



Guide to Dining Etiquette

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MU Career Center's Guide to Dining Etiquette: Part of the Job Search Preparation Guide Series

Job Search Preparation Guide Series:

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- ⇒ Guide to Curriculum Vitae
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Introduction

There is a lot of information that one can encounter when searching for proper rules of dining etiquette. This handout includes information regarding this etiquette, but by no means is this all there is to know. Although there are differences of opinion regarding certain circumstances, we feel that this handout is the most relevant to our needs. Hopefully the ideas expressed in this handout will raise your comfort level when dining with others of some significant importance.

Most people, not just employers, find that first impressions are the most lasting. No matter what the occasion, it is always important to present yourself in the best possible manner.

An occasion will arise when you will be asked to attend a dinner of great importance. Whether it is a job interview, entertaining a client, a meeting with a co-worker, or even a date with someone you really like, you will be expected to know the basics of proper dining etiquette. You have the opportunity through reading this handout to learn how to behave in a manner that will show you in the best light.

In order to relax and present yourself at your best, try to focus on the event, be yourself, use your best judgment, and follow the lead of your host. If you are in doubt about any aspect of the dining experience, watch (discreetly) how your host behaves. For example, how he/she orders, what utensil he/she uses, etc., then follow suit.

If this is an interview, be aware that you are being observed at all times. Therefore do not chew or pop gum, smoke, wear clothes that need cleaning, comb your hair at the table, attend to personal grooming, etc. For more information, see the *Career Center Guide to Interviewing*.

The Meal

WHERE TO BEGIN

Attire

It is very important to ask yourself three questions before dressing for the event:

- Who is the host of the dinner?
- What is the purpose of the dinner?
- Where is the location of the dinner?

These three questions have a great bearing on what you should wear. If the dinner is a business function at a nice restaurant, business attire is appropriate. If the dinner is a picnic or BBQ for clients, conservative casual wear would be correct. If you are unsure of the proper attire for a function, err on the side of being more conservative. You can also find out more information on how to dress for an etiquette dinner in the MU Career Center's *Guide to Business Attire*. If you are asked to wear a nametag, make sure it is legible!

Attire for the gentlemen-

- Wear a well-tailored suit or (at minimum) pants and jacket.
- Wear a tie unless informed otherwise. If this dinner is a job interview, a tie is usually an unspoken requirement.
- A proper fitting, button-down, long-sleeve shirt is appropriate.
- Jewelry should be limited to one ring per hand. Earrings or other body jewelry (eyebrow, tongue piercings) are not acceptable.
- Dress shoes with dark socks are appropriate and should be well-polished and in good repair.

Attire for the ladies-

- Suits, skirts or pants are acceptable. Skirts should be knee length or longer.
- Long-sleeve or short sleeve shirts are fine, but sleeveless shirts are not appropriate for business occasions.
- Jewelry should be conservative. One ring per hand and one pair of plain earrings should be worn.
- Keep shoes conservative and the heel at a medium height. Avoid flats as well as high stiletto heels.

Preparation

Think of some conversation topics to use at dinner. However, stay away from controversial topics such as religion or politics. You don't want to inadvertently offend your host with viewpoints that may be different from his/hers. Plan ahead to make sure you arrive 15 minutes early as well.

Sitting Down

Everyone should rise when a person of higher rank is standing. Wait until these people sit before you do.

Napkin

Once the host unfolds his/her napkin, that is your signal to do the same. Fold it into a triangle and place the longest side toward you.

Table Posture

Be comfortable; do not sit rigidly or slouch. Remember to keep your hands in your lap when not in use; no arms or elbows on the table.

Drinks

Don't stir drinks (iced tea) loudly, making a noise with the spoon against the glass. It goes without saying that you would never chew ice cubes. If you take sugar or sugar substitute packets, do not take more than two. Tear them only 3/4 of the way (to minimize trash) and leave the empty packet on the table...the waiter will take care of it. Stay away from alcoholic drinks. However, if your host chooses to have one and you wish to join him/her, HAVE ONLY ONE! At a cocktail hour, you will be shaking hands with many individuals, so keep your drink in your left hand to keep your right hand dry.

Ordering

If you are ordering food from the menu, select a medium priced item. It is a good idea to ask the host for recommendations. Follow the lead of the host. Stay away from messy or potentially offensive foods like pasta or garlic-laden dishes (even if it is your favorite).

TABLE SETTING

Each dinner you attend could involve a variation of this formal table setting below; some may be more elaborate or some more simple. However, you can expect so see something like this:



Etiquette Dinner Place Setting

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| A. Bread Plate | I. Spoon |
| B. Butter Knife | J. Soup Spoon |
| C. Salad Fork | K. Dessert Fork |
| D. Dinner Fork | L. Cocktail Fork |
| E. Dinner Plate | M. Water Glass |
| F. Soup Bowl | N. Wine Glass |
| G. Dinner Knife | O. Wine Glass |
| H. Salad Knife | P. Napkin |

DURING THE MEAL

Silverware

A formal table set with every imaginable piece of silverware can look daunting, but things will proceed smoothly if you remember one important rule: start from the outside and work your way inward. Use whatever fork, knife, spoon, etc. that is on the immediate outside. After the course, the waiter will remove whatever silverware is no longer needed. And as a last resort, watch what your host is using. Never leave your spoon in your cup, bowl or glass—place it to the side on a saucer or plate. Never place a used utensil on clean linen. Should you accidentally drop your utensil, inform your server and politely ask for clean one.

