

Advanced Education Pathway

Language

Spoken language

When you arrive in Australia, or at your school, one of your first problems may be with the English language. Even if you have studied English for many years in your home country, some of what you hear may at first escape you. You may also have difficulty in expressing yourself in English. This is a common experience for people who have not lived in an English speaking country previously. Try not to be discouraged. Here are some ideas to help you with the difficulties you may experience:

- **People speak too fast** - Spoken English will sound very rapid to you at first. Don't worry - your ability to understand will improve just as rapidly. People won't mind if you ask them to repeat what they have said or to speak at a slower pace.
- **Vocabulary** - Many common words in Australia and many words used in university life may not be in your vocabulary. Don't be surprised. Just remember that textbook English is not the same as the language used in everyday life.
- The **Australian Macquarie Dictionary** will be more helpful than the Oxford or Webster's dictionary in understanding Australian English.
- **The Australian accent** - Remember that every English speaking country has its own particular accent and way of pronouncing English words. You will find the Australian pronunciation of many familiar words quite different from what you are used to. Don't worry about this; you will soon get used to the sound of the Australian accent.
- **Slang** - Australians, particularly students, use a lot of slang. Remember that student slang is just as hard for older Australians to understand as it is for you! Slang can be very specialised and it is always changing. If you don't understand a word or phrase, ask the speaker what it means and how it should be used.
- **Anxiety** - You may feel nervous the first time you interact with English speaking people who don't understand your native accent or language that is quite natural. However, you will feel more and more at ease as the semester progresses and soon discover that you communicate quite effectively with the Australian speaker.

Written language

You will come across many new words as you continue your studies. You may also find that the grammar used in some textbooks makes them difficult to understand. Here are some suggestions that may be of assistance:

- Use a good dictionary - translate as many technical and academic words as you can into your own language. This will slow your reading, but it will vastly improve your understanding and increase your vocabulary range. Revise your list of new words and expressions as often as you can.
- Remember every academic subject has its own "language" and it may use words and expressions in ways which are quite different from ordinary day-to-day use of the English language. You will find that the same applies to the textbooks you are using.

- It is sometimes possible to "guess" the meaning of a word from its context. Try to develop your guessing ability.
- Learn to recognise the key words used to develop logical arguments within sentences and paragraphs.
- Take notes of the way a book is organised into sections, chapters etc. The headings may assist you to quickly get a general idea of the contents.

Body language

Every culture has certain 'typical' behaviours; ways of standing, moving, using hands, eyes, arms, nodding the head, etc. Usually there are meanings associated with these movements or gestures, and the meaning may be different in Australia from the meaning attached in your own culture.

In Australia, for example, it is usual to look someone in the eye when you are talking to him or her. Australians think that this shows directness, attention and sincerity; but in another culture, it may be considered as impolite or improper to do this. In some cultures, it is an insult if someone gives you something with the left hand - in Australia it makes no difference.

You will soon notice these differences when you start interacting with Australians. Similar observations are of course important anywhere else in the world. It is important that we learn to recognise, appreciate and respect difference as long as it is not offensive.

Australian Customs

Greetings

Men usually shake hands (firmly) the first time they meet. Women may or may not shake hands. "How do you do", "Good morning" and "Good afternoon" are formal greetings. Usually students and young people just say "Hello" or "Hi". People often appreciate it if you add their name: eg "Hi, Rob".

Social invitations

Whenever you receive an invitation formally (a written note) or informally (by telephone), it is good to reply quickly and honestly. On a written invitation, "RSVP," means, "Please reply" by the date that is stated. It is usual to ring and tell your friend or colleague if you have to change your plans or if you are delayed.

When you are invited to join friends for an outing to a restaurant or the theatre you will usually be expected to pay for your own meal and/or tickets. If the friend offers to "shout" then this means that they will pay for you. If you are in doubt, ask.

Servants

If you are used to having servants to do most of your work, you may find the Australian way of life a little difficult at first. In Australia, it is not considered shameful for anyone to do manual work and males often share in the housework.

