

U.S. Culture



The U.S. is a vast and diverse nation, with many regions and subcultures that account for a wide spectrum of cultural norms. While there is no simple answer to what makes an American tick, some generalizations about U.S. culture are possible, and this can be helpful along the path to [deeper understanding](#) [1] and assimilation. A bit of advice though: as with all generalizations - apply this information carefully. Sometimes it will work and sometimes it won't.

It is difficult to define what an American is because there are so many kinds of Americans.

Korean student at Yale

American Values

Individualism

One of the most pervasive values in U.S. American culture is individualism, and understanding its effects can help illuminate many aspects of the culture. In more collective cultures, accomplishments and successes may be viewed foremost as an honor to the group, for example, how it reflects upon one's family or hometown community. In the U.S., a person's success is more likely to be attributed primarily to the hard work and perseverance of the individual.

Time

Efficiency is a virtue in the U.S. Americans are apt to become impatient with slow moving lines particularly when they are trying to conduct business, and expect rapid and efficient customer service. Chatting with the customers at the expense of efficient service is not well tolerated. To Americans *time is money*. It should be valued, saved, and used wisely.

Americans also place considerable value on punctuality. Different types of activities have different conventions. You should arrive at the exact time specified for meals or appointment with professors, doctors, and other professionals. You can arrive anytime between the hours specified for informal parties, receptions, and cocktail parties. Plan to arrive a few minutes before the specified time for public meetings, plays, concerts, movies, sports events, classes, church services, and weddings. If you're unable to keep an appointment, you should always call to advise them that you will be late or unable to make the appointment.

Privacy

The right to privacy is a notion that runs deep in American culture. It's something to be both respected and defended, and is considered fundamental to a free society. Americans carry this right like a shield, and while often very warm and welcoming hosts, the home is considered a place of privacy. "Alone time" is considered important

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Published on Office of International Students & Scholars (<https://oiss.yale.edu>)

for balancing mental and physical health. It is inappropriate to visit even close friends without calling ahead, and although Americans often tell a guest, "Make yourself at home," it is a friendly statement that must be carefully interpreted.

Directness/Openness

Although it may seem contradictory to the American sense of privacy, Americans are raised to be open and direct. While defending the right to privacy, an American may assert that you must have something to hide if you aren't willing to be open and honest. Overall, they may be quite uncomfortable when faced with a more reserved, and less direct approach. Directness equals trustworthiness in American culture. One comforting aspect of the straightforwardness of Americans is that, unlike other cultures where what is said can be quite different from what is meant, in the U.S., *no* usually means *no* and *yes* usually means *yes*.

Americans, however, are not as open as they might like to believe in some areas, such as when they are compelled to criticize. *Constructive criticism* is a term for delivering criticism in a way the other person will not find offensive or unacceptable.

Social Mobility

At the heart of the "American dream" lies the lure of "rags to riches" - the belief that if one works hard enough, no matter what the circumstances, there are no limits to achievement. In other words, success is based on personal effort and merit, and the harder you work and the more deserving you are will lead to a commensurate rise in achievement. Exceptional success stories such as high paid executives who grow up in poverty or college drop outs who become famous billionaires help to underscore this notion. Statistically, however, socio-economic status, race, gender, and other factors can affect one's chances for financial advancement. In spite of anti-discrimination laws and other social policy tools designed to level opportunities, social mobility is not as fluid as the "dream" may suggest.

Equality/Informality

"All men are created equal" is one of the most famous quotations from the Declaration of Independence, and the value of equality is considered fundamental to the American spirit. This belief is more likely to lead to informality in general behavior than to fluidity between socio-economic classes. The informality of American speech, especially the common use of first name, casual dress, and relaxed posture can be quite shocking to some international students and scholars. Be careful not to confuse informal behavior with lack of hierarchy, respect or absolute informality. The signs of respect, while often subtle, are important, and it is better to be too formal than too informal. Wait to be asked to be on a first name basis with your professors, or supervisors for example.

Competition/Achievement

Because of the emphasis on the individual, Americans can be competitive, and to be called a high achiever in the U.S. is quite a compliment.

Americans value action, and will generally keep a very busy schedule. As a result, Americans may seem hurried, running from one thing to the next - unable to relax and enjoy themselves. To a newcomer, the pace of life may seem very rushed at first. The emphasis on achievement can lead to not only an over-scheduled life, but also not-so-friendly competition. One of the good things about these high achieving Americans is that they can have a good sense of teamwork when cooperating with others toward a common goal. In the school setting, this team spirit is perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of study groups where students work together on a project or exam preparation.

Self-Help

In the U.S., people can only take credit for what they have accomplished on their own. Being born into a rich family is seen as an "accident of birth," but being born poor and working your way up is worthy of praise. Doing things for one's self is highly respectable and expected. Therefore if you are struggling with classwork, social or personal

issues, you are expected to reach out for help rather than wait for help to come to you.

Taboos

Social protocols are quite relaxed in the U.S. but there are very few taboos.

