.

"Potluck" (meals where the guest brings a dish to share) are common for gatherings. Potlucks are considered more convenient, since they reduce the effort and cost required of the host.

The expression "Dutch Treat" means that when two or more people are going out to eat together, each will pay their own portion of the bill. When two people share a modestly priced meal together it is often suggested that you "split the bill" meaning each will pay half of the total amount.

Gift Giving: Americans usually only give gifts on special occasions such as Christmas, birthdays, or anniversaries. Gift giving should not be thought of as a bribe (seeking special favors) or as requiring a gift in return.

Cooking: Many kitchens in rented apartments and houses are not designed for heavy cooking which needs good ventilation. You should manage to keep the kitchen clean in order to prevent the landlord from keeping your security deposit.

Hygiene: As you can readily tell from television commercials, Americans have been taught that the natural smells of people's bodies and breath are unpleasant. Most Americans bathe or shower daily (or more often if they engage in vigorous exercise during the day), use an underarm deodorant to counteract the odor of perspiration, and brush their teeth with toothpaste at least once daily and perhaps more often. In addition, they may rinse their mouths with a mouthwash or chew mints in order to be sure their breath is free of food odors. Most Americans will back away from a person who has "body odor" or "bad breath". This backing away may be the only signal that they are "offended" by another person's breath or body odors. The topic of these odors is so sensitive that most Americans will not tell another person that he or she has bad breath or body odors.

Daylight Savings Time: In order to have daylight further into the evening in spring and summer, most of the United States uses "daylight savings time" between the first Sunday in April and the last Sunday in October. Newspapers will remind people to set their clocks forward one hour before going to bed on the last Saturday in April, and to set their clocks back one hour before retiring on the last Saturday night in October. (The actual change from daylight to "standard" time takes place at 2 a.m. on the Sunday.) Many people try to remember the direction in which to move their clocks in April (the spring) and October (the fall) by recalling the instruction: spring forward, fall back.

Attire: In academic or research institutions most people do not dress formally. Also, there is a strong political correctness in the U.S. not to comment negatively on a person's appearance.

Telephone: In general, you can telephone individuals or families between 9:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. without awakening them.

Relationships with Americans

Friendship: A particular area in which assumptions and values differ between cultures is that of friendship. Friendships among Americans can be shorter and less intense than those among people from other cultures. At least many observers from abroad have this impression. Because Americans are taught to be self-reliant, because they live in a very mobile society, and for many other reasons as well, they tend to avoid deep involvements with other people. Furthermore, Americans tend to "compartmentalize" their friendships, having their "friends at work", "friends at school", a "tennis friend", and so on. Americans often seem very friendly, even when you first meet them. This friendliness does not usually mean that the American is looking for a deeper relationship. The result of these attitudes and behaviors is sometimes viewed by foreigners as an "inability to be friends". Other times it is seen as a normal way to retain personal happiness in a mobile, ever-changing society.

Common Terms

As is true of any other people in the world, Americans have developed certain peculiarities in their everyday language. During your stay in the US, you are sure to encounter certain colloquialisms and "slang" terms which could not have been predicted by any English language textbook, teacher or dictionary. Such words are often unique to certain group of people (such as those within the University community or those from a particular region in the US) and are forever changing. The following is a list, which will give you an idea of the more common of these usages. Also included are terms or vocabulary, which you may not have encountered before, but which will prove useful to you during your stay in the U.S. No list of this type can even come close to being complete. For this reason, you must remember never to hesitate or be embarrassed about asking for clarification of a meaning or usage with which you are unfamiliar.

Americans will enjoy helping you become familiar with the oddities of their language, and many acquaintances have begun with a shared, good-natured laugh over a misused or misunderstood idiom. Americans also like to abbreviate words when they talk. Thus, they are likely to say "med school" for medical school or College of Medicine, and "bio" for biology. It would be impossible to list all such abbreviations here. If you hear one you do not know, ask someone what it means.

