

Understanding American English

Introduction: Standard American English Tips

Speaking English is not only about using proper grammar. To use English effectively, you need to understand the culture in which it is spoken. Here are a number of important tips to remember when speaking English in the United States.

General Points to Remember

- **Most Americans only speak English:** While it is true that more and more Americans speak Spanish, most Americans only speak English. Don't expect them to understand your native language.
- **Americans have difficulties understanding foreign accents:** Many Americans are not used to foreign accents. This requires patience from both of you!

Conversation Tips

- **Speak about location:** Americans love to talk about location. When speaking to a stranger, ask them where they are from and then make a connection with that place. For example: "Oh, I have a friend who studied in Los Angeles. He says it's a beautiful place to live." Most Americans will then willingly talk about their experiences living or visiting that particular city or area.
- **Talk about work:** Americans commonly ask "What do you do?". It's not considered impolite (as in some countries) and is a popular topic of discussion between strangers.
- **Talk about sports:** Americans love sports! However, they love American sports. When speaking about football, most Americans understand "American Football", not soccer.
- **Be careful when expressing ideas about race, religion or other sensitive topics:** The United States is a multi-cultural society. Especially in the last few years, Americans are trying very hard to be sensitive to other cultures and ideas. Talking about sensitive topics like religion or beliefs, is often avoided in order to be sure not to offend someone of a different belief system. This is often referred to as being "politically correct".

Addressing People

- **Use last names with people you do not know:** Address people using their title (Mr, Ms, Dr) and their last names.
- **Always use "Ms" when addressing women:** It is important to use "Ms" when addressing a woman. Only use "Mrs" when the woman has asked you to do so!
- **Many Americans prefer first names:** Americans often prefer using first names, even when dealing with people in very different positions. Americans will generally say, "Call me Tom." and then expect you to remain on a first name basis.
- **Americans prefer informal:** In general, Americans prefer informal greetings and using first names or nicknames when speaking with colleagues and acquaintances.

Public Behavior

- **Always shake hands:** Americans shake hands when greeting each other. This is true for both men and women. Other forms of greeting such as kissing on the cheeks, etc., is generally not appreciated.
- **Look your partner in the eye:** Americans look each other in the eyes when they are speaking as a way of showing that they are sincere.
- **Don't hold hands:** Same sex friends do not usually hold hands or put their arms around each other in public in the United States.
- **Smoking is Out!!:** Smoking, even in public places, is strongly disapproved of by most Americans in the modern United States.

