

George Washington's
**Rules of Civility
& Decent Behavior**
IN COMPANY AND CONVERSATION

"..and it may truly be said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great.."

– **Thomas Jefferson, about George Washington, 1814**

By age sixteen, Washington had copied out by hand, 110 *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*. They are based on a set of rules composed by French Jesuits in 1595.

Presumably they were copied out as part of an exercise in penmanship assigned by young Washington's schoolmaster. Although people used to think that Washington wrote these rules, we now know that the first English translation of the rules appeared in 1640.

Today many, if not all of these rules, sound a little fussy if not downright silly. It would be easy to dismiss them as outdated and appropriate to a time of powdered wigs and quills, but they reflect a focus that is increasingly difficult to find.

They all have in common a focus on other people rather than the narrow focus of our own self-interests that we find so prevalent today.

Courtesy meant behavior appropriate to a court; *chivalry* comes from *chevalier* – a knight. Yet Washington was to dedicate himself to freeing America from a court's control. Could manners survive the operation? Parson Weems got it right when he wrote that it was 'no wonder every body honoured him who honoured every body.'"

The Rules:

Treat everyone with respect.

1st Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

2nd When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usually Discovered.

Be considerate of others. Do not embarrass others.

3rd Show Nothing to your Friend that may affright him.

4th In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.

5th If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh, or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkerchief or Hand before your face and turn aside.

6th Sleep not when others Speak, Sit not when others stand, Speak not when you Should hold your Peace, walk not on when others Stop.

7th Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your

Chamber half Dressed.

- 8th At Play and at Fire its Good manners to Give Place to the last Commer, and affect not to Speak Louder than Ordinary.
- 9th Spit not in the Fire, nor Stoop low before it neither Put your Hands into the Flames to warm them, nor Set your Feet upon the Fire especially if there be meat before it.
- 10th When you Sit down, Keep your Feet firm and Even, without putting one on the other or Crossing them.
- 11th Shift not yourself in the Sight of others nor Gnaw your nails.
- 12th Shake not the head, Feet, or Legs roll not the Eyes lift not one eyebrow higher than the other wry not the mouth, and bedew no mans face with your Spittle, by approaching too near him when you Speak.
- 13th Kill no Vermin as Fleas, lice ticks &c in the Sight of Others, if you See any filth or thick Spittle put your foot Dexterously upon it if it be upon the Cloths of your Companions, Put it off privately, and if it be upon your own Cloths return Thanks to him who puts it off.
- 14th Turn not your Back to others especially in Speaking, Jog not the Table or Desk on which Another reads or writes, lean not upon any one.
- 15th Keep your Nails clean and Short, also your Hands and Teeth Clean

"&c" here is *et cetera*, as in "and the others" or "and company"

yet without Showing any great Concern for them.

16th Do not Puff up the Cheeks, Loll not out the tongue rub the Hands, or beard, thrust out the lips, or bite them or keep the Lips too open or too Close.

17th Be no Flatterer, neither Play with any that delights not to be Play'd Withal.

18th Read no Letters, Books, or Papers in Company but when there is a Necessity for the doing of it you must ask leave: come not near the Books or Writings of Another so as to read them unless desired or give your opinion of them unasked also look not nigh when another is writing a Letter.

19th Let your Countenance be pleasant but in Serious Matters Somewhat grave.

20th The Gestures of the Body must be Suited to the discourse you are upon.

21st Reproach none for the Infirmities of Nature, nor Delight to Put them that have in mind thereof.

22nd Show not yourself glad at the Misfortune of another though he were your enemy.

23rd When you see a Crime punished, you may be inwardly Pleased; but always show Pity to the Suffering Offender.

24th Do not laugh too loud or too much at any Public Spectacle.

Don't draw attention to yourself.