Slang Terms

awesome	very good, interesting or appealing
big deal	<i>important event; may be used sarcastically to refer to something that is not important</i>
blow someone off or blow it off	to ignore or avoid someone or something
bogus	<i>1) non-existent, fake; 2) bad, awful, unsatisfactory</i>
booze	liquor
bounce a check	<i>to overdraw a checking account</i>
broke	having no money
bucks	<i>money (a buck - one dollar)</i>
buddy	friend
bug off	<i>leave immediately; "leave me alone"</i>
bummed out	depressed
bummer	<i>unpleasant experience</i>
check out	1) to sign out materials from a library; 2) to try to find out something
check it out	<i>to look over a situation</i>
chill out	a command to stop what you doing; relax
cool it	<i>same as chill out</i>
cop	police officer
couch potato	<i>a lazy person who spends a large amount of time (perhaps on a couch) watching television</i>
crash	1) to stay overnight in someone else's dwelling, usually without notice or formal arrangement; 2) to get to sleep after becoming extremely tired
creep	<i>an unpleasant person who does odd things; a derogatory term</i>
croak	die
cut it out	<i>stop it!</i>
dead	very tired
dorm	<i>dormitory</i>
dough	money
drag	<i>something that is boring and tedious</i>
dude	a fashionable man
fire up	<i>to get excited about something; to get motivated</i>
fed up or sick of	disgusted with
flaky	<i>unable to concentrate</i>
fool around	spend time on a purposeless activity
geek	<i>unattractive, unstylish, socially inept person</i>
get a kick out of someone/something	find someone or something amusing or enjoyable
get lost	<i>go away (as a command)</i>
get out of here	I don't believe you; you must be joking
get with it or get with the program or get your act together	<i>get organized</i>

give someone a break	to stop criticizing or teasing
Give me a break!	<i>express disbelief</i>
give someone a buzz or a ring	to call someone on the telephone
goofing off	<i>acting silly; doing something that has no particular purpose</i>
give it up	to quit
gross	<i>something crude, usually unpleasant</i>
grossed out	made to feel uneasy because of something unpleasant someone has said
grungy	<i>dirty</i>
hang in there	keep trying; do not be discouraged
hang out	<i>1) to waste time; 2) a regular meeting place for friends</i>
hang-over	the physical symptoms after heavy alcohol drinking, may include headache, stomach ache, nausea etc.
hassle	<i>1) problem or inconvenience: 2) cause another person to have a problem or inconvenience</i>
hit the road	to leave a place
hit the sack	<i>to go to bed</i>
hitch a ride	to get a ride from another person
hung up	<i>to be in conflict or stuck over a problem</i>
ID	identification card
in a nutshell	<i>very briefly or concisely</i>
jerk	person who cannot do things correctly; a mildly derogatory term
john	<i>toilet</i>
knock it off!	stop doing that!
luck out	<i>get lucky or to have something good happen due to luck or chance</i>
male chauvinist pig	a derisive term from a male who acts as though he assumes males are generally superior to females
mega	<i>very large in volume, scale, or quantity; usually used as a prefix to noun e. g. megabucks, mega problems</i>
mess with	to interact with or get involved with, usually in a way that causes harm of some kind; done mess with me! leave me alone!
messed up	<i>1) mentally and emotionally confused; 2) not neat</i>
mind your own business	do not ask questions or make statements about this matter; it is my concern not yours
mooch	<i>to borrow frequently and/or take things from others, usually without the intention of returning or repaying</i>
munchies	snack foods
nerd	<i>a strange or socially inept person (see geek)</i>
on the house	free, no cost
to be open	<i>to be accepting of something or someone; to speak frankly about oneself</i>
out of one's mind	1) crazy; 2) doing something ridiculous
out of it or really out of it	<i>tired and not concentrating</i>
pain in the neck or pain in the ass or pain in the but	an unpleasant person
pal	<i>friend</i>
pig out	overeat
pissed off	<i>crude term for anger; "I am very pissed off at him"</i>
get pissed	become very angry
pooped	<i>tired or exhausted</i>

