

Lesson Objectives

- Explore how table manners reinforce social relationships
- Analyze a 19th-century etiquette guide
- Create an etiquette guide for a modern dining experience
- Compare and contrast dining etiquette in different situations

Suggested Grade Levels

7–12

(Note to 4–6 grade teachers: This lesson can be adapted for younger students by omitting the analysis of the 19th-century etiquette guide. Begin the lesson by asking students to brainstorm a list of good table manners. Proceed with Setting the Stage, omitting the mention of looking at an example of manners from the past. Then divide the class into groups of four or five and complete steps 2, 3, 4 (Option 2), and 5 of the Activity Procedure.)

Time Frame

Two or three 45-minute periods

Social Studies Performance**Expectations**

I. Culture — Middle Grades (b);
High School (f)
(See Appendix)

Handouts

- 19th-Century Dining Images (one copy per student)
- 19th-Century Etiquette Guide (one copy per student)

Supplies

- Optional: Art supplies

Mind Your Manners

Setting the Stage

1. Ask students: *What table manners do your families observe at a regular dinner at home? How about at a dinner honoring a special occasion (birthday, graduation, or holiday)? Are they different? If so, how? Allow students to share ideas.*
2. Explain that people's behavior at the table depends on the nature of the dining experience (private or public; with family or invited guests; everyday or special occasion). Tell students: *Eating a meal is about more than just refueling our bodies. The manners we use when eating say a lot about relationships between people. Rules for how we set the table, serve the food, eat, and talk during meals are a way to convey feelings of friendliness and respect toward one another. Sometimes these rules reinforce ideas of a culture's social "pecking order" by setting certain people apart from others and treating people of high and low social status differently. We're going to explore one example of how people were expected to behave in the past and determine what rules affect our behavior today.*

Activity Procedure

1. Divide the class into groups of four or five. Distribute the *19th-Century Dining Images* and the *19th-Century Etiquette Guide*. Review the instructions and allow groups time to answer the questions on the sheet. Discuss groups' answers as a class.
2. Ask each group to choose a modern dining experience (e.g., lunch in the school cafeteria, a holiday dinner at home, a meal at a fancy restaurant, a team banquet, a church potluck, or breakfast with siblings on a school morning). Explain that groups should discuss how people typically behave in this situation and develop an etiquette guide for it. The guide should contain at least 10 rules for proper behavior. The guides can be created by hand or on the computer and be as elaborate as time allows—illustrations, cover, etc.
3. Based on their etiquette guides, instruct each group to create a short skit that illustrates some of the "dos and don'ts" of proper conduct at the dining experience they have selected. All group members must have a role in the skit. Groups perform their skits in front of the class.
4. Hold one of the discussions on manners outlined below. Option 1 requires that students have background knowledge of 19th-century social history. Option 2 is a general reflection on manners and values.

Option 1: As a class, compare and contrast the rules presented in the skits with those in the 19th-century etiquette guide. Ask students: *How do the rules in your skits reflect the values of 21st-century American society? How do the rules in the etiquette guide reflect the values of 19th-century American society? How do the differences in dining etiquette in the 19th and 21st centuries reflect larger changes in American society?*

Option 2: As a class, compare and contrast the rules presented in the skits. Ask students: *Why do we expect people's manners to differ in these situations? Are there any rules that apply to all situations? If so, what are they and why are they universal? How do these rules reflect our current values as a society?*

5. Submit the class etiquette guides to your area's *Key Ingredients* hosts to complement the exhibition.

Lesson Extension

1. Students research a country's or individual group's eating customs. In a written or oral report, students identify the significance of these rules.



Food booth at the Minnesota State Fair, 1947
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

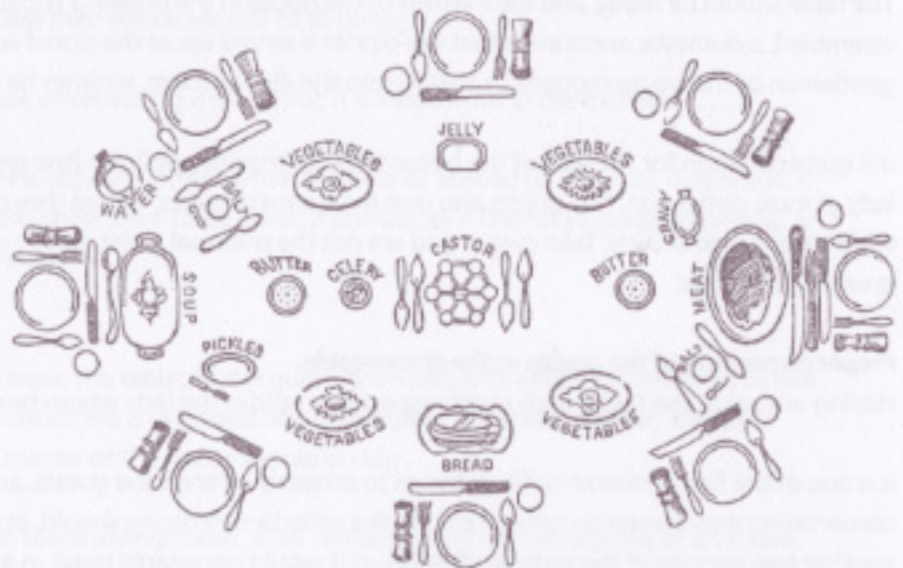


John Little dining room, San Francisco, about 1875
 Courtesy *The Society of California Pioneers*

Etiquette books subtly reminded 19th-century women that silver, china, glassware, and linen displayed family status. Rituals associated with food are very slow to change, so households continue to treasure china and silver, even if they seldom use them.

