

Dear Ms. Plume,

I need some enlightenment on the virtues of email and etiquette. I recently met a man who loves to communicate by email. His emails are funny and thoughtful, so I do enjoy receiving them. However, the other day he emailed me an invitation to go out to dinner. What do you think of that?

Sincerely,

Dotty

Dear Dotty,

I think it is perfectly acceptable to be invited out to dinner by email under the following circumstances:

- a) He is mute and can't call you on the telephone.
- b) He was just stepping on an overnight flight halfway around the world in a completely incompatible time zone for a call, and he wanted to see you immediately upon his return.

If you have not been out to dinner with him before, don't bother to go – he probably talks with his mouth full, eats with his fingers and will use his tie for a napkin. Or you could be gracious and hope that he just wanted to get on your calendar and intended to follow up in person.

Manners are manners. We are sacrificing the richness of conversation for the convenience of texting and emails. Perhaps, through evolution, our vocal chords will be completely phased out. But 'til then, dinner is an event during which two or more people presumably sit at a table, either across from, or next to, each other and share a meal. Included in this scenario is the sharing of verbal and non-verbal communication, i.e. body language, facial expressions, table manners, etc. It can be quite an educational experience to share a meal with someone for the first time. His/her customs may be very different from yours. A simple example is the European style of eating vs. a more American style of eating with the knife and fork switching hands, food on the back or front of the fork, hands on the table instead of in your lap. Most of us were taught to keep our hands in our lap at the table while we were not actively eating, and if we are eating, one hand is used while the other stays in our lap. In France it is completely bad form to ever put your hand in your lap while at the table, both hands must remain clearly in view. Manners and customs are not synonymous, but concise and thoughtful communication is essential.

Email, of course, has its benefits, the primary one being that it's expeditious. But it is no substitute for conversation or a hand written note or invitation. Email has its dangers: it might not be received at all, or the reader might imagine a tone that was not intended. And email can, in some contexts, be quite a cowardly way of communicating. One friend of mine is quite peevish about reply cards being inserted into invitations – she believes they are not only superfluous but rude. In her mind there is no substitute for a hand written reply, and it challenges her to think that someone might surmise she is incapable of that. But oftentimes, we are all guilty of having more items on our to-do list than we have time to accomplish. I question the pros and cons of evite the invitation, but I have tried it, because it is quite simply a very easy way to send an invitation and gather the responses. A benefit to the evite invitation is that everyone can see who is on the guest list, as well as their responses. It is a party invitation to a "party," reminiscent of the old telephone party lines of yesteryear, when everyone knew to whom everyone else was speaking.

A reader wrote to me and said that she agrees that "social manners have gone by the wayside in recent times."

"I love writing thank you cards," she continues, "but sadly I rarely get them myself. I do

E-mail & Etiquette

Written by L.A. Plume

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think this social grace has been missing in years and frankly with the invention of the internet and other smart devices it seems people just love to email or text a thank you. But I think there is something special about receiving a hand written thank you note that has been mailed.”

To her, I say ‘thank you.’ I couldn't have said it better myself.