Courses

Do not begin eating until everyone at your table has been served. During a banquet, it is not necessary for you to wait for the entire room to be served, but do wait for your entire table to be served. Salt and pepper or salad dressing should be offered to others before taking some for yourself. It is wise to taste your food before using salt or pepper. When passing items on the table from person to person, pass in a clockwise fashion or to your left.

Bread

Offer to others first before taking some for yourself. Never butter bread directly from the butter plate; instead, simply place some butter on your bread plate. Also, don't butter your roll all at once; break off pieces and butter each piece one at a time.

Soup

Always spoon away from you. Don't crumble your crackers into your bowl. If there are noodles in your soup, you may cut them with the side of your spoon.

Salad

Cut your salad, if needed, and then place your knife across your butter plate with the blade facing you. Cherry tomatoes may be cut by piercing with the sharpest point of your knife, though you may want to avoid them altogether.

Entrée

Cut three or four small pieces of meat at a time, not all at once. When cutting meat, fork prongs should be pointed down. Take small bites. Never speak with food in your mouth and avoid saying you are "full" or "stuffed".

Dessert

As soon as your dinner plate is removed, slide your dessert spoon or fork down to the left side of your place setting.

The Napkin

Fold your napkin neatly to the right or left of your plate when everyone at your table is through with dessert. During the meal, the napkin should always be placed in your lap. If you must excuse yourself, the napkin should be left on the arm, seat of your chair, or to the left of the plate.

Silverware

Place your silverware at a 4:00-10:00 angle with the knife blade facing you. This finished position tells your server that you are finished and your plate may be cleared now.

The Check

It is usually assumed that whoever initiates the dinner will pay for it. Therefore, the host will reach for and take care of paying for the bill. If you are interviewing for a job, the employer should pay for the meal. If you are entertaining clients, you will pay the bill. If you have asked someone out to dinner, such as a close friend, you should assume that the bill is yours. If you and a friend have decided jointly to go out to dine, you should offer to split the bill.

The Gratuity

Gratuities are meant to be given for service above and beyond what is normally expected. 15% is the norm, with 20% given when dining in fine restaurants or when the service is exceptional.

Thank You

This is VERY,VERY IMPORTANT. Send a short, sincere thank you note on plain or personal stationary to the individual(s) within 48 hours of the meal. Corporate employers typically expect a typed letter, however, a clean handwritten note is generally acceptable. It is also necessary to extend a brief, but gracious, thank you to your host at the end of the meal as you are leaving the restaurant and saying your goodbyes.

Other Important Information

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following frequently asked questions may help you avoid any faux pas during a dinner interview...

Q: What should I do if I need to leave the table during dinner?

A: If you need to leave the table during the dinner, wait until there is a break between courses. Say “excuse me”, lay your napkin on the chair (arm or seat), and leave.

Q: What should I do if some food falls from my plate?

A: Just leave it there. The waiter or waitress will take care of it. Don’t try to hide it under your plate...it will be revealed in time when the plate is removed.

Q: What should I do with my knife when I am not using it?

A: Place your knife across the top of your plate with the blade facing you when you are not using it.

Q: What should I do if I am finished before everyone else?

A: Try to keep the same pace with everyone else at the table. But if you do finish before everyone else, just wait patiently until everyone has finished.

Q: What should I do if I bite into something that is completely awful?

A: Simply bring the food to the front of your mouth and put it back on the utensil used to take that bite. Place it on your plate discreetly, preferably under the garnish.

Q: What if the server gives me the wrong order?

A: Kitchen errors happen whether it be the wrong order or improperly prepared food (undercooked, burned, etc.) Politely inform the waiter of the problem and politely suggest a solution. You don’t want to ignore the problem or respond too aggressively.

Q: Can I take my leftover food home with me?

A: It is usually not appropriate to ask for a doggy bag. However, if the host does and in turn asks you, you may follow his or her lead.

ETIQUETTE DO'S AND DON'TS

A few more miscellaneous do's and don'ts that should be noted before dining...

Do

- **Focus on the event, not the meal!**
- Remember in an interview situation, the meal is part of the interview.
- Make eye contact continuously throughout the meal.
- Think about what you are saying before you say it.
- Utilize active listening when others are speaking at the table.
- Ask questions.
- Demonstrate your ability to converse effectively.
- Be confident!

Don't

- Have a cell phone, pager, etc. with you unless you are expecting an *extremely* important call and apologize if it rings. In this case, prepare everyone that you are expecting an urgent message.
- Interrupt, complain, or gossip. Everything you say reflects your personality.
- Talk with your mouth full.
- Apply makeup or pick at your teeth at the table. Excuse yourself to the restroom to do such things.
- Reach across someone to get something; instead, ask for food to be passed.
- Push your plates away from you when you are finished with the meal.

CONCLUSION

This is not all there is to dining etiquette. These are just some of the basics that one would need to know before dining with someone important. Whether it be a prospective employer, your boss, your co-workers or just an evening with a friend, you do not want to appear uneducated regarding dining etiquette. Keep in the back of your mind the essential elements given here and you will appear well rounded and professional.