pop, soda pop, soda or soft drink	carbonated beverage (e.g. Coca Cola)
psyched	<i>excited or enthusiastic</i>
put someone on	to tease someone or try to fool
take a rain check	<i>postpone; accept the same invitation but for a later date</i>
rip off	1) steal; 2) anything too expensive and not worth the price
rowdy	<i>noisy or loud</i>
rubber	condom, prophylactic
scoop	<i>gossip, recent news</i>
screwed	to be deceived or treated unfairly
screwed up	<i>mentally and emotionally confused</i>
see eye-to-eye	have the same opinion
show	<i>television program, movie, film or theater performance</i>
so what? or what is the point?	I don't care
space cadet	<i>a disoriented or not very bright person</i>
spaced out	unable to concentrate
split	<i>to leave</i>
sucks	bad, negative or unpleasant
tacky	<i>in poor taste</i>
take a hike	go away and leave someone alone
toasted	<i>sunburned, drunk</i>
touch base	1) verify information with someone; 2) contacting someone you have not talked to in a while
tough luck	<i>it's too bad that happened to you</i>
TP	toilet paper
unreal	<i>unbelievable</i>
up tight	worried, tense
wasted	<i>drunk or extremely tired</i>
way to go!	that's very good! Sometimes used sarcastically
What's up? What's cooking?	
What's happening? What's going on?	<i>What event is taking place? What are you doing?</i>
wimp	weakling
zonked	<i>completely exhausted</i>

Academic Terms

assignment	out-of-class work required by a professor, due by a specified time
blue book	<i>a small booklet of paper with a blue cover, usually used for essay-type exams</i>
cram	to study for a test in a short period of time, usually the night before
drop and/or add a course	<i>to withdraw from and/or enroll in a course during the semester</i>
final	last exam of a semester
flunk	<i>to fail an exam</i>
freshman	a student in the first year of study at a college, university or four-year secondary school
G.P.A.	<i>grad point average</i>
graduate or grad student	a student who has earned a baccalaureate and is pursuing a higher degree
honor system	<i>the practice of relying on students not to cheat on any academic</i>

	<i>matter</i>
junior	a student in the third year of study at a college or university
mid-term	<i>test in the middle of a semester</i>
quiz	a short test
reading list (syllabus)	<i>a list of books and articles prepared by each professor for a specific course</i>
registrar	official recorder of student's academic information, such as courses taken and grades received
registration	<i>procedure of enrolling officially in classes at the beginning of each semester</i>
semester	one academic term, which is half of the academic year
senior	<i>a student in the fourth year of study at a college or university</i>
sophomore	a student in the second year of study at a college or university
T.A.	<i>teaching assistant</i>
transcript	official record of student's grades and courses

Food Terms

a la carte	each item on a menu is ordered and paid for separately
bagel	<i>a round, hard roll with a hole in the middle</i>
barbecue or Bar-B-Q	a meal cooked out of doors
bite to eat	<i>a light, quick meal</i>
brunch	a combination of breakfast and lunch, eaten in the late morning
cheeseburger	<i>a hamburger with a slice of cheese melted on it</i>
eggs over-easy (or over-medium, or over-hard)	eggs fried on both sides; or sunny-side up eggs - yoke side-up, not turned over to fry on both sides; or scrambled eggs - eggs beaten and fried
for here	<i>eating your meal in the restaurant</i>
to go	take the food with you
munchies	<i>bite-size snacks</i>
pot luck	a meal composed of dishes randomly brought by various people
sub- (submarine sandwich)	<i>sandwich on a long piece of bread with assorted fillings</i>

Etiquette

BYOB	Bring Your Own Booze (alcoholic drink)
R.S.V.P.	<i>"Repondez, s'il vous plait"; a reply is required telling whether or not you can attend a function to which you have received an invitation</i>