

---

## Etiquette Can Be Murder

---

*For a graceful lady who wishes to ensure respect there should be no exaggeration in the movement of the hips...This overtly sexual display will distract male colleagues and threaten your female co-workers.*

Alena Kate Pettitt, *English Etiquette*, 2019

### Tidbits from the Brits



Most of my readers know that I collect etiquette books, and sometimes I think that my interest in acquiring them is getting out of control. This month I purchased a 1981 copy of *Debrett's Etiquette and Modern Manners* and then, inspired by owning the gold standard of British behavior, I went on a bit of a buying spree and picked up manuals for Great Britain ranging from



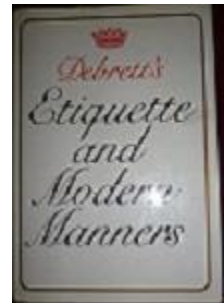
*Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners* to the 2019 *English Etiquette* book mentioned above. (Shout-out to [AbeBooks](#) | [Shop for Books, Art & Collectibles](#), a site where you can find used books of all types for a fraction of the original cost—which is often my undoing.)

I've been dipping into the books at random, and I have to say they give an amazingly detailed picture of British life over the years. So, I thought I'd share some of the tidbits I found revealing.

*Jane Austen's Guide to Good Manners: Compliments, Charades, and Horrible Blunders* is a collection of etiquette tips that the famous author wrote in letters to her eldest niece, Anna Austen, as compiled by Josephine Ross in 2006. A small sampling of the rules Ms. Austen insisted upon include:

- Know who has charge – “In the interest of a smooth-running household, it is of the first importance to consult the tastes and wishes of the Master of the house.”
- A lady may not call on any gentleman – In fact, when Ms. Austen wanted to speak with her publisher, she had to request him to “wait upon” her.
- A lady must “Observe the rules of sitting down” – “At no point...will any lady be left to wander a ballroom alone...she will at all times be under the care of either her partner or her chaperone.”
- “Be cautious with comments on others’ dress – compliments included.” To compliment anyone other than close family or intimate friends “may be regarded as impertinent.”
- Never be over-familiar with servants – “In a household where prying eyes and gossiping tongues are encouraged, no employer’s secret can ever be safe.”

Debrett’s manual (edited by Elsie Burch Donald) begins with protocol rules for ceremonies involving birth and childhood, such as christenings and bar mitzvas. It sails through the proper procedures for marriage, divorce, and funerals, and then narrows in on the events of daily life, from inviting houseguests to playing sports to being summoned for a royal occasion by the Queen. A few of the items I found interesting are:



- Birth and Childhood: Under Canon Law in the Church of England a boy should have two godfathers and one godmother and a girl two godmothers and one godfather.
- Marriage: “A girl’s betrothal was frequently arranged...with property and money involved. This led to great abuse and the Church was forced...to forbid the betrothal of children under the age of seven.”
- Funerals: In Victorian times the demand for more elaborate funerals gave rise to “specialized firms who would ‘undertake’ all the necessary arrangements.” Thus the term “undertaker” was born, although it is now mostly replaced by the title of Funeral Director.
- Visitors and Houseguests: “If you are going to stay at a rather grand house that is fully staffed it is worth bearing in mind that your suitcase may be *unpacked* by someone else.”
- Sports and Games: “Shooting is in fact so dangerous that anyone who is invited to shoot that has no experience should decline the invitation. The host will...be grateful to have been saved the embarrassment of letting an inexperienced person loose with a gun amidst shooting companions.”
- Invitations from the Queen: “Invitations from the Queen are royal commands and should be answered as such. If it is necessary to decline the invitation, the reason must be given, and it should be a substantial one.”



