

Are These Manners Still Relevant?



I have long been fascinated by books like 1883's *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* by Walter R. Houghton, not just for the sometimes outdated, sexist advice, but for the highfalutin language in which it is couched. He writes:

"Such exclamations as 'The Dickens,' or 'Mercy,' or 'Good Gracious,' should never be used. If you are surprised or astonished, suppress the fact. Such expressions border closely on profanity."

One can only imagine the horror he would feel if subjected to today's common expressions of astonishment freely used. (See the answers at the end of this document for another example of unacceptable language.)

Below are 12 admonitions from Mr. Houghton's book. I have altered 4 of them. Can you identify which 4? Which do you consider still relevant?

1. A visitor should not appear to notice any unpleasant family affairs that fall under his observation.
2. Do not exhibit vulgarity by 'making puns.'
3. A gentleman should speak to the intellectual standard of the lady he is conversing with. Never embarrass her by speaking beyond her understanding.



4. The eyes are the index of the soul, and many traits of character may be read in them . . . Nothing is more foolish and vulgar than painting or coloring the lids or lashes.

5. To every well-bred man physical education is indispensable. It is the duty of a gentleman to know how to ride, to shoot, to fence, to box, to swim, to row, and to dance. Open-air exercise is essential to good health and a perfect physical development. Athletic displays are unbecoming in women.



6. Do not show a want of courtesy by consulting your watch either at home or abroad. If at home, it appears as though you were tired of your company and wished them to be gone. If abroad, it appears as though the hours dragged heavily, and you were calculating how soon you would be released.

7. It is your duty to seem interested in the conversation of those who are talking.

8. Gossip and tale-bearing are always a personal confession of malice and imbecility.

9. Showing curiosity to know of the private affairs of others is only acceptable when inquiring of a person's health after a known illness.

10. In public conveyances one should do nothing to discommode or annoy his fellow passengers.

11. Always accept with expressions of gratitude any present offered you in the spirit of kindness. It is, however, acceptable to say, "You shouldn't have. I fear you are too generous."



12. Never affect superiority. If you chance to be in the company of an inferior, do not let him feel his inferiority.

Answers on the following page.

The Book actually says:

3. A gentleman should never lower the intellectual standard in conversing with ladies. He should consider them as equal in understanding with himself.

5. To every well-bred man and woman physical education is indispensable. It is the duty of a gentleman to know how to ride, to shoot, to fence, to box, to swim, to row, and to dance. He should be graceful. . . . Dancing, skating, swimming, archery, games of lawn tennis, riding and driving, and croquet, all aid in developing and strengthening the muscles, and should be practiced by ladies. The better the physical training, the more self-possessed and graceful she will be. Open-air exercise is essential to good health and a perfect physical development.



9. Never ask impertinent questions. Never betray a curiosity to know of the private and domestic affairs of others.

11. Always accept with expressions of gratitude any present offered you in the spirit of kindness. Never say to one who makes you a present, "I fear you rob yourself," nor anything to imply that the gift is beyond his means.

Another admonition on language:

Never use the phrases, "What-d-ye call it," "Thingummy," "What's his name," or any such substitutes for a proper name or place. If you cannot recall the names you wish to use, it is better not to tell the story or incident connected with them. No lady of high breeding will ever use these substitutes in conversation.