It is important to practice professional etiquette when assisting patients in person and on the phone, as well as when working as part of a team.
INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the importance of using professional manners and avoiding unprofessional ones. Manners, and the lack thereof, say much about a person and can communicate both favorable and unfavorable characteristics. Several aspects of etiquette are well worth the attention of all allied health students entering the health care industry. Once identified, each point of etiquette is described in light of how it communicates various messages at the practicum site. This discussion also demonstrates how correcting these tendencies can contribute to professional development while you avoid behavior-related pitfalls during the practicum. The chapter concludes with Self-Prep Questions, a Role-Play Scenario, and a Readiness Checklist.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

• Identify the general meaning of the term etiquette.
• Identify the importance of appropriate etiquette in the allied health practicum.
• Identify at least three aspects that your posture can communicate.
• Name at least six additional manners that affect how others view you professionally.
• Explain the appropriate way(s) to deal with each of those six additional manners.
• Name at least four distracting behaviors that affect your professional demeanor.
• Explain at least one possible solution for each of those four distracting behaviors.
• Identify five ways to retain a “clean” image within social media.

The Significance of Etiquette

Etiquette generally refers to the various manners and behaviors prescribed by and observed in social life. How do you carry yourself? How do you portray your work ethic? How can others see that you are committed to your work and concerned about the welfare of patients and customers? These traits are all categorized within the context of your personal etiquette. It speaks to others about you in many ways: how you work, whether you genuinely care, whether you are a committed worker, and so on. You can show utmost respect for others and professionalism through your personal set of manners, and it is crucial to recognize which manners, habits, and gestures are not acceptable in any professional setting, even while you are a student. Every person has his or her own unique set of manners that includes positive and negative (or unfavorable or unprofessional) aspects. Sometimes socially unacceptable behavior is perceived as acceptable. Many people, even those who are highly educated or have a long history of successful work experience, may benefit from tweaking their manners a bit to optimize their professional demeanor.

Students have been permanently dismissed from their training sites for behaving in an unacceptable manner, as well as for their attitude issues. Thus,
this entire chapter is devoted to the single topic of etiquette. Both acceptable and unacceptable manners are discussed. Self-presentation through posture, verbal manners, and professional language is analyzed, and basic tips on behavior are included.

Several particular aspects of your character say much about you, your confidence, abilities, and interests. For example, I worked with a student who was dismissed from two different sites for the same reasons. She had no problems arriving on time or doing as she was instructed, but her unprofessional demeanor and etiquette were more than what the managers at the two practicum sites were willing to tolerate. In this case, the main issues were not smiling (appearing grumpy), waiting to be told what to do (not taking initiative), slouching when sitting, leaning when standing, chewing gum, and showing an overall disinterest in learning. This combination communicated that this student was not motivated, did not care about the staff or patients, and did not appear to have the potential to be a productive worker. The site managers indicated that this style simply does not work in a health care setting.

In summary, even if your skills and techniques are superb in the classroom, personal aspects matter during the practicum just as much as your technical competencies. In addition, it is important to pay attention to etiquette as you prepare for job interviews—it determines much of the interviewer’s first impression of you.

**Etiquette for Allied Health Student-Trainees and Professionals**

Several aspects of etiquette that will be important to focus on during your practicum include the following:

- Posture
- Verbal manners
- Word choice
- Avoiding distracting behaviors

**Posture**

Your posture says much about you. It reflects your confidence level and your attitude, as well as your interest in what is happening around you. If you slouch in chairs or lean frequently on desks and countertops, do you think the people around you will perceive you as a confident and effective or productive worker? Actually, they will wonder what is wrong with you and may even think you are experiencing physical discomfort or pain. Patients will think like that, too, and this will have important implications. Patients need to feel that they are being cared for by a high-quality and confident health care team, not by people who drag themselves around and twiddle their thumbs or who
appear not to know what is going on. Patients and others who have business at the practicum site are more comfortable and satisfied with staff members who show interest, demonstrate care, and carry themselves professionally.

A poor or negative attitude can often lead a person to slouch, and the look of slouching or dragging oneself about tends to repel people, especially if this posture is a chronic habit. Typically, this posture also reflects boredom, unproductiveness, and even lack of a work ethic.

