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**Emily Post**  
*Etiquette*  
*in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*  
**(1922)**

Excerpts from a [Digitized Text](#) at [Project Gutenberg](#).

Emily Post's advice book on manners was a best seller during her lifetime. Since its original publication there have been many revised editions, and the phrase "according to Emily Post" still conveys the standard for polite behavior.

(NB: Paragraph numbers apply to this excerpt, not the original source.)

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## **Chapter VII: Conversation**

### **Need of Reciprocity**

{1}Ideal conversation should be a matter of equal give and take, but too often it is all "take." The voluble talker—or chatterer—rides his own hobby straight through the hours without giving anyone else, who might also like to say something, a chance to do other than exhaustedly await the turn that never comes. Once in a while—a very long while—one meets a brilliant person whose talk is a delight; or still more rarely a wit who manipulates every ordinary topic with the agility of a sleight-of-hand performer, to the ever increasing rapture of his listeners.

{2}But as a rule the man who has been led to believe that he is a brilliant and interesting talker has been led to make himself a rapacious pest. No conversation is possible between others whose ears are within reach of his ponderous voice; anecdotes, long-winded stories, dramatic and pathetic, stock his repertoire; but worst of all are his humorous yarns at which he laughs uproariously though every one else grows solemn and more solemn.

{3}There is a simple rule, by which if one is a voluble chatterer (to be a good talker necessitates a good mind) one can at least refrain from being a pest or a bore. And the rule is merely, to stop and think.

### **“Think Before You Speak”**

{4} Nearly all the faults or mistakes in conversation are caused by not thinking. For instance, a first rule for behavior in society is: “Try to do and say those things only which will be agreeable to others.” Yet how many people, who really know better, people who are perfectly capable of intelligent understanding if they didn’t let their brains remain asleep or locked tight, go night after night to dinner parties, day after day to other social gatherings, and absent-mindedly prate about this or that without ever taking the trouble to think what they are saying and to whom they are saying it! Would a young mother describe twenty or thirty cunning tricks and sayings of the baby to a bachelor who has been helplessly put beside her at dinner if she thought? She would know very well, alas! that not even a very dear friend would really care for more than a hors d’oeuvre of the subject, at the board of general conversation. . . .

{5} Be careful not to let amiable discussion turn into contradiction and argument. The tactful person keeps his prejudices to himself and even when involved in a discussion says quietly “No. I don’t think I agree with you” or “It seems to me thus and so.” One who is well-bred never says “You are wrong!” or “Nothing of the kind!” If he finds another’s opinion utterly opposed to his own, he switches to another subject for a pleasanter channel of conversation. . . .

### **Going Fishing For Topics**

{6} The charming talker is neither more nor less than a fisherman. (Fisherwoman rather, since in America women make more effort to be agreeable than men do.) Sitting next to a stranger she wonders which “fly” she had better choose to interest him. She offers one topic; not much of a nibble. So she tries another or perhaps a third before he “rises” to the bait.

### **The Door Slammers**

{7} There are people whose idea of conversation is contradiction and flat statement. Finding yourself next to one of these, you venture:

“Have you seen any good plays lately?”

“No, hate the theater.”

“Which team are you for in the series?”

“Neither. Only an idiot could be interested in baseball.”

. . . .

### **{8} A Few Important Details Of Speech In Conversation**

Unless you wish to stamp yourself a person who has never been out of “provincial” society, never speak of your husband as “Mr.” except to an inferior. Mrs. Worldly for instance in talking with a stranger would say “my husband,” and to a friend, meaning one not only whom she calls by her first name, but anyone on her “dinner list,” she says, “Dick thought the play amusing” or “Dick said——“. This does not give her listener the privilege of calling him “Dick.” The listener in return speaks of her own husband as “Tom” even if he is seventy—unless her hearer is a very young person (either man or woman), when she would say “my husband.” Never “Mr. Older.” To

call your husband Mr. means that you consider the person you are talking to, beneath you in station. Mr. Worldly in the same way speaks of Mrs. Worldly as “my wife” to a gentleman, or “Edith” in speaking to a lady. Always.

