

Is it OK to be a Lady in 2004?

by Ruth L. Seavey Kern, *Theta*
International Etiquette Consultant

When I was growing up, my mother used to tell me and my three sisters, "Now, girls, remember always be a lady, no matter what!"

"Always be a lady." What does this mean? Is it appropriate for women to strive to be ladies in 2004, or is this a goal of a different time, something that is irrelevant in today's world?

First, let us examine what a lady is. A lady knows how to treat people from all walks of life. She knows the do's and don'ts of conversation, what subjects are acceptable in mixed company as well as those she can talk about with her girlfriends. She doesn't use foul language, speak too loudly or dominate conversation. She knows what to wear for every occasion. In college, one of my professors taught me that, "A well-dressed woman dresses appropriately for every occasion." A lady wears fashionable outfits that are neither too tight, too short, nor too revealing.

A lady knows how to walk, how to stand, and how to sit properly. She knows how to introduce people gracefully and when it is appropriate to stand when being introduced or remain seated. She knows how to give a proper 'American' handshake. She knows how to dine properly whether she is at a fast food restaurant or at a formal dinner.

When I pledged Sigma Kappa Sorority at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in 1961, one of the first members that I was introduced to was the standards chairman. Her guidance and encouragement helped to shape each group of new members into polished, sophisticated Sigma Kappa ladies who would represent our Sorority well on campus, and later in life.

In the years since I left college, many changes have taken place in our country. In the late 1960's, events occurred in America that caused the established rules of behavior, and in some cases even the laws, to be questioned and sometimes

broken. Our American society has gone through a major social revolution.

Many changes from the 1960's and the 1970's were good and necessary. Women were given greater respect, afforded more rights, and offered more career opportunities than ever before. Racial barriers were broken down. With etiquette, however, changes over the last decades seem to have gone too far.

The strict rules of etiquette, morals, and even dress codes that I had grown up with were tossed aside. An 'anything goes' kind of attitude seems to be prevalent in our country today. Is it appropriate for Sigma Kappas to ignore the current trends toward more casual behavior and strive to be ladies in 2004? Or, should we just capitulate and follow the crowd? Each of us must answer that question for herself.

There are many, many examples of ladies throughout history who in their quiet, elegant ways have done more to improve the lives of their families, friends, and the world around them. The choice is yours. In 2004, I encourage you to choose to be a lady and help bring about a new social revolution, one where gracious living and polite behavior towards others are the norm.



Ruth has written two booklets and produced three videos on American etiquette. She also presents seminars for audiences numbering in the hundreds as well as conducting etiquette training for corporate personnel.

For more etiquette information please log on to
Ruth's Web site at www.modernetiquette.com

Eight Errors in Everyday Etiquette

When surveyed, collegians and alumnae submitted their most frustrating faux pas related to etiquette execution in 2004. These civility challenges are followed by savvy suggestions for avoiding animosity and behaving beautifully.

1 Control Communication Crises

1. All of us know how to use a cell phone, but few are using it to our best advantage. It is wise to remember that, while convenient, cell phones afford little privacy. Be discreet with personal, revealing information shared by phone—you never know who is listening. And, unless you want to be labeled thoughtless or rude, always turn off your cell phone when its ring might be distracting or disruptive.

*Good manners are, after all,
nothing more than a combination
of kindness and efficiency.*

- Letitia Baldrige

2 Defeat Dining Disasters

2. In George Washington's Rules of Civility, adults were advised not to use the table cloth to clean their teeth. In 2004, we've come a long way in the rules of etiquette, but there is still room for improvement. When dining, appearance is as important as performance. Sit up straight. Keep your elbows, purse, keys, and briefcase off of the table. Remember to place your napkin on your lap. Don't begin eating until everyone is seated and served. Don't wave cutlery around. Pass food to the right. Never chew with your mouth open or try to speak with food in your mouth. Eat at a pace comparable to the others at the table so you finish at about the same time.