There is a general correlation between attitude and posture (of course, with the exception of any medical condition affecting the spine/vertebrae). Thus, changing one’s posture comes more easily to those who make a conscious effort to change the underlying perceptions and attitudes that originally led to persistently slouching and leaning. (To review the importance of attitudes and perceptions, see Chapter 4.)

Disinterest in performing everyday duties and learning as you work can easily convince others, including facility managers and physicians, that you may not be truly committed to your chosen career field. As a student-trainee, demonstrating a lack of interest in your practicum will not serve you well when it comes to your evaluation by the site manager or the opportunity to initiate professional contacts and relationships to jump-start your career. It is very important to assess your behavior to ensure that you actually are communicating what you want to about yourself during the practicum.

**Verbal Manners**

The level of professionalism you display with your verbal manners and associated tactics also affects how others view you professionally. These manners and tactics include how you speak to others, your listening skills, ability to apologize, manner of addressing conflicts, and generally how you treat others. Consider the following specifics:

- Using manners as a mechanism of showing a favorable attitude was discussed in Chapter 4. The use of good manners should become natural for professional people hoping to be successful. It shows consideration and respect for other staff members, customers, and patients.
- Speaking like a professional practitioner is another direct indicator of how professional you are in your field. This skill involves understanding and applying vocabulary pertaining to your specialty and avoiding the use of unprofessional fillers, such as *uh*, *um*, and *like*, while communicating. (See the next section for examples of casual and improper phrases and their professional translations.) Keep a medical terminology book or medical dictionary handy so that you can easily check your use of professional medical terms. Your work team and patients form a more respectful perception of you and are confident in you when you speak professionally.
• During the communication process, it is of utmost importance to steer clear of any tendency to interrupt when someone else is speaking. This tendency is sometimes irresistible, such as when you are convinced that the message being communicated merits correcting.
• Correcting or adding to somebody else’s words or comments must be done tactfully. Never correct a team member or engage in a confrontation in the presence of a patient or customer.
• It is a known fact that not a single person is perfect, and therefore, if you happen to make a mistake or handle something incorrectly, admit your fault and apologize. Also, state your intention of not making the same mistake again and, if possible, thank the person who pointed out your error. We tend to despise people who constantly correct us, but these corrections and what we learn from them build us professionally.
• When addressing conflicts, the best approach is to address them as situation related rather than person related. In other words, focus on the problem’s aspects and seeking a solution rather than on anyone’s faults and communicating your opinions to others. Engaging in the latter is a sign of immaturity and lack of professionalism. Also, addressing conflict from the situation-related viewpoint helps in reducing or eliminating further interpersonal issues related to the issue at hand.
• A reliable and relevant rule of thumb, often referred to as the golden rule, is to treat others the way you wish to be treated. This means extending courteousness, forgiveness, encouragement, empowerment, compliments, recognition, and the like to others at the appropriate times. Aren’t these what you hope others will extend to you?

**Word Choice**

It is important to employ grammatically proper, professional, and polite language in any professional setting, especially in allied health professions. Would you like to be acknowledged and respected as a professional? If so, your wording and tone of voice are as important as the array of other factors noted. Table 5-1 provides a short list of selected example phrases, along with the appropriate way to say the same thing in a professional environment. You will see that a few of these focus on the matter of tone, whereas others address proper use of the English language. As other phrases come to mind, perhaps you will recognize them and be able to think quickly of the more professionally acceptable wording and tone.

**Avoiding Distracting Behaviors**

Some distracting behaviors and conditions should be avoided while in the professional environment. The following points delineate a few of them that are important, along with some recommendations.
Etiquette for Allied Health Student-Trainees and Professionals

Table 5.1 • Word Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unprofessional Wording and Phrase</th>
<th>The Professional Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What? Huh?</td>
<td>Pardon? Excuse me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yah.</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nah.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What's up?</td>
<td>How are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you need?</td>
<td>How may I help you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You ain't got . . . ?</td>
<td>Do you not have . . . ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ain't . . .</td>
<td>I do not . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't understand anything you just said.</td>
<td>Please clarify what you mean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don't got none.</td>
<td>We don't have any.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• In a medical facility, pharmacy, hospital, or billing office, and especially during the practicum, you should never chew gum. In fact, the office or facility rules for staff likely include a written policy against it. It is offensive to some staff, customers, and patients, and the act of chewing gum does not fit the image of a clean and sanitary medical or professional environment.

