

# American Manners and Customs

(A Guide for Newcomers)



by

**Elizabeth Claire**

Illustrated by Dave Nicholson

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# CONTENTS

Introduction: What do I say? What do I do?	1
1. Please. Thank You. You're Welcome. Excuse Me. I'm Sorry.	2
2. American Names, Part I	6
3. American Names, Part II	10
4. Meeting People	14
5. "Small Talk"	18
6. Smile!	22
7. Body Language	26
8. Manners Around Doors	30
9. Coughs and Sneezes	34
10. Table Manners, Part I	38
11. Table Manners, Part II	42
12. Restaurant Manners	46
13. Manners Between Men and Women	50
14. Visiting Someone in the Hospital	54
15. How Clean Can You Get?	58
16. Giving a Gift, Getting a Gift	62
17. Sexual Harassment	66
18. Showing Emotions	70
19. Telephone Manners	74
20. Road Manners	78
Answers	82
Glossary	85

# 1.

## Please. Thank You. You're Welcome. Excuse Me. I'm sorry.

These are among the first words a child learns in English. They will be the most useful words for you in English, too.



You have to learn when to say them, and how much to say them.

The word *please* can go at the beginning or at the end of a sentence.

*Please pass the salt.* Or, *Pass the salt, please.*

To be more **polite\***, “*may I*” or “*could you*” are often used: “*Could you pass the salt, please?*”

“*Give me a pencil, please,*” sounds too direct, like a **command\***. “*May I please have a pencil?*” seems softer, and less direct.

“*Could you please close the window?*” sounds more polite than “*Close the window, please.*” The words alone do not make the sentence polite. A lot of the feeling of politeness is in your **tone of voice\*** when you ask for something.

Americans like to be **appreciated\***. The size of the “thank you” depends on the size of the gift or favor:

*Thanks.* (Someone **lent\*** you a pencil, or held a door for you.)

*Thanks a lot.* (Someone *gave* you a pencil, or held a very heavy door for you.)

*Thank you.* (Someone paid you a **compliment\***, or gave you a seat on a bus.)

*Thank you very, very much.* (Someone did you a favor that was very helpful. Someone found your keys and returned them.)

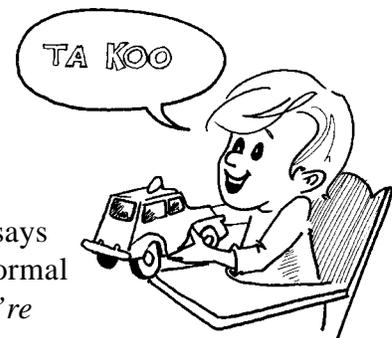
*Thank you so much.* (Someone did a favor that surprised you and made your life easier.)

*I really appreciate this so much. How can I ever thank you enough? You are a saint.* (Someone has stopped on the road and repaired your **flat tire\***.)

*This is so wonderful. I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you so much. I'll never forget it.*

Don't **overdo\*** it. For a *small* favor, *one* “please” and *one* “thank you” are enough.

When someone says “*Thank you*” the normal **response\*** is “*You're welcome.*”



### Word Help

**polite** *adjective*. Having good manners; kind, courteous.

**command** *noun*. An order from a general or captain to a person of lesser power.

**tone of voice** *noun phrase*. The quality of a person's voice. A tone can be soft, gentle, friendly, and pleasant, or angry, sarcastic, harsh, and threatening.

**appreciate** *verb*. To show or tell a person that you are thankful for their gift or favor.

**lend** *verb*. (past form: lent) To let another person use something that belongs to you.

**compliment** 1. *noun*. A word or words that say something nice about a person. 2. *verb*. To tell a person that you think he or she is good, kind, beautiful, etc.

**flat tire** *noun*. A car's tire that has a hole and has lost its air.

**overdo** *verb*. To do more than needed.

**response** *noun*. Answer.

We can also say “*It was [or is] my pleasure.*” “*Think nothing of it.*” Or “*No problem.*”

If we were very happy to do a favor for someone, we might say, “*You’re perfectly welcome.*” Or “*There’s no need to thank me; the pleasure\* was mine.*”

Americans say *excuse me* or *pardon me* in many **situations\***:

- to **apologize\*** for making an unpleasant noise, burp, **belch\***, hiccup, cough, or passing gas (flatulence)
- to apologize for **disturbing\*** someone
- to apologize for bumping into a person accidentally
- to apologize for walking between two people who are speaking.
- to **interrupt\*** a conversation
- to get someone’s attention so we can ask a question
- to ask a person to repeat something we didn’t understand
- to correct ourselves when we said something that was a mistake.
- to leave a conversation to go do something else.

