

Top Table Manners Offenses

By Jill Evans Kryston, Etiquette Consultant

Q: I work in the restaurant industry and everyday I witness customers using poor table manners. What would you consider to be the top offenses?

A: While manners are most on display at the table, basic dining skills and behavior at the table have receded. Our relaxed lifestyles coupled with the fact that many families no longer eat together have contributed to the noticeable decline. In fact, many children today grow up eating finger foods and never learn how to properly handle utensils.

Let's begin with a common first offense: napkin etiquette. After being seated at the table, open the napkin and lay it across your lap. If you must leave the table during the course of a meal, the napkin is placed on your seat. Only after the meal is over does the napkin go back on the table; loosely placed to the left side of the plate.

Once utensils are used, they should not touch the table again. Often a diner will prop a knife on the side of a plate with the handle on the table. The correct way to rest a knife is to place it across the top right side of the plate. When taking a break from eating, the knife and fork should be positioned on the plate in an inverted "V" shape to signal the wait staff that you're not yet finished eating.

When eating a roll, never cut it in half and butter each half. The proper way to eat bread or a roll is to break off a bite-sized piece and butter just the piece you put into your mouth. It is impolite to bite into a roll and put it back on the bread plate.

Do you know the salt and pepper travel together? I like to tell the children in my classes that they are "married." If someone at your table requests the salt, you should pass both the salt and pepper. When they stay together you will only need to bother one person to get what you want.

Also, most people don't realize there's a "finished position" for your utensils when ending a meal. In order to signal the wait staff that you're done eating, the knife should be placed over the fork on the plate diagonally in what is commonly referred to as the "four o'clock" position.

Too, there is always the issue of elbows on the table. It is considered rude to put your elbows and arms on the table while eating. When a hand is not in use, it should be placed in your lap.

Finally, it is inconsiderate to blow your nose, groom yourself, conduct cell phone conversations, and text message while at the table. Should you need to engage in any of these behaviors, the polite way would be to excuse yourself to a rest room or a private place.

More than eating, dining out is about enjoying the company of others. While the objective isn't to have perfect manners, the experience is always made more pleasurable when we put our best foot forward and practice consideration of others by avoiding offensive behaviors. Bon appetite!

Do you have an etiquette question you want Jill to answer in her monthly column? Email your question(s) to: information@DefiningManners.com or mail to: P.O. Box 1703, Shavertown, PA 18708.

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