

Etiquette Explained

Written by L.A. Plume
Tuesday, 09 June 2009 10:19

Dear Ms. Plume,

Someone asked me the other day whether or not I “know etiquette,” which sounds vaguely ungrammatical, but it did set me thinking about the essence of etiquette.



The Oxford English Dictionary says: “Etiquette - the code of polite behavior in society, from the French formerly, it was a list of court engagements.”

Relaxation of the rules has made it really difficult for people to understand their boundaries. In the absence of a formal framework, some people rebel and turn against any formality; others hide behind outdated rules to the point of pretension. My purpose is to share the actions and reactions that I know from experience have elicited a good response from people, they are not rules - more suggestions – but they do work.

And that is what etiquette is, a code of practice. It can, like any code, get subverted by the small-minded.

Now we arrive at the real purpose of etiquette and even of good manners; really, it is just so simple. Make people feel comfortable and use the most commonsense framework to do so. That simply means, for example, that people have all the right knives and forks for the food they are to eat, men open doors for ladies, which allows them to show respect without having an agenda, and so on, with each action having a commonsense reason behind it to clarify intent. Your column discusses situations and how they should be handled, but basically the purpose is just to get along and make guests feel welcome and comfortable so each party knows what behavior is expected of them and is acceptable and comfortable for the other.

Pretension is etiquette which has been hijacked. Then it looks ridiculous and is used as a weapon by some people to control or belittle their guests. If you don't like people, or are afraid of them, don't invite them, because you are not going to enjoy the experience.

Just relax, be attentive and follow simple rules with charm and good manners; if something is not quite right, well... just apologize and pour some more wine; nobody expects perfection but they do expect to feel comfortable.

Sorry, I haven't really got any specifics, but the questions do seem to materialize around the more formal events which people rarely attend. Maybe they are a bit intimidated, and that, I think, is where you can shine. Remind them to think that the imposing restaurants are just expensive eateries which are there to sell food and be of service. No need for boorishness, but no need to feel put down, either.

Mr. X

Dear Mr. X,

“Do you know etiquette?” certainly does sound ungrammatical, just as does “You don't know

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etiquette.” Perhaps these people are confused by more than grammar and good manners. Maybe we met Etta Ket, or if she’s British - Hetta Ket, at a social function and we had the poor manners to ignore or overlook her.

Asking you if you know etiquette is like asking you if you speak English. For goodness sake, don’t invite those people to dinner again. They’ll be asking you if the cake is for dessert and you’ll have to check their pockets for the fish forks when they leave, which is not good form. People really are confused/uncertain about the concept of etiquette. Emily Post said in 1939: “No word in our language is so greatly misunderstood, so falsely interpreted, as this word etiquette. Everything we do, everything we say, everything we choose, every impulse we check or obey is governed by a precept of taste, of experience, of kindness, or worldly knowledge, of ethics – in short, etiquette.”

So there you have it – Mrs. Post (always mention a lady first) and you on the very same proverbial page, just as it should be. Thanks to you both for making it simple and understandable to us all.

L.A. Plume