### Word Help

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**pleasure** *noun*. Good, happy feeling.

**situation** *noun*. Condition; what is happening at the moment.

**apologize** *verb*. To say that you are sorry for something you did or said.

**belch** *noun*. A loud noise of gas coming up from the stomach through the mouth.

**disturb** *verb*. To make noises or do things that will annoy people.

**interrupt** *verb*. To stop someone’s conversation in order to speak.

A person might say “*Excuse ME!*” **sarcastically\*** when another person says something that the first person didn’t like.

“*I beg your pardon*” may mean “*I didn’t hear you.*”

“*I’m sorry*” is used when you feel bad that another person was hurt in some way. You apologize for accidents that you caused, or accidental rudeness.

“*I’m sorry.*” (You ate the last cookie, and your friend wanted one.)

“*I’m sorry. I was wrong.*” (You want to make up after a disagreement you had with your neighbor.)

“*I’m terribly sorry. Are you OK?*” (You ran over someone’s foot with your shopping cart at the supermarket.)

“*I’m truly sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you.*” (You are breaking up with your girlfriend, and she feels terrible about it.)

“*I’m dreadfully\* sorry.*” ( You have spilled ink on someone’s jacket.)

Sometimes “*I’m sorry,*” is not enough. Offer to fix the problem you caused. “*Please let me pay for your cleaning bill.*”

Respond to the person who says “*I’m sorry*”:

“*That’s OK. No harm done.*”

“*That did hurt. But don’t worry about it. I’ll be OK in a minute.*”

“*Thanks for offering to pay the bill. I’ll let you know how much it is.*”

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**sarcastically** *adverb*. Said in a way that is the opposite of what you mean. This shows you are annoyed, or is an unkind joke.

**dreadfully** *adverb*. An intensifier: very, very.

## Let's talk about it.

1. What are the most common polite words in English? What are the most common polite words in your native language?
2. How would you make these requests more polite?
  - a. Give me a cup of coffee.
  - b. Close the door.
  - c. Lend me a pen.
  - d. Help me do this.
3. Tell how you would thank a person who has:
  - a. Helped open a door for you.
  - b. Found your eyeglasses and returned them to you.
  - c. Given you a new winter coat.
  - d. Helped fix a computer problem that took an hour to solve.
4. An elderly lady has thanked you for helping to find her lost dog. What will you respond?
5. Pretend you received an expensive silver picture frame for a wedding gift. What will you write on a thank-you card?
6. What are some reasons for you to say "Excuse me"?  
When would you say "I'm sorry"?

## Using new words:

Match the word with its meaning.

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| _____ 7. to break into other people's conversation  | A. compliment    |
| _____ 8. to do more than is needed  | B. pleasure      |
| _____ 9. to say the name of a person or object during a conversation or speech  | C. interrupt     |
| _____ 10. to show or tell a person that you are thankful for their gift or favor  | D. overdo        |
| _____ 11. to tell a person that you think he or she has done a good job, or looks good, or is wearing nice clothing, etc. | E. sarcastically |
| _____ 12. a good and happy feeling  | F. apologize     |
| _____ 13. to say that you are sorry for something that hurt another person in some way                                    | G. mention       |
| _____ 14. speaking in a way in which the speaker says the opposite of what he means in order to show that he is annoyed   | H. appreciate    |

**Write a word in each sentence to make it correct. Choose from this list: compliment, appreciated, end, overdo.**

15. You can use the word "please" at the beginning or at the \_\_\_\_\_ of a sentence.
16. Americans like to be \_\_\_\_\_ for favors or gifts.
17. If someone pays you a \_\_\_\_\_, you can say "thank you."
18. It's not necessary to \_\_\_\_\_ the thank you's. One "thank you" is enough for a small favor.