3 Improve Inept Introductions

The most important thing to remember about introductions is to "just do it." If you don't, people around you end up feeling invisible. Who's first? The person who is being introduced, or "presented" is named last. Social etiquette is based on chivalry, so in a social situation, we defer to people based on sex and age. Business etiquette is based on hierarchy. Gender plays no role. The rule is that persons of lesser authority are introduced to persons of greater authority. "Mr./Ms. CEO, I would like to introduce Mr./Ms. Junior Executive." Providing a brief bit of information gives the two people being introduced some basis to begin conversation.

How you respond to being introduced by others is just as important as how you make an introduction. In America, we expect three things when we meet people: eye contact, a smile, and a handshake. In a business setting, always stand when being introduced. Socially, it is acceptable for a lady to remain seated.

*Being cultured is the least
expensive form of respectability.*

-Mason Cooley

4 Malign Meeting Mistakes

4. Think of meetings as opportunities, as chances to impress your colleagues, and as a way to meet others. To make the best use of meeting time, consider your responsibilities as a participant. Make sure you have read all of the materials in advance, including the agenda. Prepare your comments before the meeting so you don't ramble or repeat yourself. Arrive on time or a little early. Lateness is an affront to those who have arrived on time, and suggests that you are disorganized. Bring all necessary materials with you—agenda, paper, pen. Keep

briefcases and purses on the floor, not on spare chairs or on the conference table. Practice positive body language—sit up straight, don't cross your arms in front of you, don't fidget or doodle on your notepad.

5 Discern Discourteous Dialog

Please. Thank you. You're welcome. These are the basics of good manners. Your mother was right...they are "magic" words. Using them regularly and sincerely signifies a true lady. Conversely, using four-letter words and other vulgarities demonstrates a poor vocabulary and offends others. As an educated, articulate woman, you should be able to express yourself without using profanity. And R.S.V.P. - the abbreviation for *repondez s'il vous plait*, it means "please reply." In other words, it means "have the courtesy to tell me if you're going to accept my invitation."

6 Avoid Atrocious Attire

Never underestimate the importance of attire within social and corporate cultures. What you wear says a lot about you, and you can damage or even destroy your chances of success by dressing inappropriately. It takes only four seconds for somebody to make a preliminary judgment. In business, if there is a dress code, observe both the letter and the spirit of the code. If there is no dress code, study how those in senior management dress, and don't be afraid to ask. In social situations, a bra strap or panty line or thong that shows, as well as too-tight or midriff-baring tops that reveal flab instead of curves are not in good taste. What do your clothes say about you?

Friendship Do's and Don'ts

- Do keep secrets.
- Do make time for friends - and don't forget the occasional girls night out.
- Don't talk behind your friends back.
- Do be there when a friend needs someone to listen.
- Do tell friends the truth when asked.
- Don't laugh at friends, laugh with them.
- Do talk to your friends more than when you need to - they are just a phone call away.
- Do send personal notes - they mean a lot.

There is no such thing as neutral clothing. Everything you put on communicates something, and your image is either working for you or against you.

Etiquette is a code of behavior that helps people get along with one another.

- The World Book Encyclopedia

7 Ignore Inappropriate Interjections

There's nothing small about small talk. It's been said that America is a nation of interrupters. Instead of engaging in a pleasant give and take conversation, we cut the other person off and jump in to make our point. We're so busy forming our own opinion that we don't really hear what the other person says. People love to talk about themselves. Being a good conversationalist really means that you are a good listener with a sincere interest in people.

8 Resolve Reluctant Responses

R.S.V.P, the abbreviation for *repondez s'il vous plait*, means "please reply." When an invitation is received, the courtesy of your response is required whether or not you plan to attend. If a telephone number is included, it is acceptable to call the hostess. If not, a written response is expected. If you can't attend, let the host know the reason why. If you accept, do your best to honor your commitment. While you are under no obligation to reply to a "Regrets only" event if you are planning to attend, it's thoughtful to take the time to do so. Not only will the hostess be pleased to hear you're coming, but it will give her a better idea of how many guests to expect.

