

Classroom Culture

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What this handout is about

This handout explains four strong cultural attitudes in the US and suggests culturally appropriate strategies for students.

Cultural Value: Individualism

One of the founding values of the United States is that each person controls his or her own destiny, that each person has the freedom to make choices for him or herself, and that success or failure depends very much on an individual's effort. Individuals are recognized for their effort and achievement, and it is considered dishonest to take credit for work you haven't done yourself.

- Give proper credit when you use information from other sources. You'll write a lot of papers in which you explain the positions of various scholars or the results of previous research. Cite these sources accurately. If you're not sure how to do either of these things, come to the Writing Center and ask the tutors to help you learn to incorporate sources and use a style manual. See our handout on [Using Quotations](#) and the University [Honor Code](#).
- Use information from sources carefully. Do not copy sentences from reading material into your own writing without "quotation marks" and full citation. If you paraphrase, you don't need quotation marks, but you do need the citation. See our handouts on [Avoiding Plagiarism](#).
- Write your work alone. Although some instructors allow students to work together on assignments, they expect that students will have conversation about the material but that each person's written work will be done alone.
- Do NOT copy someone else's homework and turn it in as your own work. If discovered, you will be charged with academic dishonesty and could be suspended from school.
- Ask your instructors to explain what they consider to be "unauthorized assistance." Different instructors have different boundaries, so ask each one.

Cultural Value: Critical Thinking

Americans are not expected to memorize information they are studying or to believe that all people in authority are correct. They are taught to ask questions, to analyze strengths and weaknesses, to look at things from many perspectives, to challenge previous understandings, to find flaws, and to be creative in their interpretations. In class:

- Expect assignments that make you engage with the material in a critical way.
- Expect the instructor to ask questions that don't have a clear right answer but do make you think through a situation or a problem to find interesting solutions.
- Believe that you can make a meaningful contribution to the discussion.
- Feel comfortable asking questions and offering comments in class.
- Do not memorize passages from the textbook. Try to explain concepts in your own words as if you were teaching someone else.

Cultural Value: Directness

Americans communicate very directly, believing it is the speaker's responsibility to be perfectly clear. They value honesty and openness, even when the information is unpleasant. They can be confused by the indirect communication style of other cultures. They generally see indirectness as a sign of dishonesty.

- In writing, state your main point explicitly. Much American academic writing is "thesis driven argument." See our handouts on Argument and Thesis Statements for detailed explanations.
- Explain connections between ideas, even if the connection seems obvious, and use explicit transitions between ideas and paragraphs.
- In conversation, try to say exactly what you mean. Americans will not be offended if you say "I can't go to the movies tonight." If you say "I'll try" just to soften the negative message, Americans will expect you to actually try and they might be upset if you don't meet that expectation.

Cultural Value: Time Sensitivity

Americans are very conscious of time! They believe that time should be monitored carefully, managed effectively, and used efficiently. They can become impatient when things do not run according to schedule.

- Arrive to class on time. If you know in advance that you will be late, politely notify your instructor in advance. If you are accidentally late, apologize to your instructor after class.
- Ask permission in advance if you need to leave early.
- Look on your syllabus for the number of absences you are allowed to have before your grade is reduced.
- Turn your work in on time. Dates on the syllabus are the due dates, when assignments must be given to the instructor. Some instructors will not accept late work; others will accept it but will deduct points. You must negotiate this in advance.
- Socially: If you're meeting someone, try to be on time. Call if you're going to be late. If you're going to someone's home for a small gathering, you can be slightly late (10-15 minutes). Never arrive early. Your hosts might not be ready for you. If you're going for a party you think will last for most of the night, you can show up any time.

General Advice

Most people take their own culture for granted—we don't really think about it until something strange happens. If you encounter anything confusing, it's okay to say "I don't really understand what just happened." The other person may be just as confused as you are, and you'll both learn something from the conversation.



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