The Interview—Etiquette

Sometimes your potential employer may invite you to lunch or dinner. This is the employer’s way of getting to know you in a more social setting to see if you will fit into their corporate culture.

Before the Meal

- A few days before the interview, consider making a practice run to the restaurant to ensure you have accurate directions and enough transportation time.
- Arrive at the restaurant 10-15 minutes early.
- After you have been seated, place your napkin in your lap. Do not leave it on the table until the interview is over and you are ready to leave. Leave the napkin in your chair if you get up from the table in the middle of the meal.
- Do not slouch! Sit up to remain alert and engaged in the conversation.

During the Meal

- When in doubt, take a cue from your host. If you are unsure about a price range, ask your host what dish they would recommend.
- Avoid choosing messy food that is sloppy or hard to eat.
- Be subtle regarding any special dietary preferences. Choose something on the menu you can eat or quietly discuss special requests with the waiter, not your host.
- Your place setting may include several pieces. Use your outside fork for the first course, unless soup is served, then use the outside spoon.
- When you are finished with the course, place your fork at the right end of your plate, using a slight diagonal. For a soup course or another course that uses a wide bowl, place the spoon on the plate below the bowl. If a shallow bowl is used, place the spoon on the bowl in the same manner as a fork on a plate.
- Continue eating the next course with the new outside fork. If a course requires a knife, use the knife farthest to the right.
- Use the fork closest to your plate to eat your entrée.
- If dessert is served, use the spoon and fork at the top of the plate.
- If a little bowl with water is on the table, or appears with the dessert, wash the tips of your fingers in it. Dry them on your napkin.
- Do not talk with your mouth full. Take small bites so that you can converse freely.
- Sometimes mistakes will happen. If you spill water or food, apologize and recover modestly. If you drop a utensil, wait until you can catch the waiter’s attention to ask for a new one. To catch a waiter’s attention, make eye contact from across the room or as they walk by say, “Excuse me sir or ma’am.” Do not snap your fingers or wave your arms.

After the Meal

- Because you are a guest of the company, the interviewer will pay the bill. You do not need to offer to pay, but remember to thank them for the meal.
- Find out the next step in the interviewing process.
- Send your host a thank-you note promptly.

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Be Socially Savvy
Remember that while employers use these less formal occasions to see if you fit in the company culture, you should observe the employer’s behavior as well. This is your chance to see if the company is a right match for you.

Here are a few additional tips about an interview that includes socializing:

- Shake hands firmly—not weakly, but not with a vise grip. Practice your interlock, grip, hold, and release.
- Don’t try too hard to impress. Be honest about what you know. As a student, you are not expected to know as much as practicing professionals.
- Be courteous and polite.
- Be positive and upbeat, but not boisterous.
- Be open to others’ viewpoints.
- Be empathetic of others’ feelings.
- Use appropriate formal greetings such as Mr. or Ms. Do not call someone by their first name without their permission.
- Have some safe topics of conversation ready for those inevitable lull periods.

Remember that the National Association of Colleges and Employers, as well as USC, does not allow alcohol as part of the recruiting process at any time—on- or off-campus. Regardless of how informal or friendly an interviewer appears, your interaction is all part of the interview—even if it is a personal acquaintance. If an employer makes you feel uncomfortable about this issue, please call the Career Center at (213) 740-9111 and let us know.