{9}In speaking about other people, one says “Mrs.,” “Miss” or “Mr.” as the case may be. It is bad form to go about saying “Edith Worldly” or “Ethel Norman” to those who do not call them Edith or Ethel, and to speak thus familiarly of one whom you do not call by her first name, is unforgivable. It is also effrontery for a younger person to call an older by her or his first name, without being asked to do so. Only a very underbred, thick-skinned person would attempt it.

{10}Also you must not take your conversation “out of the drawing-room.” Operations, ills or personal blemishes, details and appurtenances of the dressing-room, for instance, are neither suitable nor pleasant topics, nor are personal jokes in good taste.

### **A Few Maxims For Those Who Talk Too Much—And Easily!**

{11}. . .Don’t pretend to know more than you do. To say you have read a book and then seemingly to understand nothing of what you have read, proves you a half-wit. Only the very small mind hesitates to say “I don’t know.”

{12}Above all, stop and think what you are saying! This is really the first, last and only rule. If you “stop” you can’t chatter or expound or flounder ceaselessly, and if you think, you will find a topic and a manner of presenting your topic so that your neighbor will be interested rather than long-suffering.

{13}Remember also that the sympathetic (not apathetic) listener is the delight of delights. The person who looks glad to see you, who is seemingly eager for your news, or enthralled with your conversation; who looks at you with a kindling of the face, and gives you spontaneous and undivided attention, is the one to whom the palm for the art of conversation would undoubtedly be awarded.

## **Chapter VIII: Words, Phrases, and Pronunciation**

{14}Traits of pronunciation which are typical of whole sections of the country, or accents inherited from European parents must not be confused with crude pronunciations that have their origin in illiteracy. A gentleman of Irish blood may have a brogue as rich as plum cake, or another’s accent be soft Southern or flat New England, or rolling Western; and to each of these the utterance of the others may sound too flat, too soft, too harsh, too refined, or drawled, or clipped short, but not uncultivated. . . .

{15}[How can people tell whether their pronunciation is correct?] Nothing should be simpler to determine. If they pronounce according to a standard dictionary, they are correct; if they don’t, they have an “accent” or are ignorant; it is for them to determine which. Such differences as between saying wash or wawsh, adVERtisement or advertISEment are of small importance. But

no one who makes the least pretence of being a person of education says: kep for kept, genelmun or gempmun or laydee, vawde-vil, or eye-talian.

### **How To Cultivate An Agreeable Speech**

{16}First of all, remember that while affectation is odious, crudeness must be overcome. A low voice is always pleasing, not whispered or murmured, but low in pitch. Do not talk at the top of your head, nor at the top of your lungs. Do not slur whole sentences together; on the other hand, do not pronounce as though each syllable were a separate tongue and lip exercise.

{17}As a nation we do not talk so much too fast, as too loud. Tens of thousands twang and slur and shout and burr! Many of us drawl and many others of us race tongues and breath at full speed, but, as already said, the speed of our speech does not matter so much. Pitch of voice matters very much and so does pronunciation—enunciation is not so essential—except to one who speaks in public.

{18}Enunciation means the articulation of whatever you have to say distinctly and clearly. Pronunciation is the proper sounding of consonants, vowels and the accentuation of each syllable.

{19}There is no better way to cultivate a perfect pronunciation; apart from association with cultivated people, than by getting a small pronouncing dictionary of words in ordinary use, and reading it word by word, marking and studying any that you use frequently and mispronounce. When you know them, then read any book at random slowly aloud to yourself, very carefully pronouncing each word. The consciousness of this exercise may make you stilted in conversation at first, but by and by the “sense” or “impulse” to speak correctly will come.

{20}This is a method that has been followed by many men handicapped in youth through lack of education, who have become prominent in public life, and by many women, who likewise handicapped by circumstances, have not only made possible a creditable position for themselves, but have then given their children the inestimable advantage of learning their mother tongue correctly at their mother’s knee.

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## Chapter II: Introductions

### The Correct Form

{21}The word “present” is preferable on formal occasions to the word “introduce.” On informal occasions neither word is expressed, though understood, as will be shown below. The correct formal introduction is:

“Mrs. Jones, may I present Mr. Smith?”

or,

“Mr. Distinguished, may I present Mr. Young?”

{22}The younger person is always presented to the older or more distinguished, but a gentleman is always presented to a lady, even though he is an old gentleman of great distinction and the lady a mere slip of a girl.

{23}No lady is ever, except to the President of the United States, a cardinal, or a reigning sovereign, presented to a man. The correct introduction of either a man or woman:

To the President is,

“Mr. President, I have the honor to present Mrs. Jones, of Chicago.”

To a Cardinal is,

“Your Eminence, may I present Mrs. Jones?”

To a King:

Much formality of presenting names on lists is gone through beforehand; at the actual presentation an “accepted” name is repeated from functionary to equerry and nothing is said to the King or Queen except:

“Mrs. Jones.”

But a Foreign Ambassador is presented,

“Mr. Ambassador, may I present you to Mrs. Jones.”

{24}Very few people in polite society are introduced by their formal titles. A hostess says, “Mrs. Jones, may I present the Duke of Overthere?” or “Lord Blank?”; never “his Grace” or “his Lordship.” The Honorable is merely Mr. Lordson, or Mr. Holdoffice. A doctor, a judge, a bishop, are addressed and introduced by their titles. The clergy are usually Mister unless they formally hold the title of Doctor, or Dean, or Canon. A Catholic priest is “Father Kelly.” A senator is always introduced as Senator, whether he is still in office or not. But the President of the United States, once he is out of office, is merely “Mr.” and not “Ex-president.” . . .

### **Forms Of Introductions To Avoid**

{25} Do not say: “Mr. Jones, shake hands with Mr. Smith,” or “Mrs. Jones, I want to make you acquainted with Mrs. Smith.” Never say: “make you acquainted with” and do not, in introducing one person to another, call one of them “my friend.” You can say “my aunt,” or “my sister,” or “my cousin”—but to pick out a particular person as “my friend” is not only bad style but, unless you have only one friend, bad manners—as it implies Mrs. Smith is “my friend” and you are a stranger. . . .

{26} Do not repeat “Mrs. Jones? Mrs. Smith! Mrs. Smith? Mrs. Jones!” To say each name once is quite enough.

### **When To Shake Hands**

{27} When gentlemen are introduced to each other they always shake hands.

{28} When a gentleman is introduced to a lady, she sometimes puts out her hand—especially if he is some one she has long heard about from friends in common, but to an entire stranger she generally merely bows her head slightly and says: “How do you do!” Strictly speaking, it is always her place to offer her hand or not as she chooses, but if he puts out his hand, it is rude on her part to ignore it. Nothing could be more ill-bred than to treat curtly any overture made in spontaneous friendliness. No thoroughbred lady would ever refuse to shake any hand that is honorable, not even the hand of a coal heaver at the risk of her fresh white glove.

{29} Those who have been drawn into a conversation do not usually shake hands on parting. But there is no fixed rule. A lady sometimes shakes hands after talking with a casual stranger; at other times she does not offer her hand on parting from one who has been punctiliously presented to her. She may find the former sympathetic and the latter very much the contrary. . . .

### **What To Say When Introduced**

{30} Best Society has only one phrase in acknowledgment of an introduction: “How do you do?” It literally accepts no other. When Mr. Bachelor says, “Mrs. Worldly, may I present Mr. Struthers?” Mrs. Worldly says, “How do you do?” Struthers bows, and says nothing. To sweetly echo “Mr. Struthers?” with a rising inflection on “—thers?” is not good form. Saccharine chirpings should be classed with crooked little fingers, high hand-shaking and other affectations. All affectations are bad form.

{31} Persons of position do not say: “Charmed,” or “Pleased to meet you,” etc., but often the first remark is the beginning of a conversation. For instance,

Young Struthers is presented to Mrs. Worldly. She smiles and perhaps says, “I hear that you are going to be in New York all winter?” Struthers answers, “Yes, I am at the Columbia Law School,” etc., or since he is much younger than she, he might answer, “Yes, Mrs. Worldly,” especially if his answer would otherwise be a curt yes or no. Otherwise he does not continue repeating her name.