- 25th Superfluous Complements and all Affectation of Ceremony are to be avoided, yet where due they are not to be Neglected.
- 26th In Pulling off your Hat to Persons of Distinction, as Noblemen, Justices, Churchmen &c make a Reverence, bowing more or less according to the Custom of the Better Bred, and Quality of the Person. Amongst your equals expect not always that they Should begin with you first, but to Pull off the Hat when there is no need is Affectation, in the Manner of Saluting and resaluting in words keep to the most usual Custom.
- 27th Tis ill manners to bid one more eminent than yourself be covered as well as not to do it to whom it's due Likewise he that makes too much haste to Put on his hat does not well, yet he ought to Put it on at the first, or at most the Second time of being asked; now what is herein Spoken, of Qualification in behavior in Saluting, ought also to be observed in taking of Place, and Sitting down for ceremonies without Bounds is troublesome.
- 28th If any one come to Speak to you while you are are Sitting Stand up though he be your Inferior, and when you Present Seats let it be to every one according to his Degree.
- 29th When you meet with one of Greater Quality than yourself, Stop, and retire especially if it be at a Door or any Straight place to give way for him to Pass.

30th In walking the highest Place in most Countries Seems to be on the right hand therefore Place yourself on the left of him whom you desire to Honor: but if three walk together the middest Place is the most Honorable the wall is usually given to the most worthy if two walk together.

31st If any one far Surpasses others, either in age, Estate, or Merit yet would give Place to a meaner than himself in his own lodging or elsewhere the one ought not to except it, So he on the other part should not use much earnestness nor offer it above once or twice.

32nd To one that is your equal, or not much inferior you are to give the chief Place in your Lodging and he to who 'is offered ought at the first to refuse it but at the Second to accept though not without acknowledging his own unworthiness.

33rd They that are in Dignity or in office have in all places Precedency but whilst they are Young they ought to respect those that are their equals in Birth or other Qualities, though they have no Public charge.

34th It is good Manners to prefer them to whom we Speak before ourselves especially if they be above us with whom in no Sort we ought to begin.

35th Let your Discourse with Men of Business be Short and Comprehensive.

36th Artificers & Persons of low Degree

When you speak, be concise.

ought not to use many ceremonies to Lords, or Others of high Degree but Respect and highly Honor them, and those of high Degree ought to treat them with affability & Courtesy, without Arrogance.

37th In speaking to men of Quality do not lean nor Look them full in the Face, nor approach too near them at lest Keep a full Pace from them.

38th In visiting the Sick, do not Presently play the Physician if you be not Knowing therein.

39th In writing or Speaking, give to every Person his due Title According to his Degree & the Custom of the Place.

Do not argue with your superior. Submit your ideas with humility.

40th Strive not with your Superiors in argument, but always Submit your Judgment to others with Modesty.

41st Undertake not to Teach your equal in the art himself Professes; it Savours of arrogance.

42nd Let thy ceremonies in Courtesy be proper to the Dignity of his place with whom thou converses for it is absurd to act the same with a Clown and a Prince.

43rd Do not express Joy before one sick or in pain for that contrary Passion will aggravate his Misery.

When a person does their best and fails, do not criticize him.

44th When a man does all he can though it Succeeds not well blame not him that did it.

When you must give advice or criticism, consider the timing, whether it should be given in public or private,

45th Being to advise or reprehend any one, consider whether it ought to be in public or in Private; presently, or

the manner and above all be gentle.

If you are corrected, take it without argument. If you were wrongly judged, correct it later.

Do not make fun of anything important to others.

If you criticize someone else of something, make sure you are not guilty of it yourself. Actions speak louder than words.

Do not be quick to believe bad reports about others.

at Some other time in what terms to do it & in reproving Show no Sign of Cholar but do it with all Sweetness and Mildness.

46th Take all Admonitions thankfully in what Time or Place Soever given but afterwards not being culpable take a Time & Place convenient to let him know it that gave them.

47th Mock not nor Jest at any thing of Importance break [n]o Jest that are Sharp Biting and if you Deliver any thing witty and Pleasant abstain from Laughing thereat yourself.

48th Wherein you reprove Another be unblameable yourself; for example is more prevalent than Precepts.

49th Use no Reproachful Language against any one neither Curse nor Revile.

50th Be not hasty to believe flying Reports to the Disparagement of any.

51st Wear not your Cloths, foul, ripped or Dusty but See they be Brushed once every day at least and take heed that you approach not to any Uncleaness.

52nd In your Apparel be Modest and endeavor to accommodate Nature, rather than to procure Admiration keep to the Fashion of your equals Such as are Civil and orderly with respect to Times and Places.