Excerpts from:

The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette by Nancy Tuckerman & Nancy Dunnan

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Etiquette by Nancy Mitchell with John Corr

Etiquette Quiz

Can you conduct yourself with confidence? Evaluate your etiquette savvy. Fact or Fiction? Review the answers on page 12.

1. To signify that you have finished your meal, place your flatware on your napkin.
2. At work, a man should open the door and allow the woman to enter first.
3. In a restaurant, it is appropriate to tip the waiter 10% of the bill.
4. Nametags should always be worn on the upper right side.
5. Tear bread into bite-sized pieces and butter each piece before you eat it.
6. Once you pick up a piece of silverware, it never touches the tabletop again.

7. When answering the telephone for someone else at work, ask "Who's calling?"
8. Always shake hands very gently, offering only your fingers to the other person.
9. When passing items at the table, always pass them to the right.
10. Cut up all of your food at once so you can concentrate on conversation at the table.
11. It is appropriate to send a handwritten note for all dinner parties.
12. If you need to leave during a meal, tuck your napkin under your plate.
13. For a semi-formal event, you wear only black clothing.

14. A salad fork is used when you are served an entrée salad.
15. After the food is served, pass the salt and then, the pepper.
16. If your coffee is too hot, blow on it to cool it.
17. To temporarily stop eating during a course, place your knife and fork crossed on the plate with the fork over the knife and the prongs pointing down.
18. When serving others, always serve from the left side of the guest.
19. When someone compliments you, you should find something to compliment them on.
20. The bread and butter plate is on the left of the dinner plate, either slightly above it or

Essentials for Every Woman's Closet

Some items of clothing are classics. They look good on all generations of women. These 10 basics never fail in a pinch.

- A simple well-tailored black pant
- A cardigan: black is always chic and easy to wear
- A crisp, well cut white button down shirt
- A simple black dress that can be dressed up or down
- A black skirt that suits your figure: knee length or longer
- A pair of well-fitting jeans
- Pearl or diamond earring and necklaces (real or good imitation)
- A coat/jacket to wear over skirts and dresses
- A classic shoe: a black pump with an elegant heel will go with all of the above
- A black bag: look for a simple style that's not too oversized

Formal place setting with cutlery numbered in order of use.

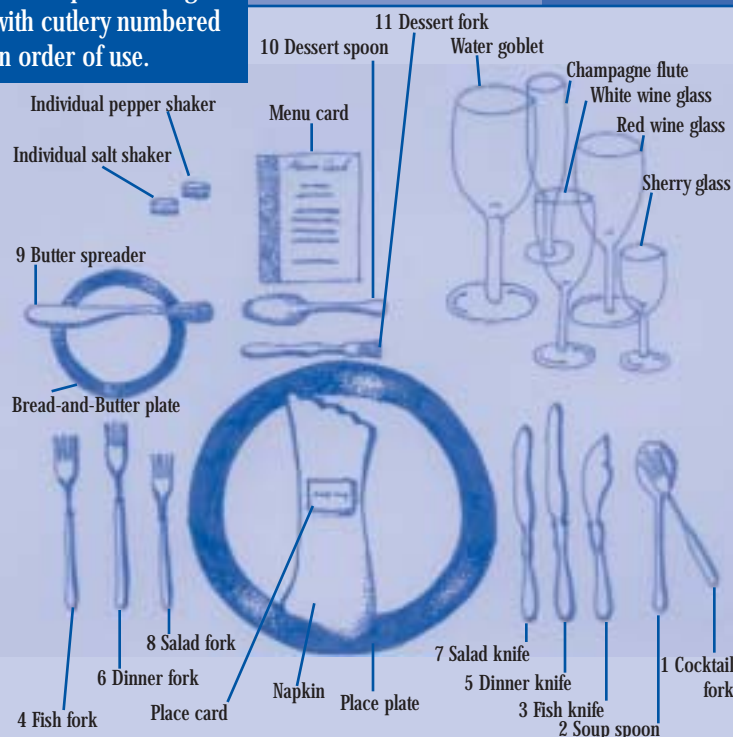
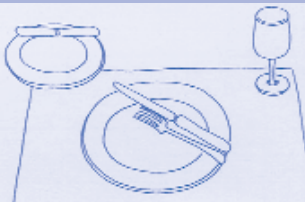


