



## Your guide to perfect formal etiquette

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Going to a formal? It's tough enough to worry about the date, the duds and the dinner. But one false move in social graces and all the best intentions will fall apart more quickly than a \$50 suit. At Play's put together a primer on going to a formal, from how to get through those awkward introductions at a table of strangers to whether men should wear makeup.

### THE GROUP INTRODUCTION

Q. I'm seated at a big round table with people I don't know. What's the polite way to make introductions? Do I reach across the table to shake hands, or just nod or wave?

A. Get to the table a little early and walk around introducing yourself to everyone, says Peggy Post, the great-granddaughter of etiquette doyenne Emily Post and author of the 17th edition of "Emily Post Etiquette." "It makes everyone feel more comfortable."

If everyone is already engaged in conversation, "then you can wave across the table," Post says. "If you are close enough to shake hands, that is ideal too."

And if you are already seated at a business function and somebody comes around to greet you, stand up--or at least begin to stand up--whether you are a man or woman, she adds. But in a more social situation, the woman can remain seated.

### ESCAPING A BORE

Q. Is there a good way to politely escape that conversation that just won't end with that guy who just won't stop talking about his new BMW?

A. No worries about being pinned to the wall all night talking about carburetors, Post says. But the first rule might be hard. "Don't look bored," she says. "Look them in the eye. Nod. Make eye contact. Don't start the wandering eye syndrome. Give them your attention, and when there is a break in the conversation, say something so you have the last word: 'Oh, it's really been interesting.'"

Or, change the subject and make your exit, she says, even if it's just to say, "Oh, what a nice event" or "I am glad we got to meet." Or come up with a reason to leave, like there is somebody you need to meet. "Say, 'Excuse me, there's somebody I am on the lookout for, I have to greet them,'" Post says.

Or, offer to refill the dull person's drink, do it and then drift away. "Whatever you do, do it gracefully," says Post, and "end it with aplomb (this sentence as published has been corrected in this text). Say: 'I am glad we had a chance to chat. It's nice to meet you and have a nice time.'"

## **TAXI ETIQUETTE**

Q. Okay, my husband (or date) and I are getting into a taxi. Does he get in first, or do I? Do the same rules apply to limousines?

A. It depends, but generally, "whoever gets there first jumps in, especially in a crowded city," Post says. Overall, "it doesn't matter much. Who has the packages? Who is there first? Sometimes it is hard to slide over if you have a winter coat and packages. The hard and fast rule is common sense and consideration."

## **JUST CHECKING MY E-MAIL**

Q. Is there any place or time during a formal event where it is OK to use my Blackberry or cell phone?

A. Turn the ringer off, first and foremost, Post says. "And I wouldn't even look at it." If you're expecting an important call, warn the people you are with and then, when you get that call, excuse yourself and take it. "So you don't take every call. I would say 98 percent of calls are not emergency calls."

It's the same with the Blackberry. If you absolutely need to check it, do it in the hallway or away from the party so you aren't looking at the equipment all of the time, she says. "Don't keep glancing down [to] see who is sending you messages or calling you. You are there to focus on the present and not on the messages. Do it very quickly and discreetly, without any glancing down or noise."

## **KNOW YOUR LIMITS**

Q. Is it ever OK to ask the bartender for half a glass?

A. Sure, says Neal Zucker, CEO of Corporate Cleaning Services. "I think it's completely acceptable to ask for what you want. If you just want a sip, have a sip. You don't need to feel pressure."

## **NO, A LITTLE TO THE LEFT**

Q. Are there any foods you should not eat?

A. Unless you want to walk around a party with your dinner stuck in your teeth, skip the stringy foods no matter how tempting, Zucker says. "Ribbs are a good example of something that is very easy to get in your teeth," he says. "And corn on the cob."

Watch out for dishes that can stain a white shirt, he says, and avoid them. That means passing on the plate of pasta with a red tomato sauce. Zucker says he always tries to think about where his tie is going. "Half the time, it is going into the dinner," he says. "I look down and my tie has been part of dinner."

## **FLOWER POWER**

Q. Is there ever a time and place for a corsage?

A. Not unless you're going to the prom, Zucker says. "Leave the corsages for the prom."

While corsages may be so high school, Zucker does try to send a little something to the host of a table at a charity event if he is invited. "I'll often send flowers before or after as a thank-you, to show my appreciation," says Zucker, who often rings Ronsley Special Events on Huron or Heffernan Morgan on Elston for the flowers. Sometimes, he'll send an orchid. Or in the spring, a bowl of tulips. "I am very seasonal," he says.

## **WATCH THE BLING**

Q. Jewelry-wise, where is the line between trashy and classy?

A. It depends on the event, says Streamwood-based personal stylist Laura Siebold, who recently appeared on "Style Me with Rachel Hunter."

"If it is a wedding, the rule is: Never outshine the bride. Keep it simple. With a charity event, the more 'real' jewelry you have, the better. When you are going to a society or charity event, have your investment pieces on. But don't do it all at once. And save the costume jewelry for going out with your girlfriends."

There is no hard and fast rule about how many pieces to wear. "Just don't wear everything at once," she says. "I think if it's simple, you have a better chance of pulling it off than if you are wearing a lot of bold, chunky pieces."

Q. Can men wear jewelry?

A. "Yes, of course!" Siebold says. "Especially cuff links. Cuff links are some of the sexiest accessories a man can wear."

Also nice is a great watch, she says. "But leave the earrings, chains and bracelets at home."

Q. Should a woman wear a watch?

A. "It's a personal preference. If it is a dressy watch and you are going to a dressy occasion, sure," she says. "Just don't wear your Swatch watch."

## **MEN AND MAKEUP**

Q. Should men ever wear makeup?

A. "I think if men want to put on makeup and feel comfortable with it, all the more power to them," Siebold says. "If they apply it properly, nobody will even be able to tell. And a little lip balm goes a long way."

## **SHOW OFF THE TATTS**

Q. Should women try to hide their tattoos?

A. Not unless you want to, says Siebold, who has a tattoo. "I feel really, this is who I am and I am not going to cover that up," she says. Except for a church wedding, she says. "Then, I would use a wrap."

## **WRAPS, GOOD AND BAD**

Q. Are pashminas totally out? And what about my boyfriend, who always reaches for his GoreTex shell?

A. "Pashminas are classic," Siebold says. "Wear them when it is a little cooler. Also, there are lightweight

And for the men, who are reaching for their North Face shell? "Wear a top coat, or some sort of a blazer," she says. "But no Gore-Tex, windbreakers or zippy sweatshirts. Oh yikes! If it is cold outside, men can wear a cashmere or wool blend overcoat and then check it."