53rd Run not in the Streets, neither go too slowly nor with Mouth open go not Shaking your Arms kick not the

earth with R feet, go not upon the Toes, nor in a Dancing fashion.

54th Play not the Peacock, looking every where about you, to See if you be well Decked, if your Shoes fit well if your Stockings sit neatly, and Cloths handsomely.

55th Eat not in the Streets, nor in the House, out of Season.

Associate with good people. It is better to be alone than in bad company.

56th Associate yourself with Men of good Quality if you Esteem your own Reputation; for 'is better to be alone than in bad Company.

57th In walking up and Down in a House, only with One in Company if he be Greater than yourself, at the first give him the Right hand and Stop not till he does and be not the first that turns, and when you do turn let it be with your face towards him, if he be a Man of Great Quality, walk not with him Cheek by Joul but Somewhat behind him; but yet in Such a Manner that he may easily Speak to you.

Always allow reason to govern your actions.

58th Let your Conversation be without Malice or Envy, for 'is a Sign of a Tractable and Commendable Nature: And in all Causes of Passion admit Reason to Govern.

Never break the rules in front of your subordinates.

59th Never express anything unbecoming, nor Act against the Rules Moral before your inferiors.

Some things are better kept secret.

60th Be not immodest in urging your Friends to Discover a Secret.

61st Utter not base and frivolous things amongst grave and Learned Men nor very Difficult Questions or Subjects,

among the Ignorant or things hard to be believed, Stuff not your Discourse with Sentences amongst your Betters nor Equals.

62nd Speak not of doleful Things in a Time of Mirth or at the Table; Speak not of Melancholy Things as Death and Wounds, and if others Mention them Change if you can the Discourse tell not your Dreams, but to your intimate Friend.

A person should not overly value their own accomplishments.

63rd A Man ought not to value himself of his Achievements, or rare Qualities of wit; much less of his riches Virtue or Kindred.

64th Break not a Jest where none take pleasure in mirth Laugh not aloud, nor at all without Occasion, deride no mans Misfortune, though there Seem to be Some cause.

65th Speak not injurious Words neither in Jest nor Earnest Scoff at none although they give Occasion.

66th Be not froward but friendly and Courteous; the first to Salute hear and answer & be not Pensive when it's a time to Converse.

Do not detract from others nor be overbearing in giving orders.

67th Detract not from others neither be excessive in Commanding.

Do not go where you are not wanted. Do not give unasked-for advice.

68th Go not thither, where you know not, whether you Shall be Welcome or not. Give not Advice without being Asked & when desired do it briefly.

If two people disagree, do not take one side or the other. Be flexible in your own opinions and when you don't care, take the majority opinion.

69th If two contend together take not the part of either unconstrained; and be not obstinate in your own Opinion, in Things indifferent be of the Major

Do not correct others when
it is not your place to do so.

Side.

- 70th** Reprehend not the imperfections of others for that belongs to Parents Masters and Superiors.
- 71st** Gaze not on the marks or blemishes of Others and ask not how they came. What you may Speak in Secret to your Friend deliver not before others.
- 72nd** Speak not in an unknown Tongue in Company but in your own Language and that as those of Quality do and not as the Vulgar; Sublime matters treat Seriously.
- 73rd** Think before you Speak pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your Words too hastily but orderly & distinctly.
- 74th** When Another Speaks be attentive your Self and disturb not the Audience if any hesitate in his Words help him not nor Prompt him without desired, Interrupt him not, nor Answer him till his Speech be ended.
- 75th** In the midst of Discourse ask not of what one treateth but if you Perceive any Stop because of your coming you may well intreat him gently to Proceed: If a Person of Quality comes in while your Conversing it's handsome to Repeat what was said before.
- 76th** While you are talking, Point not with your Finger at him of Whom you Discourse nor Approach too near him to whom you talk especially to his face.

Don't compare yourselves amongst yourselves.

Do not be quick to talk about something when you don't have all the facts.

Do not be curious about the affairs of others.

Do not start what you cannot finish. Keep your promises.