Table diagram, from "Godey's Lady's Book," 1859

There was—and is—more than one proper way to set a table. For the clueless, books of etiquette impart explicit instructions.



19TH-CENTURY ETIQUETTE GUIDE

Etiquette refers to the set of rules, or prescribed behaviors, deemed appropriate for any given situation. In 19th-century America, demonstrating the proper manners was thought to be crucial for increasing or maintaining one's status in society. Countless etiquette guides were published that covered the correct way to act in all kinds of situations, from meeting members of the opposite sex on the sidewalk to greeting guests at a ball. Below is a set of rules governing behavior at a dinner party.

First read the rules and then analyze them with your group. Look for answers to these questions:

1. *Were these rules intended to help the guests feel welcome and comfortable or to make them nervous and uncomfortable? Or do you think they had some other purpose? Explain your answers.*
2. *Do these rules distinguish between people of higher and lower status? If so, how are they treated differently?*
3. *What attitudes or feelings do people intend to show by following these rules?*
4. *What do you think would happen to a person who did not follow these rules?*
5. *What can we learn about 19th-century values? For example, are gender, wealth, profession, and age important in determining social status? What else can we suppose about American society at this time?*

Write your group's answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Excerpts from *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility, In Manners, Dress, and Conversation . . . also a Useful Instructor in Letter Writing . . . etc.* by Emily Thornwell. New York: Derby & Jackson; Cincinnati: H.W. Derby & Co., 1857.

Manner of going to the dinner-table, on special occasions.

The table should be ready, and the mistress of the house in the drawing-room, to receive the guests. When they are all assembled, a domestic announces that the dinner is served up; at this signal we rise immediately, and wait until the gentleman of the house requests us to pass into the dinner-room, whither he conducts us by going before.

It is quite common for the lady of the house to act as a guide, while he [the gentleman of the house] offers his hand to the lady of most distinction. The guests also give their arms to ladies, whom they conduct as far as the table, and to the place which they are to occupy. Take care, if you are not the principal guest, not to offer your hand to the handsomest, for it is a great impoliteness.

Proper disposition of the guests at the dinner-table.

Having arrived at the table, each guest respectfully salutes the lady whom he conducts, and who, in her turn, bows also.

It is one of the first and most difficult things to properly arrange the guests, and to place them in such a manner that the conversation may always be general during the entertainment; we should, as much as possible, avoid putting next to one another two persons of the same profession, as it would necessarily result in an aside conversation, which would injure the general conversation, and consequently the gaiety of the occasion.

The two most distinguished gentlemen are placed next to the mistress of the house; the two most distinguished ladies next to the master of the house; the right hand is especially the place of honor . . . The younger guests, or those of less distinction, are placed at the lower end of the table . . .

Special rules to be observed at the table.

It is ridiculous to make a display of your napkin; to attach it with pins to your bosom, or to pass it through your button-hole; to use a fork in eating soup; . . . to take bread, even when it is within your reach, instead of calling upon the servant; to cut with a knife your bread, which should be broken by the hand, and to pour your coffee into the saucer to cool . . .

If a gentleman is seated by the side of a lady or elderly person, politeness requires him to save them all trouble of pouring out for themselves to drink, and of obtaining whatever they are in want of at the table. He should be eager to offer them whatever he thinks to be most to their taste.

It is considered vulgar to take fish or soup twice. The reason for not being helped twice to fish or soup at a large dinner party is because by so doing you keep . . . the company staring at you whilst waiting for the second course, which is spoiling, much to the annoyance of the mistress of the house. The selfish greediness, therefore, of so doing constitutes its vulgarity . . .

Never use your knife to convey food to your mouth, under any circumstance; it is unnecessary, and glaringly vulgar . . .

Do not press people to eat more than they appear to like, nor insist upon their tasting of any particular dish; you may so far as recommend one as to mention that it is considered excellent. Remember that tastes differ, and viands [food] which please you may be objects of dislike to others; and that, in consequence of your urgency, very young or very modest people may feel themselves compelled to partake of what may be most disagreeable to them.

Ladies should never dine with their gloves on; unless their hands are not fit to be seen.

In conversation at the table, be careful not to speak while eating a mouthful; it is indecorous in the extreme . . .

Frequent consultation of the watch or time-pieces is impolite, either when at home or abroad [as a guest]. If at home, it appears as if you were tired of your company and wished them to be gone; if abroad, as if the hours dragged heavily, and you were calculating how soon you would be released.

Leaving the table.

It is for the lady of the house to give the signal to leave the table; all the guests then rise, and, offering their arms to the ladies, wait upon them to the drawing-room, where coffee is prepared. We never take coffee at the table, except at unceremonious dinners. In leaving the table, the master of the house should go last.

Politeness requires us to remain at least an hour in the drawing-room, after dinner; and, if we can dispose of an entire evening, it would be well to devote it to the person who has entertained us.