
Etiquette Can Be Murder

No matter what the occasion...make the gift suit the person for whom it is intended. No gift at all is better than a thoughtless, carelessly chosen gift that fulfills an obligation but gives no pleasure.

Lillian Eichler, *Today's Etiquette*, 1941

Gift-giving Rules and Taboos



With Mother's Day and some special birthdays coming up in my family, I've been thinking about how to choose the perfect gift. My husband is notoriously hard to shop for, so I turned to my etiquette manuals for advice. And of course that led me down the usual rabbit hole of researching past and present gift-giving rules.

In general, almost all my current etiquette books claim that the most important part of giving presents is to search for a gift that “suits the recipient, not that you think *should* suit the recipient” (*Modern Etiquette for Dummies*, Sue Fox, 2023). In fact, *Debrett's Etiquette for Girls* (Fleur Britten, 2006) makes a point of saying that you “can't give just any old thing, as limp gifts are embarrassing. The perfect present requires very special consideration and attention to various elements.”

Some elements to consider include the recipient's personal tastes, the gift's cost, the donor's level of acquaintance with the giftee, and the receiver's ability to reciprocate in kind. Apparently most people will feel obligated to give a gift in return at some point, and you don't want to bankrupt each other in a competition to give the most expensive gift.

The Eichler book quoted above also explains that “the charm of any gift lies not in its value, but in the spirit behind it.” However, in 1941 there was one additional “inviolable rule” for gift-giving—the book adamantly insists that “young girls should not accept valuable gifts of jewelry from men. The only acceptable gifts are flowers, candy, books, and inexpensive gifts of a similar nature.”

This might seem like it let men off the hook from choosing a more personal present, but in truth gift-giving in the past was still fraught with difficulty, since a particular book could be deemed unsuitable, or the choice of flowers could say much more than the giver intended.



In fact, *The Language of Flowers* by Margaret Pickston gives a multi-page list of what various blooms were said to represent. Giving a rose didn't just mean love; the book describes forty different types of roses with meanings from "love is dangerous" to "meet me by moonlight." Sending flowers from the linden tree was seen as a proposal of marriage, while gifting nettles meant "you are cruel" and marigolds indicated a "vulgar mind." I expect men had to be very careful not to send the wrong message in a bouquet!



Care also has to be taken today, by both men and women, when giving gifts to members of different cultures, since certain modern presents may carry unexpected meanings as well. For example, one should never give a clock to a person from China, as it is associated with the passage of time and ultimately death. Similarly, "green hats are to be eschewed, as a man who 'wears a green hat' in China is being cuckolded by his wife" (*Chinese Business Etiquette*, Scott Seligman, 1999).

Some other tips on bestowing multicultural presents that I picked up from *Behave Yourself: The Essential Guide to International Etiquette* (Michael Powell, 2005) include:

- When you are invited to an Austrian home, always take an odd number of flowers, since an even quantity is considered unlucky.
- In Brazil you should avoid giving sharp gifts such as scissors or knives, since these indicate you want to sever the relationship.
- In Chile a woman should not give a gift to a male colleague, as it may be interpreted as a proposition.
- Chinese people will politely decline a gift three times before accepting it.
- In Egypt you should always give and receive gifts with your right hand.
- When visiting Greece, you should be careful not to show too much admiration of another person's belongings, since the owner may feel obliged to give them to you.
- In Hong Kong you should never wrap a gift in blue paper as it is associated with mourning.
- Do not give leather gifts in India.
- In Mexico red flowers are seen as casting spells, while yellow flowers signify death. It is not considered appropriate to gift either of these.
- In Saudi Arabia one should only give gifts to very close friends. Otherwise, gifts are considered insulting.
- In Taiwan you should always accept a gift with two hands, while being sure that your palms face upwards.

While I found all these tips interesting, what to give my husband as a present is still a bit of a conundrum, since none of the books offered specific ideas. So if you have any suggestions for good gifts for men, please send them my way!



Are there any aspects of gift-giving etiquette that you have questions about? Drop me a line at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and let me know.

A Reader Asks



The flip side of choosing a gift for someone else is, of course, knowing what to do when you receive a gift—especially a gift that you don't want or need. In fact, one of the reasons I was thinking about gift-giving this month is because a reader asked: "When someone gives you a gift, it is usually a good thing. But occasionally it just makes my heart sink when it is something I do not like or have no use for. I know to make the right noises ('Thank you. You are so kind. How thoughtful,' etc.). But then what?"

According to the Debrett's manual mentioned above, "If you're receiving a present from somebody, your delight should be unambiguous and all-accepting. Even if you hate it or have it already, tact is best."

Once you have thanked the gift-giver, however, you are free to exchange, return, or re-gift the present, as long as it is done gracefully (*Modern Etiquette for Dummies*, Sue Fox, 2023). Suggestions for handling white elephant gifts include:

- If the present is from a close family member who will notice the gift's absence, you may need to keep it in a cupboard and bring it out for display whenever they visit.
- Don't bring up your plan to exchange the gift unless the donor specifically asks. Then it is polite to tell a small white lie, such as mentioning that the item didn't fit, or that you already had a duplicate.
- Returning a gift for cash is considered rude.
- If you decide to re-gift an item, you should never give it to someone in the same city or the same circle of friends.
- Keep a log of any presents you want to re-gift, along with the names of people who gave them to you. "You never want to face the embarrassment of giving a gift to the person who gave it to you."

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 proper dog-owner protocol to guidelines for dining with English royalty. So, if you have any questions about etiquette, send me a note at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and I'll do my best to find an answer. And you might even make it into my next newsletter!

Latest News

Last month's class on Writing the Short Story was filled with good information, but I confess I still have a bit of a phobia about trying to write something short. I think it is because I haven't read many short stories lately, so I am planning to buy a couple of books featuring modern mystery stories to get a better idea of what today's readers expect. If any of you can recommend a good, recent collection of murderous stories, please let me know.



This month I signed up for classes dealing with the more technical side of the writing business. I will be attending webinars on tech tools for writers and how to use social media in May, and I also enrolled in a course on building author websites. My husband, Ken, has created a wonderful website for me at www.LucindaGerlitz.com, but I hope to get better at maintaining and making changes to it myself.

My latest book should be back from the copy editor sometime in the next two weeks, and I expect to spend some time addressing her suggestions. I'm also happily researching new ways to kill the victim in my next book.

That's all the news I can think of. But 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 having my readers get in touch! You can drop me a note anytime on my contact page at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

You can also support my writing by following me on my [Instagram Page](#) or my [Facebook Page](#).

And for my usual picture, I thought I'd include a shot of my blooming azaleas, since spring is my favorite time of year.

