

French Etiquette 101

Your Bridge to Social &
Professional Success in France

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Introduction

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French etiquette isn't just about following rules. It's how you get noticed, respected, and truly feel part of life here.

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France is a country of sophistication, culture, and deep-rooted traditions. For Indian students seeking to build a life and career here, understanding French etiquette isn't just about manners — it's about integration, inclusion, and increasing your chances of professional success.

Whether you're attending a class, a dinner, or a job interview, the way you greet, dress, speak, and interact can shape how you're perceived.

This guide will help you decode social and business etiquette so you can confidently navigate life in France.

Daily Etiquette for Everyday Situations

Be polite, be prepared, be part of the culture.

Whether you're grabbing a baguette or entering your internship, small gestures make a big difference in how you're perceived. Here's your go-to etiquette cheat sheet

✓ **Greet before you speak**

- Always say “*Bonjour*” (before 6 p.m.) or “*Bonsoir*” before starting any conversation — with shopkeepers, at the doctor’s cabinet, even to bus drivers.
- No greeting? Don’t expect great service. It’s seen as rude.

✓ **Use polite phrases often**

- “*S’il vous plaît*” = Please
- “*Merci*” = Thank you
- “*Pardon*” or “*Excusez-moi*” = Sorry / Excuse me
- “*Bonne journée / soirée*” = Have a nice day/evening

These are small, but they go a long way!

✓ **Respect personal space**

- Avoid standing too close in queues, in the elevator, or transport.
- Avoid loud phone calls or voice messages in public places.

✓ **Visiting somebody’s home?**

- Bring a small gift — chocolates, flowers (not chrysanthemums!), or wine.
- Take your shoes off if others do.
- Don’t show up empty-handed or unannounced.





Tu or Vous?

Traditionally, “vous” was the go-to form to show respect, distance, professionalism, and good manners, especially with teachers, employers, or strangers.

But things are changing, especially in the workplace.

6 in 10 employees now tutoient their boss. It’s especially common in creative industries, startups, media, and tech — where flat hierarchies and team spirit are the norm.

Younger professionals often see tu as a sign of openness and equality. But be careful — using “tu” too soon can seem overly familiar or disrespectful, especially in formal settings.

Situation	Default	Can you use “tu”?
Professors or university staff	Vous	Only if invited by them
Landlords, public officials	Vous	Rarely appropriate to switch
Internship or job	Start with “vous”	Switch if your manager or team does
Group projects or student clubs	Tu	Common and expected
Friends/classmates	Tu	Always!



Business Etiquette: Dress, Interact & Impress

✔ Dress to Express Professionalism

France values effortless elegance and grooming

- Men: Tailored dark suits / semi-formal shirts & trousers, clean shave or trimmed beard.
- Women: Conservative dresses or suits, minimal makeup, tasteful accessories.

Even for “casual” events, stylish coordination is expected.

✔ Office Culture: Respect & Structure

- French companies are hierarchical. Respect seniority and ranks.
- Greet colleagues with a single “*Bonjour*” each day. Don’t repeat.
- Take part in coffee breaks (*pause café*)—they are important social rituals & crucial for integration.
- Separate work and personal life. Don’t ask intrusive questions.



In France, professionalism isn’t just about doing your job. It’s about showing respect, communicating clearly, and knowing when to switch from formal to friendly.





Dining Etiquette & Social Gatherings

✓ At Meals

- Wait for the host to start eating.
- Keep hands visible but no elbows on the table.
- Use the continental style of eating (fork in left hand, knife in right).
- Slow down — meals are to be enjoyed, not rushed.

Don't forget to appreciate the meal, even at a restaurant: "C'était délicieux !" (That was delicious!)

✓ Social Gatherings

- Arrive on time, or 10–15 minutes late, not early.
- Toast with "**Santé!**", and maintain eye contact.
- Avoiding toasting with water—it's considered bad luck. 😊
- Smoking is still fairly common in France, especially outdoors. But if you're with a group, always ask: "*Ça ne vous dérange pas si je fume ?*" (Do you mind if I smoke?)

✓ Topics & Behaviours to Avoid

- Never ask about salary or flaunt wealth.
- Avoid discussions on religion, politics, and sex — unless among close friends.
- Avoid "aggressive networking" — remember, it's about connections, not transactions!



Job Interviews & Professional Success Tips

✓ Meetings & Interviews

- Schedule meetings at least 2 weeks in advance.
- Be punctual and professionally dressed.
- Avoid hard selling — persuade with logic and clarity.
- Don't interrupt unless in a debate-style conversation — and even then, do it with elegance!
- Prepare your CV in French and take bilingual business cards.

✓ Work Culture Realities

- 35-hour work week, but productivity is high.
- Don't contact anyone during lunch (12–2 pm).
- Hierarchy matters. Wait for senior persons to speak first.
- Ask before switching to English in meetings.

Pro-tips



- Don't be overly casual, or overly friendly in business settings.
- Don't use “*Mademoiselle*” in a professional context. It's outdated.
- Appointments run late. Forms are many. Rules seem inconsistent. Breathe. A polite tone, calm voice, and a smile will get you much further than frustration.



Bonus Tips to Blend In and Stand Out

- ✓ Learn about French holidays: July & August are vacation months. Avoid scheduling meetings during that time.
- ✓ Get familiar with French food, wine, music, cinema, and cultural icons. They're great conversation starters.
- ✓ Practice wit and subtle humour — the French love it.
- ✓ Be professionally assertive but always polite and respectful.

“Respect, formality, and cultural awareness are your best allies in France. Mastering etiquette won’t just help you fit in — it will help you build lasting connections, access opportunities, and stand out in the job market.”

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