- 77th Treat with men at fit Times about Business & Whisper not in the Company of Others.
- 78th Make no Comparisons and if any of the Company be Commended for any brave act of Virtue, commend not another for the Same.
- 79th Be not apt to relate News if you know not the truth thereof. In Discoursing of things you Have heard Name not your Author always A Secret Discover not.
- 80th Be not Tedious in Discourse or in reading unless you find the Company pleased therewith.
- 81st Be not Curious to Know the Affairs of Others neither approach those that Speak in Private.
- 82nd Undertake not what you cannot Perform but be Careful to keep your Promise.
- 83rd When you deliver a matter do it without Passion & with Discretion, however mean the Person be you do it too.
- 84th When your Superiors talk to any Body hearken not neither Speak nor Laugh.
- 85th In Company of these of Higher Quality than yourself Speak not til you are asked a Question then Stand upright put of your Hat & Answer in few words.
- 86th In Disputes, be not So Desirous to Overcome as not to give Liberty to each one to deliver his Opinion and Submit to the Judgment of the

Major Part especially if they are Judges of the Dispute.

87th Let thy carriage be such as becomes a Man Grave Settled and attentive to that which is spoken. Contradict not at every turn what others Say.

88th Be not tedious in Discourse, make not many Digressions, nor repeat often the Same manner of Discourse.

Do not speak badly of those who are not present.

89th Speak not Evil of the absent for it is unjust.

90th Being Set at meat Scratch not neither Spit Cough or blow your Nose except there's a Necessity for it.

91st Make no Show of taking great Delight in your Victuals, Feed not with Greediness; cut your Bread with a Knife, lean not on the Table neither find fault with what you Eat.

92nd Take no Salt or cut Bread with your Knife Greasy.

93rd Entertaining any one at the table, it is decent to present him with meat; Undertake not to help others undesired by the Master.

94th If you Soak bread in the Sauce let it be no more than what you put in your Mouth at a time and blow not your broth at Table but Stay till Cools of it Self.

95th Put not your meat to your Mouth with your Knife in your hand neither Spit forth the Stones of any fruit Pie upon a Dish nor Cast anything under the table.

Don't take so big a bite that you must chew with your mouth open.

- 96th It's unbecoming to Stoop much to ones Meat Keep your Fingers clean & when foul wipe them on a Corner of your Table Napkin.
- 97th Put not another bit into your mouth till the former be swallowed. Let not your morsels be too big for the jowls.
- 98th Drink not nor talk with your mouth full; neither gaze about you while you are drinking.
- 99th Drink not too leisurely nor yet too hastily. Before and after drinking, wipe your lips; breath not then or ever with too great a noise, for its uncivil.
- 100th Cleanse not your teeth with the table cloth napkin, fork, or knife; but if others do it, let it be done without a peep to them.
- 101st Rinse not your mouth in the presence of others.
- 102nd It is out of use to call upon the company often to eat; nor need you drink to others every time you drink.
- 103rd In the company of your betters, be not longer in eating than they are; lay not your arm but only your hand upon the table.
- 104th It belongs to the chiefest in company to unfold his napkin and fall to meat first, but he ought then to begin in time & to dispatch with dexterity that the slowest may have time allowed him.
- 105th Be not angry at the table whatever happens & if you have reason to be

so, show it not; put on a cheerful countenance especially if there be strangers, for good humor makes one dish of meat a feast.

106th Set not yourself at the upper of the table; but if it be your due or that the master of the house will have it so, contend not, least you should trouble the company.

Show interest in others conversation, but don't talk with your mouth full.

107th If others talk at the table, be attentive but talk not with meat in your mouth.

108th When you speak of God or his attributes, let it be seriously & with reverence. Honor & obey your natural parents although they be poor.

109th Let your recreations be manful not sinful.

Don't allow yourself to become jaded, cynical or calloused.

110th Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

Directions:

1) Choose 5 of the Rules that you think are interesting, and list their numbers below.

2) Choose 5 of the Rules and explain why you think they are important to understanding George Washington.

A cursive signature of George Washington, written in black ink. The signature is highly stylized and fluid, with a prominent 'G' and 'W' at the beginning. The name 'George Washington' is written in a continuous, flowing script.