



Western Illinois
University

AMERICAN CULTURE

American Culture - The Basics

- The United States is a diverse country with many customs and traditions.
- Here are some key values and generalities that might help you understand Americans and their culture. These generalities are not always true, but can be a guide to understanding.
- We hope that these key values will help you understand American Culture and develop a reasonable accurate set of ideas with which you can interpret the behavior of the people you meet.
- Your willingness to understand a new culture and to adjust to the cultural differences will greatly contribute to your smooth and sufficient adaptation to the new environment.

Making Conversation

- **"Small talk"** includes topics, such as sports, weather, jobs, or past experiences. Most people do not talk about religion, politics, or personal feelings with strangers. Sex and bodily functions are not discussed. People do not usually talk about the personal lives of their conversation partners. This emotional distance does not mean people dislike you, but personal lives are discussed only with close friends and family.
- You should know that "How are you?" and "How's it going?" are greetings, not questions about your life. "See you later," or "See you soon," are ways of saying goodbye, not appointments.
- People in the US are curious. *They will ask you a lot of questions.* Some of their questions may appear ridiculous, uninformed and elementary, but try to be patient in answering them. You may be the first person from your country whom they have met, and they will have very little understanding of your life. Most people are sincerely interested in learning about you.
- Loud conversations usually mean people are angry. Most conversations are moderate in volume with few gestures. Do not speak too loudly or too quietly, and keep your hands under control.

Non-verbal Communication

When you have communication difficulties, you may think it is because of spoken or written language.

However, many misunderstandings happen because of non-verbal communication, or body language.

- **Eye Contact:** During a conversation, the speaker looks briefly into the listener's eyes, briefly away, and then back at the listener's eyes.
- **Touching:** Touching people often makes them uncomfortable. A man is especially nervous when touched by another man.
- **Space:** You do not have to touch people to make them nervous. People expect others to be at least an arm's length away from them. If you get closer than this, people will move away from you; they do not dislike you; you are "in their space." Also, you will hear people say, "Excuse me," although they have not actually touched anyone. No matter where you are, give people plenty of space.

Remember, these are generalizations. Some people will be uncomfortable if you do not touch them during a conversation. The hard part is figuring out who wants what.

Some Characteristics

Most people in the US believe that the ideal person is independent and self-reliant, and most people think of themselves this way. People in the US do not think of themselves as representatives of their families, communities, or social class. Some international students see this attitude as "selfish." You can see examples of individualism in the classroom as well. Teachers expect students to be independent and individualistic, to work alone, and to produce original work.

- **Equality:** You can see equality in such common practices as "waiting in line." When you go to the bank, to the post office, or to immigration, you will be asked to take a number and wait. Regardless of how important or trivial your need is, you will be treated like everyone else; first come, first served. You can also see equality in the classroom. All students should be the same in the eyes of professors, and many professors view students (particularly graduate students) as their equals. Professors may ask students to call them by their first names.
- **Informality:** Although equality is ignored in some parts of life, it is followed closely in others. For example, people treat one another very informally, even in the presence of great differences in age or social status. This is not a "lack of respect," this is the custom in the United States.

Some Characteristics - continued

- **Punctuality:** Many people in the US are very punctual and organize their activities around schedules. Being late is rude. If you cannot be on time, tell the people who are waiting for you. For business appointments, you should always arrive a few minutes early.
- **Materialism:** Success in the United States is often measured in dollars. Many people think about money and material possessions as much as time. As a result, you may think that people ignore more important things in life, like love and friendship. This is not true; like people in every country, most people in the US value friendship more than wealth.

Misjudgments and Differences

Common Misjudgments

- International students often think that people in the United States are incapable of deep conversation or thought. Many people are able to think and talk deeply; they are just reluctant to do so with strangers.
- People in the US often think that internationals who speak rarely or quietly are too shy, too formal, or just dumb. Also, some might assume that internationals with a strong accent don't know English.
- Arguing may alarm some people. They expect violence or long-lasting anger to follow such encounters.
- Many people are easily embarrassed by sex, religion, and politics, and may assume that those who mention such topics are rude.

Some Different Customs

- People in the United States have no taboo associated with the left hand; they touch you or hand you objects with either the left or the right hand.
- People in the US have no negative association with the soles of the feet or the bottom of the shoes.
- A common way to greet children is to pat them on their heads.
- People point with their index finger.
- Respect for someone is shown by looking him or her in the face.
- Relaxed postures, whether sitting or standing, are very common; do not think your listener is inattentive because she is relaxed.
- People are uncomfortable with silence.
- The doors of rooms are usually open unless there is a specific reason to close them.

Religion

- Religion does not play the same role in the United States as in many countries. There is no government-supported religion or established church of state. In general, people are quite private about their religious views. Do not talk about religion until you know someone better.
- This does not mean that people are not religious, and that religion is not a political issue or an important part of people's lives. Most people in the United States believe in God, and the majority of people are Christians. Christianity is divided into Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestantism is also divided into many churches: Baptist, Methodist, Mormon, Christian Scientist, to name a few. Christianity has many different faiths, and the United States has many different religions.
- Macomb has many places of worship: Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Unitarian, and many other religions and denominations.
- Someone may telephone you or come to your house to talk about their religion with you. These people are salespersons for their beliefs. If you are not interested in discussing religion with them, simply thank them for their time and excuse yourself. If they ignore your requests and continue to pressure you, you do not have to be polite.

