
Etiquette Can Be Murder

Let's get one thing clear: Do not call unannounced unless someone is dying.
Victoria Turk, *Kill Reply All*, 2020

Phone Dread

Okay, we've all had them. That phone call at an unexpected time, with a familiar number, that automatically causes an elevator-dropping sensation in the gut as you assume that something's wrong.



I got one last week, when my mother telephoned after dinner to tell me that my sister was being taken by ambulance to the hospital for a medical issue. (She's going to be okay.) Mom doesn't usually call at night, and as soon as her number popped up on my TV screen, I knew that the call probably didn't bring good news.

Of course we rushed to the hospital, but after all the hubbub died down, I started to think about how much I dread that kind of phone call, along with several other

types: robocalls, calls from salespeople, political calls, and calls from insurance companies, just to name a few.

With the development of cell phones, pretty much anyone can try to reach anybody at any time. And while I admit to screening my calls and not answering when an unknown number appears on the Caller Id, it is still a struggle for me not to answer calls from friends and family even at inconvenient times. Because there's always that little, niggling idea that there might be bad news.



That led me, naturally, to my manners manuals to research telephone etiquette, and it turns out that I am not alone in getting that wave of existential dread when the phone rings unexpectedly.

In fact, *Emily Post's Etiquette: The Centennial Edition*, by Lizzie Post and Daniel Post Senning, states that cell phones have complicated our lives to the point that members of the "younger generations dislike reaching out via phone. Some are even afraid to receive or place a call, and avoid the phone entirely." Evidently they stay in touch by text and email instead of preferring to talk to a live person.



In *Kill Reply All*, Victoria Turk asserts that the problem is with unscheduled phone calls. "...when your phone starts ringing with an unrecognized number. The horror. There's nothing worse than scrambling to pick up the receiver...only to find it's someone you don't want to speak to, wanting to have a conversation you're not ready to have." And even if you let the call go to voicemail, "you'll almost always assume it's bad news, which adds to the feeling of dread."

The solution to phone dread, apparently, is simple. Both the Turk book and the Emily Post book claim that if you want to call someone, you should set a time first, by sending a text or email which explains what the call is to be about. The only exception is "if it's genuinely urgent," and even then Turk claims you should "send a message saying as much." (Which I think is going a little bit too far. Family and friends, if it's that important, please go ahead and call!)

I hadn't realized that modern etiquette called for pre-arranging phone calls, but I do think that would help with that ominous feeling I get when the phone rings. So from now on, when I need to call people unexpectedly or at an unusual hour, I will try to warn them first, and save everybody some concern.



Do you hate getting an unexpected phone call? Drop me a line at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and let me know.

A Reader Asks

Last month my newsletter was about tipping, and a reader suggested I clarify a couple of points, since some of the rules seemed contradictory. Specifically, I included the information that:

- 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.

These rules are listed in *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette* by Tuckerman and



Dunnan, and I think the point they are trying to make is that you should always be prepared with enough funds to tip for good service, on the assumption that most of the time you will get it.

However, if the service is poor, you are certainly not obligated to tip. Although in that case, the manual also suggests that you speak to the manager to let them know what went wrong, so that the problem can be corrected. (And so that the service person knows that you're not just being cheap.)

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, send 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

This month I've been busy with classes. I took two online courses: one on humor writing and one on writing dialogue and description. Both were helpful and a lot of fun. I also got my latest book off to my editor, and expect to get her comments back by the end of November.

Just as an FYI, I'd like to let you know not to expect a newsletter in December, as I'll be taking a break to celebrate the season. I hope you all have wonderful holidays, and I'll be back in touch in January.



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

Wishing you all happy holidays. On a sad note, my beloved twenty-year-old cat, Thomas, passed away in October. So for my usual animal photo, I am including a picture of him celebrating Christmas. He loved helping me rearrange the garlands and the packages every year. RIP, little buddy.

