

Want to work or study in the United Kingdom?

An international student's guide to British culture and etiquette



The [UK](#) is home to world-class universities that welcome over [400,000](#) international students per academic year.

Higher education in the UK offers a unique opportunity to broaden knowledge, enhance horizons and enrich personal and professional lives. Not only must foreign students manage multiple academic and social pressures, they must also navigate the challenges of [British culture and language](#).

So, if you're an international student heading to the UK, there are several unique and often quirky British customs, language and cultural differences you should take note of.

The best way to learn is from experience but having some background knowledge on British culture will be invaluable as you navigate your way through the British maze.

Apologising

The word 'sorry' is probably the most over-used word in the British language. Brits have a huge tendency to over-apologise, from the weather to when someone bumps into them on the train. A

survey found that the average person in the UK says the word ‘sorry’ around seven times a day, with some apologising up to 20 times!

Queuing

UK civilians have a strange habit of forming queues wherever there are large groups of people. The British take queuing very seriously; they wait their turn and go by a ‘first come, first serve’ basis. Please do not under any circumstances jump or push in as you will be confronted with scathing looks, so be warned!

Being polite

Learning the ‘Ps and Qs’ (please and thank you) is taught to Brits from a very young age. Traditional British custom states that ‘manners maketh the man’, so try to sprinkle as many p’s and q’s into the conversation as possible. Being polite will always be well-received and put you in a good stead. A ‘please’ is almost always followed by a ‘thank you’.

Punctuality

Brits also tend to value punctuality and being late is often regarded as the height of rudeness. For business or more formal meetings, it is advisable to arrive 5-10 minutes early. Try not to arrive late to lectures as no one likes to be interrupted mid-flow. Of you are late, enter quietly and don’t forget to say ‘sorry!’. At less formal or larger gatherings like parties, being 5 or 10 minutes late is less of a problem.

Tea

The British truly believe that almost anything can be cured with a good-ol’ cup of tea! In fact, it’s very much part of the fabric of British life. Offering a ‘cuppa’ is a great way to break the ice and make new friends. English breakfast tea is the most popular type of tea, followed closely by the Queen’s favourite – Earl Grey. The conundrum is whether one pours the milk or tea first (...but if you go for milk first, you’re wrong)!

British Humour

Brits are polite and generally don’t express strong opinions, but sometimes they may not necessarily mean what they say. Often you will have to “read between the lines” because British sarcasm uses a mixture of irony and mockery in a humorous way. Sarcasm is very context-dependent, but an example is when someone expects something to happen and it does and they say ‘well, what a surprise!’.

Making new friends is easier when you can make them laugh, so if you can laugh at yourself, you will be well-liked too. Regale your new friends with humorous tales of your escapades and near-misses and watch them envelop you with their affection.

The key to British etiquette is to always be open and accepting. There will be cultural and language barriers, which could take some time to overcome. But these tips and tricks should help you settle into your new life in the UK. It would be wise to do as the Brits do when in Britain!