



USA - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette

Welcome to our guide to The USA. This is useful for anyone researching America culture, customs, manners, etiquette, values and wanting to understand the people better. You may be going to America on business, for a visit or even hosting American colleagues or clients in your own country. Remember this is only a very basic level introduction and is not meant to stereotype all Americans you may meet!

Facts and Statistics

Location: North America, bordering both the North Atlantic Ocean and the North Pacific Ocean, between Canada and Mexico

Capital: Washington, DC

Climate: Mostly temperate, but tropical in Hawaii and Florida, arctic in Alaska, semiarid in the great plains west of the Mississippi River, and arid in the Great Basin of the southwest.

Population: 301,139,947 (July 2007 est.)

Ethnic Make-up: white 81.7%, black 12.9%, Asian 4.2%, Amerindian and Alaska native 1%, native Hawaiian and other Pacific islander 0.2% (2003 est.)

Religions: Protestant 52%, Roman Catholic 24%, Mormon 2%, Jewish 1%, Muslim 1%, other 10%, none 10% (2002 est.)

Government: Constitution-based federal republic

Language in the USA

The United States does not have an official language, but English is spoken by about 82% of the population as a native language. The variety of English spoken in the United States is known as American English; together with Canadian English it makes up the group of dialects known as North American English. Spanish is the second-most common language in the country, spoken by almost 30 million people (or 12% of the population).



American Society and Culture

Diversity

America is ultimately a nation of immigrants and as a result is a cultural mish-mash in every sense of the word. Not only is the country populated by people from foreign countries but all Americans in one way or another trace their ancestry back to another culture, whether Irish, German, Italian or Scottish. Looking around any major city one will notice the 'melting-pot' that it is.

Informal and Friendly

Most people who come to the United States may already know a few things about the people through TV. Although this is of course a skewed reality some of the stereotypes are true, especially American friendliness and informality. People tend to not wait to be introduced, will begin to speak with strangers as they stand in a queue, sit next to each other at an event, etc. Visitors can often be surprised when people are so informal to the point of being very direct or even rude.

Time is Money

The country that coined the phrase obviously lives the phrase. In America, time is a very important commodity. People 'save' time and 'spend' time as if it were money in the bank. Americans ascribe personality characteristics and values based on how people use time. For example, people who are on-time are considered to be good people, reliable people who others can count on.

The Family

The family unit is generally considered the nuclear family, and is typically small (with exceptions among certain ethnic groups). Extended family relatives live in their own homes, often at great distances from their children.

Individualism is prized, and this is reflected in the family unit. People are proud of their individual accomplishments, initiative and success, and may, or may not, share those sources of pride with their elders.

Customs and Etiquette in the U.S.A

Meeting and Greeting

- Greetings are casual.
- A handshake, a smile, and a 'hello' are all that is needed.



- Smile! Use first names, and be sure to introduce everyone to each other.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- In general, Americans give gifts for birthdays, anniversaries and major holidays, such as Christmas.
- A gift can be as simple as a card and personal note to something more elaborate for a person with whom you are close.
- Gift giving is not an elaborate event, except at Christmas.
- When invited to someone's home for dinner, it is polite to bring a small box of good chocolates, a bottle of wine, a potted plant or flowers for the hostess.
- Gifts are normally opened when received.

Dining Etiquette

- Americans socialise in their homes and 'backyards', in restaurants and in other public places.
- It's not at all unusual for social events to be as casual as a backyard barbecue or a picnic in the park.
- Arrive on time if invited for dinner; no more than 10 minutes later than invited to a small gathering. If it is a large party, it is acceptable to arrive up to 30 minutes later than invited.
- Table manners are more relaxed in the U.S. than in many other countries.
- The fork is held in the right hand and is used for eating. The fork is held tines down. The knife is used to cut or spread something. To use the knife, the fork is switched to the left hand. To continue eating, the fork is switched back to the right hand.
- If you have not finished eating, cross your knife and fork on your plate with the fork over the knife. Indicate you have finished eating by laying your knife and fork parallel across the right side of your plate.
- If you are more comfortable eating in the Continental manner, go ahead. It will not offend anyone.
- Feel free to refuse specific foods or drinks without offering an explanation.
- Many foods are eaten by hand.
- Food is often served family-style, which means that it is in large serving dishes and passed around the table for everyone to serve themselves.
- Do not begin eating until the hostess starts or says to begin.
- Remain standing until invited to sit down.
- Do not rest your elbows on the table.
- Put your napkin in your lap as soon as you sit down.



- Leave a small amount of food on your plate when you have finished eating.

Business Etiquette and Protocol

Business Dress

- What is considered appropriate business attire varies by geographic region, day of the week and industry.
- In general, people in the East dress more formally, while people in the West are known for being a bit more casual.
- Executives usually dress formally regardless of which part of the country they are in.
- Casual Friday is common in many companies. High technology companies often wear casual clothes every day.
- For an initial meeting, dressing conservatively is always in good taste. Women can wear business suits, dresses or pantsuits. Men should wear a business suit unless you know the firm to be quite casual.

Greetings

- The hand shake is the common greeting.
- Handshakes are firm, brief and confident.
- Maintain eye contact during the greeting.
- In most situations, you can begin calling people by their first names.
- Most people will insist that you call them by their nickname, if they have one.
- In formal circumstances, you may want to use titles and surnames as a courtesy until you are invited to move to a first name basis, which will happen quickly.
- Business cards are exchanged without formal ritual.
- It is quite common for the recipient to put your card in their wallet, which may then go in the back pocket of their trousers. This is not an insult.

Communication Styles

Americans are direct. They value logic and linear thinking and expect people to speak clearly and in a straightforward manner. To them if you don't "tell it how it is" you simply waste time, and time is money. If you are from a culture that is more subtle in communication style, try not to be insulted by the directness. Try to get to your point more quickly and don't be afraid to be more direct and honest than you are used to. Americans will use the telephone to conduct business that would require a face-to-face meeting in most other countries. They do not insist



upon seeing or getting to know the people with whom they do business.

Business Meetings

Arrive on time for meetings since time and punctuality are so important to Americans. In the Northeast and Midwest, people are extremely punctual and view it as a sign of disrespect for someone to be late for a meeting or appointment. In the Southern and Western states, people may be a little more relaxed, but to be safe, always arrive on time, although you may have to wait a little before your meeting begins.

Meetings may appear relaxed, but they are taken quite seriously. If there is an agenda, it will be followed. At the conclusion of the meeting, there will be a summary of what was decided, a list of who will implement which facets and a list of the next steps to be taken and by whom. If you make a presentation, it should be direct and to the point. Visual aids should further enhance your case. Use statistics to back up your claims, since Americans are impressed by hard data and evidence.

With the emphasis on controlling time, business is conducted rapidly. Expect very little small talk before getting down to business. It is common to attempt to reach an oral agreement at the first meeting. The emphasis is on getting a contract signed rather than building a relationship. The relationship may develop once the first contract has been signed.