Illustration by Lacey Byington, Gamma Gamma

Etiquette Quiz Answers

1. **Fiction.** When you have completed your meal, the knife and the fork should be placed in the 4:20 or finished position. The tines of the fork should be down and the serrated edge of the knife should be toward you.



2. **Fiction.** If you reach a door first, regardless of gender, you should open it, go through it, and hold it to ensure that it doesn't hit the person following. Men no longer hold doors for women just because they are women.

3. **Fiction.** In general, tip 15-20% of the total bill in a restaurant, although 20 percent is becoming the norm for good service.

4. **Fact.** With your nametag on the upper right side, as you shake hands with someone, they will be able to follow the line of your arm up to your right shoulder to read your name, which will reinforce what she heard when introduced to you.

5. **Fact.** This custom of "breaking bread" and taking only as much as you intend to eat originated centuries ago, when what was left of the communal loaf after a meal was given to the poor.

6. **Fact.** When not in use, forks and knives remain on the plate. The knife is placed in the upper right part of the plate with the blade facing you. The coffee/tea spoon goes on the saucer beside the cup.

7. **Fiction.** A better inquiry would be "May I tell her who's calling?"

8. **Fiction.** A proper American handshake is web-to-web. One, or at most two, firm but not bone-crushing shakes of the hand are appropriate.



9. **Fact.** Food should move around the table in a counter-clockwise direction using the hand-over-hand method. Serve yourself and then pass the dish to the person on your right while holding it in your left hand.

10. **Fiction.** In the American style, only one or two pieces of food may be cut at a time. You can eat these pieces and then cut more.

11. **Fact.** If you attend, you must thank your host for inviting you. It is also appropriate to follow the European custom of bringing a gift to the party with your thank you note tucked inside.

12. **Fiction.** If you need to leave during a meal, excuse yourself and place your napkin on your chair. At the end of the meal, place your napkin beside your plate, after your host or hostess has done so.

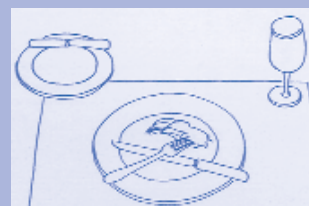
13. **Fiction.** Semi-formal events are slightly less dressy than black tie. Women should wear a dressy suit in an evening fabric, a short cocktail dress, or a long skirt and blouse.

14. **Fiction.** An entrée salad, such as a Chicken Caesar, usually requires both a knife and a fork. Use the main dinner utensils for this salad.

15. **Fiction.** Food should never be seasoned before it is tasted. Salts and peppers are passed as a pair.

16. **Fiction.** Beverages, like hot tea or coffee, should be allowed to sit awhile in order to cool. Never blow on them, and please don't slurp. If you use a spoon to stir, place it on your saucer.

17. **Fact.** The knife should be in the 10:20 position while the fork prongs are at 2 o'clock and the handle at 8 o'clock, forming an inverted V.



18. **Fact.** Food is served from the left and finished plates are removed from the right side.

19. **Fiction.** The perfect response is to simply say thank you. The best compliments are sincere, spontaneous, specific, and unqualified.

20. **Fact.** If someone makes use of your bread and butter plate, simply put your bread and butter on the edge of your dinner plate.