A person sometimes employs a cleaner, who comes once a week to clean the house, but Australians usually do most of the housework, child care and gardening themselves. This means that they don't have as much free time as people who employ servants.

Bring a plate

You may receive an invitation to a Barbecue be asked to "bring your own steak or veggie patties". This seems strange to most international students but it is an acceptable way to entertain. Buy a steak or patties at the supermarket (they come neatly packaged), put it in a bag and give it to your host when they greet you at the party. If you are asked to "bring a plate", this means "bring a plate of food" as a contribution to the meal - don't just bring an empty plate! .

B.Y.O ? Bring your own

If you are told that a party is BYO it means that you are expected to bring your own drink - soft drink or alcohol. Some restaurants are also BYO. At these restaurants it is acceptable to bring your own alcohol, usually wine or beer. Soft drinks are normally available from the restaurant.

Australians drink a broad variety of refreshments. Water is not automatically brought to tables in restaurants. Just ask for water and it will be brought.

Conversation

Don't be worried if you are not fluent in the English language. If an English speaker is speaking too fast ask them to speak a little more slowly.

Some questions are not asked in Australia unless you know a person very well or unless you are related to them. For example: don't ask someone their age (especially an older person) and don't ask men or women how much money they earn.

Questions about the cost of a person's house and the cost of the various things they own are considered impolite in Australia. If you would like to know the cost of something, ask the question in a general way. For example, you could say, "How much does the average house cost in Brisbane?"

Saying thank you

If you are invited to a party celebrating someone's birthday, or for Christmas, take a small gift. If you are invited to a meal and you drink alcohol it is common practice to take a bottle of wine to contribute. If you do not drink alcohol then it is not necessary to do this. It is never necessary to give expensive gifts, but a small souvenir from your country, a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers would be received with delight.

Thank you is a phrase used often in Australia. It is usual to say thank you even for small favours done by people who are just doing their jobs (eg shop assistants or waiters).

The use of names

Australians usually have two or three names. The last name is their family name or surname while the first one or two names are their given names.

On all official documents it is important that you always use your name in the same order. As different cultures adopt varying practices in relation to names many overseas students underline their family name, eg Wong Chee Lee. This is also why some Australians may have difficulty remembering your name.

Here are a few guidelines on the use of names:

- First names are used more frequently in Australia than in other countries. It is usually all right to use a person's first name if he or she is about the same age and status as you. This also true for people younger than you.
- Lecturers/supervisors will often invite you to call them by their first name, which is very acceptable practice in Australia.
- A man or woman who is older than you is often addressed as Mrs, Miss, Ms or Mr until the person asks you to use her or his first name, or until you get to know the person better.
- Many Australian women use the form of address, Ms (pronounced Mizz). Ms is used for both single and married women and replaces Miss or Mrs. Use "Ms" when you are not sure if a woman is single or married.
- If you have any doubts about what to call someone, simply ask, "What shall I call you?" If people seem unsure what to call you, tell them the name you prefer.
- The use of "nicknames" is very common in Australia. A nickname is not a person's real name but a name given by friends (usually) because of some physical characteristic or behaviour pattern, or it may be a contraction of a real name. Someone named Andrew, for instance, might be given the nickname, "Andy". Being called a nickname is not uncomplimentary; in fact, it is often a sign of acceptance and affection.

Meals and table manners

Australians eat three meals a day: breakfast (7 am-8 am), lunch (12 noon-2 pm) and dinner or "tea" (6 pm-7 pm, sometimes later), supper - (late evening) usually after an evening social event is only tea and coffee and a light snack.

When invited to "tea" it is best to ask "at what time?" Tea usually means the evening meal, but as Australians also have "afternoon tea" (mid afternoon light snack) and "morning tea" (mid morning light snack) confusion might result from the word "tea". Australians forget that this term is not perfectly clear to newcomers.

