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# Image Insights

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## DINING ETIQUETTE FOR THE FAST-FOOD GENERATION

By Jill Bremer, AICI, CIP  
Bremer Communications

Everyone needs an etiquette book on his or her shelf, one of those five-pound encyclopedias of everything related to manners. I think it should be a mandatory gift to every graduate, right along with the PDA and new briefcase. I received one when I finished high school and I still have it on my bookshelf. It's a little dog-eared, but the advice within isn't showing its age (unlike its owner).

Why is this book so important? You'll be glad you have it when you're faced with an invitation to a formal event. It will teach you first how to properly respond to the invitation and then, how to eat that multi-course meal with dozens of utensils, plates and glasses. It can help you plan a wedding, teach you how to write a letter, even how to get along with your co-workers.

But in this fast-food era, many people have forgotten - or were never taught - the fundamentals of dining etiquette. Which way should I pass? Which fork is mine? What do I do with my napkin? What follows are the answers to the basic questions many people have about dining. (If you need advice on how to combine business with a meal, please read "The Business Lunch" posted in the "Image Insights" archives.)

The first thing to do after being seated at a table is to immediately place your napkin in your lap. Unfold it into either a large triangle or rectangle. Never use your napkin as a tissue, but have one close by if you think you'll need to wipe your nose during the meal. Ladies should blot their lipstick with a tissue before eating so that they don't soil the cloth napkin and glassware. Don't flip over your coffee cup or other glassware you won't be using. If a beverage is served during the meal that you don't want, simply hold your hand over the cup and say, "No thank you."

If you have to leave the table during the meal, say a soft "excuse me" to the people on either side of you, leave your napkin on your chair (not the table) and push the chair under the table as you leave.

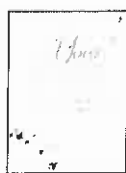
As you look at your place setting, remember that solids are on the left and liquids are on the right. In other words, your bread plate is on the left side above your forks and your drinking glasses are on the right side above the knife and spoons. Use silverware from the outside in. The first fork you will need will probably be your salad fork, the one farthest on the left. The larger

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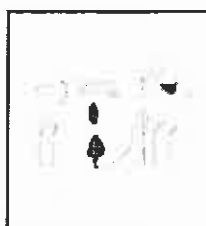
Bremer Communications

526 North Highland Ave  
 Oak Brook, IL 60059-1440  
 Phone: (708) 548-0794  
 Fax: (708) 548-8031

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fork directly to its right is your dinner fork. On the far right side of your place setting will most likely be a soup spoon, and on its left, a teaspoon followed by the knife. If you see utensils placed horizontally across the top of your place setting, save those for dessert. Remember - once a utensil has been used for eating, it never again touches the tablecloth, only the china!



**Click on this place setting to see a larger image!**

Your "real estate" at a table consists of, not only your place setting, but also the other items directly in front of you. It is your responsibility to take notice of those things and initiate their use. Roll baskets, butter, cream, salad dressings, sugar, salt and pepper - if they're within your reach, pick them up and start them around. Pass to the right and refrain from helping yourself first. Those items should make a complete pass around the table before you get your turn. If you just can't stand not having first choice of the rolls, turn to your neighbor on your right and say, "Would you mind if I help myself first?" They'll always say yes. Whenever you pass something with a handle, such as dressings, pass it with the handle facing the other person so that they can grasp it easily. And always pass the salt and pepper as a set, even if only one was requested.

It's important that you place the butter first on the bread plate before buttering your bread. Break up your bread or rolls into one- or two-bite morsels for buttering and eating. Whatever you take up to your mouth to eat should be eaten in one or two consecutive bites. Your tablemates don't want to see the part that didn't quite fit in your mouth placed back on your bread plate!

To eat soup properly, draw the spoon away from you and quietly sip the soup from the side of the spoon. Tilt the bowl away from you to get to the last drops. When you're finished, place the spoon on the plate beneath the soup bowl. If there is no plate, rest the spoon in the bowl. Follow these same guidelines for any dessert served in a bowl.

Salads should be prepared so that they consist of bite-size pieces. But if the salad contains leaves that are too big to eat, use your salad fork to cut them into smaller pieces. And if that doesn't work, use your dinner knife. But only use the knife when all other methods have failed. Why? Because you'll also need that knife for the main course, and after you've used it for the salad, there's no place to put it so that it doesn't also disappear with the salad plate.

When eating the main course, pace your speed of eating to that of your tablemates so that you don't make them feel uncomfortable. In the United States, we eat "American Style". Here's how to do it. Cut your food with the fork in your left hand and the knife in your right hand. Cut only one piece at a time. Then lay your knife down along the top edge of the plate and transfer the fork to your right hand. Bring the food up to your mouth with the tines on the fork facing upward. Don't stab your food or hold the silverware with your fists. And be careful not to gesture or point with your silverware, whether or not it has food on it.

If you must remove something from your mouth as you eat, take it out the way it went in. In other words, if it entered your mouth on a fork, remove it with your fork. If it was finger food, use your fingers to remove it. Hold your napkin in front of your mouth to mask the removal, then place the item on the side of your plate. Don't try to hide it under the plate, because as soon as the plates are cleared it will be left behind on the tablecloth! Don't hide

any paper trash you've accumulated during the meal under your plate either. Just place it on the edge of your bread plate.

At the conclusion of the meal, imagine your dinner plate as a clock and place your utensils in the 4:20 position. It's considered rude to push your plates away, stack them up or hand them to the server. Place your loosely-folded napkin on the table just as you stand to leave, not before.

Maneuvering through a meal doesn't have to be scary. Like all elements of etiquette, it boils down to common sense combined with kindness. Knowing the guidelines for dining etiquette gives you confidence so that you can relax and enjoy the meal and company. And in this fast-food age, it can also make you unforgettable!

*Jill Bremer, AICI, CIP, owner of Bremer Communications, offers training, consulting and coaching in professional image development and presentation skills. Her clients include Oracle, Abbott Labs, W.W. Grainger, U.S. Department of Energy and the National Association of Realtors. She can be reached at 708-848-5945 or at [www.bremercommunications.com](http://www.bremercommunications.com)*

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