- Cover your mouth when you yawn, sneeze or cough. Americans are careful not to spread germs. It is considered unsanitary to not cover one's mouth.
- Americans are offended by strong odors, and normally bathe daily (sometimes twice daily in hot weather), and use underarm deodorant. Strong smelling perfumes or colognes are applied sparingly because they may not be pleasant to others.
- Do not belch loudly in public. Flatulence should be controlled as discreetly as possible.
- Do not spit. You may see people spitting on the streets, but it is considered very rude.
- Do not pick your teeth or nose in public.
- Do not stare (gaze continuously) at someone you are talking to.
- Do not whistle at women. This is [sexual harassment](#) [2].

Suggested Readings

- Wanning, Esther. [CultureShock! USA: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette](#) [3] (2009). ISBN: 0761455035
- Stewart, Edward C. [American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective](#) [4] (2005). ISBN: 1877864013
- Lanier, Alison. [Living in the USA](#) [5] (2004). ISBN: 1931930198
- Althen, Gary. [American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States](#) [6] (2002). ISBN: 1877864994
- Collis, Harry. [101 American Customs: Understanding Language & Culture](#) [7] (1999). ISBN: 0844224073

Building Relationships

Constructing a circle of friends and a social support network will take time and effort, and is one of the most important things to attend to when relocating to a new environment. Before coming to the U.S., you may have developed expectations of making new American friends. Who those friends would be, and what they would be like was probably shaped by your notions of what a more or less typical American is. As you may have discovered by now, a typical American can be rather difficult to define. So who will your friends be? There is no ready answer. You will meet so many different kinds of people in the U.S.

Keep an Open Mind and Try to Not Be Judgmental

A friend could be one of those typical Americans. You will also get to know international students from other countries, or students from your own country. Or maybe you will meet an American-born person who is unlike any American person you have ever met, imagined or seen in films or on T.V. Friends come in all flavors.

Be Patient

Take this advice from a visiting scholar at Yale, "Initial social contact plants the seeds for a friendship." Remember that going from friendliness to friendship is a gradual process and takes time.

Be Yourself

Because of the emphasis on individuality in American culture, it is expected that everyone will be different. Be confident about who you really are. Also, don't be afraid to be open when you are not sure of the norms of behavior. Ask, "How do you do this in the U.S.? In my country we do it this way." Most Americans will be pleased to teach you about their culture.

Look and Listen

A word, phrase or gesture that means something in your home country may mean something very different in the U.S. Watch people's reactions in their conversations with you or with others:

- How close do people stand when they talk?
- How do people greet each other?
- Do people tend to agree with you or do they express differing opinions freely?
- What makes you feel dissatisfied or uncomfortable when communicating with someone?
- How do Americans change their communication styles when talking with a professor? A student? A friend? A family member? A stranger?

Look for Commonalities

As different as we can be across cultures, there are also many ways in which we are the same. A good place to begin seeking out the commonalities between you and others is through conversation. Talk about family, school, childhood, weather, food, travel, work, favorite things - like music, books, and leisure activities. What do you find funny, embarrassing, sad or inspiring? As naive as it may sound there is some truth in the statement, people are people everywhere.

Beware of Stereotypes

A stereotype is an idea about a person's characteristics or personality, which is incorrectly assumed to be shared by all members of the same group. Possible stereotypes in the U.S. might be that all Chinese are polite and good at math, or all Italians are emotional. A stereotype about Americans might be that they are all arrogant, rude, and outspoken. Try not to act on any preconceived ideas you may have about someone you meet. It may be impossible to forget stereotypes, but it is possible to be aware of them and ready to find the exceptions.

Take Initiative in Meeting Others

This is one of the most important elements. Because of the work load at Yale, it is possible to fall into the rut of all work and no play. Don't wait for a social life to come to you. Make time each week to go out and attend events, take part in sports activities, invite a friend for a meal or a movie. Be active in building your social network. Remember too that Americans could be shy about making friends with people from other countries. Many of them have been raised in a socially and linguistically isolated atmosphere. Don't be afraid to begin conversations, extend invitations and if necessary make the first move.

An invitation to a party or an event will often be delivered verbally in a very casual manner. Don't always expect a written invitation or a follow-up phone call. If you are interested in going to a party, and don't have all of the details, such as where to go and what time, it is customary to phone the host of the party to get more information.

Be Persistent

Some social interactions may be superficial and you may experience disappointments in your attempts to form new friends. Learn to distinguish between friendliness and the deeper bond of friendship. Most of all, don't get discouraged. As we say in English, "There are many fish in the sea," and finding true friends takes time and effort.

Have a list of topics you are ready to talk about. Examples: cultural differences, slang terms, American food, family members, gestures, wedding customs, etc.

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Links:

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[1] <https://oiss.yale.edu/node/440>

[2] <https://provost.yale.edu/title-ix>

[3] <https://www.amazon.com/CultureShock-USA-Survival-Etiquette-Cultureshock/dp/0761455035>

[4] <https://www.amazon.com/American-Cultural-Patterns-Cross-Cultural-Perspective/dp/1877864013>

[5] <https://www.amazon.com/Living-USA-Alison-Lanier/dp/1931930198>

[6] <https://www.amazon.com/American-Ways-Foreigners-United-States/dp/1877864994>

[7] <https://www.amazon.com/101-American-Customs-Understanding-Practices/dp/0844224073>