Socializing

- Shaking Hands - People usually shake right hands when they first meet, but it would not be considered rude or disrespectful to use the left hand. Handshakes usually last just a few seconds.
- Names and Titles - Most people in the United States have three names: a given name, a middle name, and a last (family or surname) name. In conversation and in writing, the given name usually comes first. For example, "Hello, my name is Tom Cruise." Most official forms ask you to write your family name first, followed by a comma, then your first name: "Cruise, Tom." Read carefully before filling out any form so you fill it out correctly. A comma shows that the last name is written first.
- People often use first names. Do not assume from the use of given names that there is no respect for status or age. There are many non-verbal habits that show respect. Young people generally talk less in the presence of their elders and are less assertive. Young people and people of lower status are less likely to use slang or profanity around their "superiors."

Use of Names

- It is all right to use the first name of someone your same age and status, or someone younger. If you are unsure, you should ask if the person prefers to be called by his or her first name.
- A woman or man older than yourself is often addressed as Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. until the individual requests that you use his or her first name or until you get to know the individual better.
- Men and women will be confused if you use Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. with a first name, as is the custom in some countries. Ordinarily Ms., Miss, Mrs., or Mr. is used only with the family name.
- Some women in the US prefer Ms. (pronounced "Miz"). Ms. is used for either single or married women and replaces Miss (for single women) and Mrs. (for married women). You can use Ms. if you do not know if a woman is single or married.

Meeting People in the United States

- Meeting people in the United States is not easy. Because of the problems mentioned previously, internationals sometimes stick together and avoid contact with people who live here. The best way to learn more about the United States is to meet and talk to new people.

Relationships

- Clocks are very important to American life. "Wasting time" or not doing anything is considered a bad thing, although many people still do it. As someone observed, "When people are not busy working, they are busy relaxing."
- When people seem warm and open with new acquaintances, this does not mean that close friendships are forming. At social gatherings people readily welcome new people, and the warmth expressed is genuine and sincere but confined to that occasion and may not always continue. Close friendships do develop as a result of repeated interactions and shared interest between individuals.
- Another problem in forming relationships is that the definition and expectations of "friend" are different in different cultures. The majority of friendships in the United States tend to be shorter and shallower than those of other cultures. People have different groups of friends: "work friends," "school friends," "family friends," etc.

UTILIZING AVAILABLE RESOURCES

University Advising & Academic Support Center



The University Advising and Academic Support Center offer support and academic skill development. To get assistance and set up an appointment, please email rockysresources@wiu.edu.

UAASC advisors are full-time academic support professionals committed to student success. They view themselves as mentors and resource people who recognize that students may experience difficulties adjusting to university life. In addition to assisting with course selection, advisors help students explore major and career options, and facilitate their transition to college.

WIU's Top Ten Tips

How To Be Successful In Online Classes

www.wiu.edu/tutoring

- 10. Make sure you have the tech requirements**
-If you do not, contact your professor immediately



- 9. Establish a good workspace with minimal distractions**
-Stay organized and make others aware of when you're studying

- 8. Know if you are a morning person or a night person**
-When do you work best



- 7. Know your resources**
-Scan the QR code for more information

- 6. Manage your time wisely**
-Time management is crucial



- 5. Make daily to-do lists**
-To-do lists help you stay organized and on task

- 4. Have an accountability partner**
-To stay on task and meet deadlines



- 3. Consult with your classmates**
-Stay engaged with your peers through discussions

- 2. Save copies of all work turned in to the professor**
-Keep your work backed up in case of technical error



- 1. Practice self-care**
-Stretch, stay hydrated, and clean your surroundings

Career Development

- The Career Development Center is ready to assist virtually with all aspects of career preparation.
- Email careers@wiu.edu to set up an appointment.

Available Services:

- Resume Building and Review
- Cover Letter Review
- Mock Interview & Interview Assistance
- Personal Statement Assistance
- Job & Internship Searching
- Career Navigation
- Graduate School Application

University Counseling Center

Your well-being is our first priority.

Services

- Individual Counseling Appointments – **We are now offering [Tele-Mental Health Counseling](#). Please click on the link to see if you are eligible for these services and for instructions on how to schedule an appointment.**
- Crisis Appointments – If you believe you are in crisis, please call our office to speak with an on-call counselor.
- Group Counseling – Group counseling services are cancelled for the remainder of the semester.
- Consultations– Students, faculty, and staff members are encouraged to contact the Counseling Clinic if they need to consult with one of our counselors over the phone.

