
Etiquette Can Be Murder

Despite its long history, few money issues cause as much anxiety as tipping, even among the most sophisticated.

Tuckerman and Dunnan, *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette*, 1995

Tipping Points



I have to confess; I am a chronic over-tipper. I even tipped a waiter 400% of my bill once, when I was at Johnny Rockets. Although in that case there were extenuating circumstances: his manager was being extremely rude and hateful to the entire staff, and the poor guy had to keep interrupting his work to do the Hustle every time the song played on the jukebox—and someone was playing it over and over. Also, my meal was only a hot dog and a coke, so the extra-large tip didn't exactly break the bank.

I come by overtipping honestly. I worked as a waitress at Cracker Barrel for several summers while I was in college, and I know how difficult it is to deal with the public all day. I also know how much of a difference getting even a slight bit extra in the tip can mean to a worker who is making less than minimum wage. But as I was leaving a dollar tip for a three-dollar cup of coffee the other day, I wondered why we have a system where people work for such a small amount (the going wage for waiters in Tennessee is \$2.13 an hour) and have to make a living kowtowing to an often impatient and less than generous clientele because they rely on tips.



According to *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette*, “The word ‘tip’ comes from England. Before the postal service was established, a businessman wishing to communicate with other businessmen would hand letters to a stagecoach driver and offer him a shilling ‘To Insure Promptness.’ The idea of a reward for good service of course goes back much further.” In fact, the practice “originated in medieval times as a master-serf custom wherein a servant would receive extra money for having performed superbly well” ([How](#)

[Americans Tip at Restaurants](#), *Time*, 2019).

But why should we pay extra for good or superior service, when we could just pay workers a livable wage and expect them to do their jobs? Well because, to put it in a nutshell, it works.

Scott D. Seligman's book, *Chinese Business Etiquette*, explains that in mainland China, "tipping has never been sanctioned" as the government sees it as "an unpalatable vestige of the more exploitative aspects of capitalism." In fact, it was once so frowned upon that if you seriously wanted to reward someone for service, you had to make sure the two of you were completely alone and then give the person something small enough to fit in a pocket. Even then you were told to be respectful of refusals, because that person would "know better than you whether he or she is at any risk for receiving it."



Seligman states that "under such a system, service in China became notoriously indifferent, and occasionally somewhat surly. This is still the case in many state-owned establishments."

On the other hand, in countries which encourage tipping, "A generous tip will usually get you better service in the future" (Tuckerman and Dunnan, *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette*, 1995).



Given that we are stuck with the system, the next question most Americans have is how much to tip in given situations. A full 11% of Americans are "confused about who and how much to tip" ([The Latest Rules Of Tipping: How Much To Tip In 2024 | Bankrate](#), Lane Gillespie, 2024).

According to the Amy Vanderbilt book, this is partly because "there are no hard and fast rules. Knowing when to tip and how much depends on variables such as where you live, the service rendered, and personal philosophy." That certainly doesn't make it clear. But you can always consult an etiquette book or the internet for current tipping guidelines. The most important general rules are:

- Many people, such as waiters, taxi drivers, and hairdressers, rely on tips to supplement their own minimal salaries. (So, if you can't afford the tip, you can't afford the outing.)
- No tip is automatically required. It is a reward for good service.
- When giving a tip for especially good service, it is important to "look the person in the eye and express your appreciation as you hand him the money. Kind words... will be remembered by the recipient long after the tip has been spent."

And I can personally vouch for that last rule, because to this day I remember a woman who left me a decent tip, three pennies for luck, and a short note about how much she admired my waitressing skills. That note meant more to me than any larger tip ever would have.



From what I've read, 35% of Americans feel that our tipping culture has recently grown out of control, as we are now being encouraged to tip for services where it was never required before. Do you agree? Drop me a line at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and let me know.

A Reader Asks



In a recent manuscript, I mentioned that my etiquette teacher/sleuth, Dorietta Mosely, had manuals covering everything from seemingly church behavior to how much you should plan to tip your corporate jet pilot. A curious beta reader wanted to know how much the pilot's services were worth, so I consulted my latest etiquette manual: *Emily Post's Etiquette: The Centennial Edition*, by Lizzie Post and Daniel Post Senning. The book offers the following suggestions for "High-Life Tipping."

- **Private Jet Crew** - \$50 per pilot (if you choose to tip your pilot). \$50 or more per crew member (who should always be tipped), per person traveling with you
- **Driver/guide** – 20% of the cost of the trip, or \$50 to \$500 per day, with the option of a small gift
- **Town Car/limousine** – 20% of the cost of the car for the trip
- **Yacht or boat with private crew** - \$100 to \$1,000 for the captain, \$50 to \$500 per crew member. For charters, tip 10 to 15% of your weekly fee to the captain and crew

Of course, these are only suggested ranges, but it definitely gives me an idea of how the other half lives!

Note to readers: I enjoy reading etiquette books for fun, since they give an entertaining look at the social customs of different time periods. I actually have quite a collection of manuals, which range in coverage from children's etiquette to multicultural manners. So, if you have any questions about current or old-fashioned etiquette, drop me a note at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and I'll do my best to look up an answer. And you might even make it into my next newsletter!

Latest News

Some of you may remember a short essay I wrote in a previous newsletter about a battle I had with a nuthatch who was trying to build a nest in my siding. I'm pleased to say that the essay has been picked up by a "literary humor site" called *Little Old Lady Comedy*. The site was founded by comedians Mary Cella and Ginny Hogan in 2017. You can read my essay here: [Nuthatch v. Deadline — Little Old Lady](#). I hope you will check it out.



In other news, we survived hurricane Helene with only five inches of rain, so we were much luckier than residents in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. Damage there was extensive and many lives were lost, so I encourage you to donate or help out however you can.

I also made it through a thyroidectomy and am gradually returning to normal activities. I hope to get back to writing soon. In the meantime, the holidays are beginning to creep up on me, and I'd like to wish you all a Happy Halloween!

As always, if you know anyone who might be interested in signing up for my email list, please pass along my opt-in information at: [Newsletter - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

Contact Information

I would love for my readers to get in touch! You can drop me a note anytime on my contact page at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I hope you all have a great October. And for my usual animal photo, here is a picture of some deer using a path we cleared in our driveway in Colorado:

