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# Peas & Queues

The Minefield of Modern Manners

Written by Sandi Toksvig

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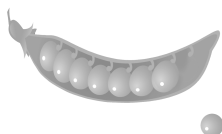
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# PEAS & QUEUES

THE MINEFIELD OF MODERN MANNERS



SANDI TOKSVIG

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# TO BEGIN: AN INTRODUCTION



## WHY DO WE NEED GOOD MANNERS?

*Nobody knows the age of the human race, but everybody agrees that it is old enough to know better.*

Author unknown

Dear Mary

This bit of a book is usually referred to as ‘The Introduction’. It’s the section most likely to be skipped by a reader so you may wonder why the author bothered. If you do just want to crack on with the basics of manners then by all means move along, but if you want to know why you should pay attention to them at all then it might be interesting. At any rate do be polite enough to at least give it a go, seeing as I’ve made the effort to write it.

## Sit up straight? How annoying

Two points straight away:

The first thing to say is that basic manners apply no matter where you are or what you are doing. They are even a good idea when no one is watching. Having a code of behaviour will help you know how to react to the unexpected.

The second point is to assure you that manners are not some

new notion invented by the present generation of old fogies to annoy youngsters. The fact is that, on the whole, human beings don't live in isolation from each other nor do they want to. Think how delighted Robinson Crusoe was when Man Friday turned up. If we're not going to live alone on a desert island then we need to find ways to get on. Irritatingly we can't all just do what we like. Imagine the chaos there would be on the roads. Manners are simply an expression of how we manage the tricky art of co-existing. A good starting point for this is to show kindness and consideration to others and every society has and has had some basic notion about this.

Most religions have spent a lot of time working out how you ought to behave and most of them have what is known as

## The Golden Rule

For example, the Mahabharata of Hinduism declares, 'This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what would cause pain if done to you', while the Jewish Talmud instructs 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary' and the Christian Bible follows on with 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. Sounds a simple plan which, if you follow it, should set you off on the right foot.

## MANNERS MAKETH THE MAN (AND THE WOMAN, THE KID, THE DOG . . .)

*A man's manners are a mirror in which he shows his portrait.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German writer

The general notion is that how you are seen to behave says something about the kind of person you are. Worrying about what impact your behaviour has on other people means you are thinking about someone other than yourself. It's not about using the right fork or addressing royalty correctly, it's about doing your best to be a considerate member of the community. We have rules because predictable behaviour can be very comforting. It is nice

to know what to do if you attend an event, which is why there are so many helpful hints about things like formal dinners, works functions, weddings and funerals. These are stages in life which will come up for us all and it's good to have a game plan.

## Minding your Ps and Qs

The expression 'mind your Ps and Qs', meaning 'be on your best behaviour', has been around for so long that no one can quite recall where it came from. There are many candidates:

1. It was a foreshortened admonishment to children to remember to say *Please* and *Thank you*.
2. It was a seventeenth-century admonishment for drinkers to keep an eye on how many pints and quarts they consumed.
3. It was an eighteenth-century admonishment for sailors to pay attention to their *peas* (a sailor's pea coat) and *queues* (a traditional nautical ponytail).

I could carry on through history seeking a meaning via the Norman Invasion of 1066, specific reading symbols in Medieval Latin texts or how early printers might easily confuse lowercase Ps and Qs but we have too much to do to get sidetracked. The fact that we don't know the precise origin of the phrase seems appropriate, for 'minding your Ps and Qs' at all is far from an exact science.

## Writing the rules

It's important to understand that rules about manners are not laws. They're not really even rules. They are suggestions. You don't have to keep them but you may get along better in life if you do. Over the years there have been many attempts to write down propositions for behaviour to help grease the wheels of the great social machine. Probably the book most responsible for kicking off modern ideas about this was the book I mentioned right at the outset – *De civilitate morum puerilium* (On Civility in

Boys) – which was written in 1530 by Erasmus of Rotterdam. (He also wrote *The Handbook for the Christian Knight* and the rather jollier *In Praise of Folly* in which Folly mucks about as a goddess having been brought up by two nymphs called *Inebriation* and *Ignorance* but sadly we haven't the time.) Quite what it was about sixteenth-century boys in Rotterdam that required a whole volume of suggestions for better behaviour is hard to know, but in the first six years of the book's publication it was reprinted thirty times. The first English version came out in 1532 and from then on it became popular to instruct young people in the basics of civil behaviour.

Erasmus didn't invent the idea of good conduct. You find it written about as soon as you find writing of any kind in history. There is a papyrus in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris from the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty (c. 2414–2375 BC) called *The Maxims of Ptahhotep* which is said to have been written by one of the top officials to King Isesi. It is low on jokes but in it Ptahhotep recommends the sort of behaviour that still seems quite a good idea today – truthfulness, self-control, and kindness to others.

## EVOLVING ETIQUETTE

I mention the past but it's critical not to get stuck in it. The way manners are expressed evolves on an almost daily basis. In the twelfth century, for example, it was recommended that one should cough very loudly when entering a house 'for there may be something doing which you ought not to see'. These days it's easier to ring the bell.

The word 'Etiquette' derives from the French word for small labels or tickets attached to bags to tell you what was inside them. In the same way 'Protocol' comes from the Greek *protokollon* which was a sheet glued to a manuscript case to show its contents. Labels or stickers attached to things proclaiming what they were and where they belonged gradually developed into written instructions for how to behave. They would be posted, for example, outside a soldier's billet or lodging to tell him what was

expected. Interestingly, in Danish the word 'billet' means 'ticket' just like 'etiquette'. Those who ran Louis XIV's palace at Versailles used *étiquettes* (little cards) to remind courtiers to keep off the grass or whatever else was considered *de rigueur* in court life.

In fact a lot of the words associated with manners have their origins in the royal courts of the past. The word 'courteous' even has 'court' in it. It starts popping up in the mid fourteenth century and comes from the Old French *curteis* – 'having courtly bearing or manners'. The German word *hübsch* meaning 'beautiful' is descended from *hofesch* with the word *hof* meaning 'court'. Presumably the notion was that only the rich had time to behave really well and the poor should at least aspire to follow their example.

What is and isn't generally acceptable changes all the time. There is a painting by the Dutchman Andries Both called *Hunting lice by candlelight*. It was painted in 1630 and it shows four men engaged in ridding a kneeling figure of unwanted vermin in his hair. This is not a procedure most people today would think of as an acceptable public practice. When I was at boarding school in the late 1970s my headmistress would have had a polite but clear seizure if any one of us girls had turned up in church without white gloves on. Fortunately (although not for the white glove industry) that is a notion which has died a happy death.

There are rules today about Twitter and Facebook which didn't exist a decade ago because neither did Twitter or Facebook. Modes of behaviour need to be examined continuously as we decide which are worth keeping and which need to be updated. That doesn't mean that some rules which have been around for a long time aren't still worth sticking to.

## SOCIAL HIERARCHY

*An Englishman's way of speaking absolutely classifies him,  
The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him.*

*My Fair Lady*, Alan Jay Lerner, 1956

Before we get going let me just be very clear that having good



manners has nothing to do with class. Being polite is not the same as being subservient. Fortunately we no longer live in a world where anyone needs to tug a forelock. Respect needs to be earned whatever your background and it is not something anyone should assume they will receive because of their social class. Sadly, there are some who have failed to notice this democratisation of society and who continue to behave as if their class has any bearing on how people ought to treat them.

I have a lesbian friend who came out to her mother who was rather grand. It went better than expected, so with some trepidation my friend went on to describe her girlfriend, Frances.

‘What does Frances’s father do?’ asked her mother.

‘He used to work in a mill,’ my friend replied.

‘He owned a mill?’ said her mother.

‘No,’ explained my friend, ‘he was on the shop floor.’

There was a sharp intake of breath from the mother who, in her most horrified voice, exclaimed ‘Frances is working class?’ The lesbian thing was fine. The class thing was a complete horror.

## A class act

So where class is concerned be a little cautious and

### 1. Never presume you know someone’s background because of their accent

My English accent sounds very ‘posh’ but in fact I am the daughter of a journalist. I don’t come from money, just another country.

### 2. Don’t presume someone’s accent is linked to their intelligence

Brain power is never measured in vowels.

### 3. Don’t limit anyone because of the accident of their birth

Oprah Winfrey is sometimes suggested to be the most influential woman in the world. She was born to a single, poor, teenage mum in rural Mississippi.

## • A quick but classy aside

• Dame Barbara Cartland was one of the most prolific Romantic  
• novelists of all time. She did not begin her life with a title. Her  
• mother ran a dress shop. Dame Barbara, however, perceived  
• herself as a cut above. When she was interviewed on Radio  
• 4's *Today* programme by Sandra Harris she was at her most  
• condescending. Asked by Ms Harris if she thought class barriers  
• had broken down in Britain, Dame Barbara replied, 'Of course  
• they have or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to someone like  
• you.'

•.....

## 4. Don't be a snob

This applies not just to those who think themselves in a higher class bracket but to those from the 'working' class too. It is terrible when a privileged person is arrogant but it is equally unpleasant when someone from a poor background believes that they alone have the right to know what it is to suffer.

## 5. Do remember the sixteenth-century French writer, Michel de Montaigne

Michel is claimed as the Father of Modern Scepticism which I'm not sure about, but he did quite rightly point out: 'However high a man sits, he still sits on his own arse.'

## The upside of manners

The fact is you will do better in life if other people like you and find you a pleasure to have around; if you know how to behave. A study by Barbara Griffin, a psychologist at the University of Western Sydney, has shown that bad manners are bad for business. It makes sense. If managers are rude to their staff then no one feels particularly inspired to work hard. If business people are rude, their customers will take their custom elsewhere.

If you find it hard to think about others then you may bear in mind that consideration for your fellow man may also be best

for you. A friend of mine was a doctor at the A & E department of a large hospital. One night he was running to work and was desperate to be excused. The pubs were just closing and he ran into one to ask the landlord if he might use the facilities. 'No,' said the landlord and very rudely told him to go away. My friend explained that he was in some pain and was desperate but nevertheless the landlord threw him out. A few hours later, early in the morning, my doctor friend was called to attend a man who had broken his leg. He pulled back the curtain to a cubicle to reveal the same pub landlord. My friend smiled. He examined the man's leg. 'It's definitely broken,' he said, 'you must be in some pain. I bet you want my help but I am very busy.' My friend said he was ashamed but he made the man wait. The moral of the story? Being nice for its own sake is best, but if you can't manage that then be nice because you never know when you might need some help yourself.

## AN ARIA OF ATTITUDE – THE TOP Cs OF MANNERS

Consideration

Common sense

Context

Comfort

In this book I have tried to cover situations which might arise during the general course of your life. I can only hope that I am able to provide a helpful thought. Please accept that I may be wrong in some instances (although it would be poor behaviour to make me feel bad by pointing it out). It is, of course, not possible for me to cover everything, but the plan is to lay down some basics and to make you think. After that, like a tenor singing Verdi, you need reach for your Top Cs to see you through.

The first is 'Consideration', but after that you need to remember 'Common sense' and 'Context'. Be kind, be sensible and remember that not everyone thinks or feels the way you do. Manners are there to be interpreted and common sense should always prevail. It may be considered rude to bang a perfect stranger on the back, but not if they are choking to death. We should also