In contrast to Debrett's, Alana Petite's book, *English Etiquette*, claims that it is not another "antiquated, excruciating, and frankly confusing minefield of rules lauded by traditionalists," because "many of us will never need to know which side a snail fork should be placed at the dinner table, nor are we likely to 'take tea' with the Queen." The manual was written only six years ago, so I was somewhat surprised to find the quotation given above with instructions on how a woman should walk to avoid appearing overtly sexual. I was also rather amused by the following tips:

- "Any good Englishman and Englishwoman knows that the less you say with your body, the better. We have perfected the art of steely, cool and calm body language and physical poise for good reason."
- It is "not advised for a lady to stand with her feet hip width apart.... Ladies should avoid having gaps between their thighs at all costs."
- Tiaras "Are worn only by married women" and are "useful in that they serve as an obvious visual cue to refrain from approaching a woman romantically."
- "The Englishman will require four types of suits in his lifetime: a black suit, a dark navy or charcoal business suit, a lighter color unlined linen or seersucker summer suit, plus a heavy winter tweed.... He should aim to blend in to a lineup of leading characters from incredibly English fantasy spy movies such as Kingsman and James Bond."

\*\*\*

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

---

## A Reader Asks

One of my readers sent the following question:

“We are watching POIROT on Britbox - Agatha Christie's Belgian detective, played by David Suchet. He's a very dapper man...very proper in his manners and every aspect of his deportment. However, sometimes when he is dining, he is shown with his napkin tucked into his neckline to protect the front of his garments from the soup. I always thought using one's napkin in this manner was considered rather gauche.... Under what circumstances (if any) may it be considered proper to wear a 'bib' while dining?”



I had to laugh at this question, because my mother once gave the whole family adult bibs for Christmas as a joke. It is a family tradition that when we eat together, at least one of us will drop food on his/her shirt. But you are allowed to wear a bib when eating lobster, crab legs, ribs, pasta, and any other food you consider particularly messy. However, I had to check on using your actual napkin as a bib, since I'd always heard that was considered ill-mannered as well.

According to *Emily Post's Etiquette: The Centennial Edition* (Post and Senning, 2022), the napkin should only ever be placed in your lap and used as needed throughout the meal. “Should you have spilled a bit...excuse yourself to the restroom to do damage control.”



The internet's guidance is a little more laid-back, and suggests that using a napkin as a bib in a restaurant can be considered a bit unconventional, but it depends on the situation and the type of restaurant. “In more casual dining settings, it might be seen as practical and acceptable, especially if you're eating something messy. However, in more formal or upscale restaurants, it is viewed as inappropriate or lacking in etiquette.”

In fact, if you're concerned about making a good impression, “it's best to use the napkin as intended—placed on your lap. For added protection, you might consider bringing a discreet, stylish bib specifically designed for adults, or even asking the restaurant staff if they have any options available” ([The Ultimate Guide to Table Manners: 50 Essential Dining-Etiquette Tips](#), Quinn, 2024).

\*\*\*

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

I'm branching out a bit with educational opportunities for March. Earlier this month I took a class on Criminal Profiling taught by Dr. Katherine Ramsland, an international expert on serial murder. I mostly took the class for fun, but I also learned some fascinating details about the psychology of killers that may be useful in upcoming books.



I also attended a Genre Fiction Writers Conference (via Zoom) from Gotham Writers Workshop, which featured panels of authors and agents discussing everything from creating suspense to publicizing your work. I picked up some great tips on querying and working with agents, which I think will be very useful.

Next, I'm signed up for a course on Writing the Short Story, and I must admit that I am not looking forward to it as much as my previous classes. I haven't written a short story since elementary school, and I've always thought it is harder to write short fiction than it is to write a novel. But a lot of authors give away short stories or flash fiction pieces to tempt readers into signing up for their blog or newsletter, and I thought I might give it a try.

Regarding actual writing, my latest book is off to my editor for copy editing, and I expect to get her comments sometime in April. So, now is probably the perfect time to work on that short story.



And on a personal note, my kittens were born on March 21, 2022, and this week they will be three years old. The time has gone by really fast, and I guess I now have to start calling them cats!

That's about 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 animal picture, here are Cricket and Izzie taking a break from being destructive little terrors.