Australians eat with their fingers only at barbecues or picnics outside the home. Inside the house, you are usually invited to sit down and to use knives, forks and spoons. If you are not sure which one to use first, wait to see what your hosts do and copy them. Do feel free to ask your host if you prefer to eat according to your own country's custom. There is no cultural significance in eating with left or right hand in Australia.

If you have medical, dietary or religious reasons for not eating certain foods, explain this to your hosts when you accept their invitation to dinner. It is the Australian custom to offer food or drink only once. If your first reply is "No" out of politeness, your "No" will probably be taken literally and food may not be offered again.

Smoking

If you are at someone else's home and you wish to smoke, it is common practice to go out of doors, as many Australians find cigarette smoking offensive.

Smoking is forbidden in all school buildings, government buildings, public transport and many restaurants, shops and indoor venues in Australia.

Tipping

Tipping is not the usual custom in Australia except in the more expensive restaurants. In these situations, people usually tip the waiter or waitress about 10% of the bill, if the service has been satisfactory. Tips are not given in cafeterias, or in fast food shops (like Macdonald's etc). Sometimes the small change is given to the taxi driver. Hairdressers do not expect a tip.

Alcohol

In Australia, people under the age of 18 years are not allowed to buy alcoholic drinks. There are also heavy penalties for people who drink and drive. If you are drinking in a pub, you should pay for each drink as soon as you receive it, and not when you are about to leave the hotel. The Australian custom of shouting means that if someone buys you a drink you are expected to shout him or her back by buying his or her next drink.

Bargaining

You can't bargain in Australian shops for food items. Goods are sold according to the prices at which they are marked. However for household items eg washing machines and motor vehicles - some shops will offer discounts for cash or, if you ask, they might match or better another stores price. Also, in some street and weekend markets you may be able to bargain.

What not to do in public

It is against the law to be drunk, to swear, talk indecently, urinate or behave in a sexually indecent way in a public place. There are also local council regulations against spitting. If you need to clear your throat or nose, use a handkerchief or tissue.

Mothers and babies

Most large department stores and toilets in public buildings have a mothers' room where you can sit and feed your baby quietly and change soiled nappies. It is increasingly common for women to breast-feed their babies in public.

Noise

In most States it is an offence to make loud noise that annoys your neighbours even in your own home (eg playing stereo music) after 11.00 pm. or before 7.00 am.

Characteristics of Australians

Individuality

Most Australians want to be treated as individuals rather than as representatives of a certain class, position or group. They dislike being too dependent on others.

Equality

Australians grow up believing that people should have equal social, legal and political rights and the Australian Constitution protects these rights. In addition, recent anti-discrimination laws try to prevent discrimination on the grounds of race, gender and marital status, homosexuality, and physical and intellectual disability. Most people in Australia think of themselves as your equal, and the taxi-driver, waitress or garbage man expects to get the same respect from you as the accountant or the school teacher.

Australian women expect the same rights, status and opportunities as men. Many Australian women have responsible jobs and continue to work after they are married. Social relationships between men and women are usually very informal. Before they get married, many young people leave their parental home to live on their own or with friends of either sex.

Directness

It is considered quite normal in Australia to discuss issues, events and ideas openly with other people. Australians might bring up in conversation issues, which you would consider sensitive or embarrassing or rude.

Punctuality

You are expected to be punctual ("on time") in Australia. If you have an appointment at 10.30 am with the dentist, be there at 10.30 - no later. If you are invited for dinner at 7 o'clock, try to be there at 7.00 pm or no later than 20 minutes (but not much earlier than 7.00). If you can't keep an appointment or if you can't avoid being late, it is best to telephone and explain. Most concerts, lectures, church services etc. begin on time.

Tolerance

Australia is a place where all people have dignity and are valued and respected. While there will always be a few who have difficulty with this, many others are working toward achieving this goal. People with disabilities are studying, with assistance if necessary, in most degree courses. There is also an increasing acceptance of persons who are gay or lesbian. Discrimination or Racial remarks are unlawful in Australia.