Tools For Success

- For a limited time, many companies are providing additional resources for free or at reduced costs to assist students. Below you can find some virtual tools to assist in finding success.
- [WIU Technology Resource Overview](#) - This page outlines many avenues of support and ways to stay connected including Western Online, Hangouts, Good Drive, Zoom, and more!
- [RedShelf](#) - Access to eBooks
- [Google Hangout](#) - Ability to use audio/visual to meet with advisors, faculty, and classmates. See more resources for how [faculty will be using Google Hangouts](#) as well as other online resources.
- [Study Blue](#) - Crowdsourced study library, with flashcards, notes and study guides.
- [Quizlet](#) - Simple learning tools that let you study a wide array of topics and subjects.

Eight Success Tools



Effective Study Strategies



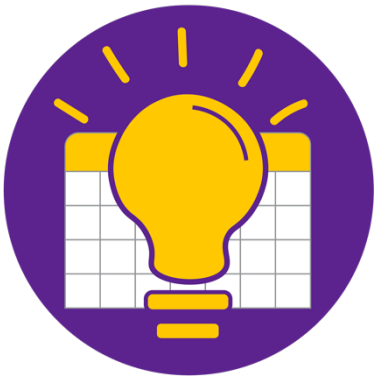
Email Etiquette Guide



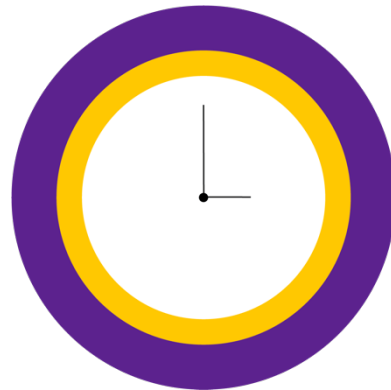
Note Taking Strategies



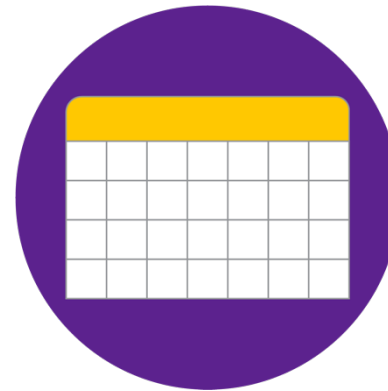
S. M. A. R. T. Goal
Setting



Study Schedule Template



Time Management Strategies



Weekly Schedule Template



Working In Groups

University Writing Center

Bring In

- Any type of writing
- Essays, lab reports, references, theses
- Graduate school applications
- Education Portfolios
- Curriculum Vitae
- Cover letters and resumes

We Help You

- Figure out assignment prompts and what your teacher values
- Brainstorm ideas and topics
- Make drafts and go over revisions
- Do research and learn proper documentation
- Improve organization, coherence, development, grammar, argument and support

Social Gatherings

Social gatherings are quite informal in the US. Most people do not use parties to show wealth or taste. Parties are opportunities for people to gather, converse, and relax. As a result, the host-guest relationship, which is quite formal in many cultures, is very informal. Your host wants you to "feel at home." You may be greeted at the door with "Make yourself at home." This means you may have to serve yourself.

Invitations are usually informal and often oral, but tell the time and place: "Will you come over Tuesday evening at 8:00?" A statement such as "come and see me sometime" or "drop in" is not an invitation. It means that you must telephone before you drop in. If you accept an invitation, it is important that you go and be punctual. The host expects you to call as soon as possible if you must cancel. It is considered rude to simply not show up. If you are not interested in the invitation, it is better to politely refuse the date or appointment in the beginning. Refusing a date is not considered rude in the United States.

Social Gatherings - continued

A formal, written invitation requires a response and often a written response.

- If the invitation says "RSVP," you must call the host and tell him whether or not you will be there. If you cannot attend or do not plan to attend, say so. Do not say "yes" just to be polite. The "RSVP" is to help the host plan how much food and drink to prepare; an accurate count is necessary. If you are unsure how to dress, call the host and ask, "What should I wear?"
- If your invitation says, "Regrets only," you only need to tell your host if you do not plan to attend.
- Student gatherings are much less formal. What time you arrive makes little difference, because people are coming and going all the time. Many student parties are "BYOB" (bring your own beverage). You will make enemies rapidly if you go to parties and drink other people's beverages. If a party is BYOB , then you should BYOB!

Social Gatherings - continued

- **Gifts for Hosts:** It is not necessary to bring flowers, candy, or a gift to a dinner host. However, it is a nice thing to do. You should always say "thank you" when you leave. It is also polite to write a note or telephone the next day and repeat your thank you. Overnight house guests usually bring a small, inexpensive gift to the host, such as a small remembrance or souvenir from your home country.
- **Table Etiquette:** If you have dietary restrictions, it is a good idea to tell your host when you are invited. When you are at the dinner table and are asked if you would like something, do not refuse out of politeness. The host or hostess probably won't ask you a second time. After you have had enough, it is all right to politely decline additional servings.

Other Resources and Information

- More about American Culture:

<http://www.livescience.com/28945-american-culture.html>

- International Student Guide to American Culture:

http://www.wiu.edu/global_education/guide/GuideSummer2020.pdf



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