It is important not to have bad breath when working in close contact with others, but this can be achieved through proper dental care and not by chewing gum. A thorough brush, floss, and rinse are appropriate before work. Breath mints after snacks and lunch also are useful. Some foods, particularly sulfurous foods such as garlic, cabbage, and onions, should always be avoided before working around others, as these cause bad breath.

• At times other than during a formal break, snack items should be consumed where designated and out of the sight of patients or customers. Food, wrappers, snack bags, soda cans, and the like diminish the image of a neat and sanitary medical environment. On occasions when a snack or tray of food is provided in the break area, you should demonstrate appropriate etiquette by taking a reasonable or small amount, even if you are very hungry. Be considerate of others who may come along after you for their portions. The best behavior is to wait until the regular employees have had their chance to take what they would like before you. This is simply the courteous and respectful way to act in this situation. In addition, be sure to clean up after consuming food or drink on site.

• Another very important point to consider is that a practitioner who works in very close proximity to patients and customers should never smell of cigarette smoke while on duty; this is highly offensive to some
staff members and patients. This particular odor also works against the goal of a clean and sanitary working environment.
• Do not appear tired. If excessive fatigue is an issue on any given day, it is important to find ways to cope rather than showing such obvious signs as constantly yawning or resting your head in any way. Be sure you allow yourself enough nighttime sleep, as you will likely work full days during the practicum. While at your site, if necessary, ask to take a brief break, go outside, and take a three- to five-minute walk in partial sunlight to re-energize. Consuming fruit and other types of healthy snacks, especially with substantial protein content, during the day (rather than snacks like chips and cookies) also helps to maintain your energy level.
• All phones and other portable devices, such as tablets, should be turned off or silenced while at the practicum site. These devices should not be visible to other staff or to patients and customers. Trying to squeeze in personal time on one's devices while on the job is viewed as unprofessional, and if perceived as a habit by the site supervisor, it may be another potential reason for permanent dismissal from the site. It is usually acceptable to use these devices when officially off the clock or on break time. If use of these devices is allowed during break times in designated areas, be sure that you remain professional in your activity while anywhere on the site’s property. In other words, it is best to avoid streaming videos, playing music, or visiting questionable or inappropriate Web sites. Make sure you fully understand the rules at your site concerning this issue. In any case, one definite rule of thumb is to not use these devices anywhere patients or customers can see you.
• Regarding computer use at the practicum site, just because you have been placed at a computer station to complete certain tasks does not mean that it is okay to use the Internet for any personal reasons or to play computer games. This includes checking personal e-mail, paying bills, shopping, checking social media, and so on. Computer games can be habitual for some people when no immediate task is at hand. These games must be avoided as well, especially when, as a student-trainee, you are attempting to make your best impression on the professionals training you.

During the practicum, it is imperative to give your best effort in all areas. Consider what personal adjustments are necessary, and plan ahead to be successful. The preceding recommendations cover some of the most common areas of concern for students to consider before the practicum.

**Spotlight on the Surgical Technology Practicum**
Surgery patients rely on the comfort and reassurance they receive from their surgical team. At a time when these patients can be somewhat apprehensive, such as on their way into the operating room, the competence and caring
nature of the surgeon(s) and their team of surgical technologists and nurses must resonate with the patient. Professional etiquette throughout the pre-op procedures, along with the surgical team's effective bedside manner, can make a difference in how comfortable and calm the patient feels and how he or she will perceive the care received, even in the post-op phase. Important aspects that stand out to surgery patients are the demeanor of the surgical team as well as the way the team members communicate with the patient and with each other. The surgery experience for the patient becomes more positive when they see these qualities during such an uncertain and possibly emotional time.

**Social Media Etiquette and Behavior**

Believe it or not, the social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.) can be and are used by employers to provide a glimpse into the personal nature of potential student-trainees and employees, and even current employees, especially those being considered for promotions. Certain employers are concerned about the overall personality and nature of individuals involved with their organizations in addition to their professional qualifications and experience. Checking into social media sites provides insight when the character of a person is important for the position or promotion in question. Therefore, as aspiring health care professionals, it is up to all practicum (and job) candidates to consider their personal presentation in social media.

Social media use includes communication through both language and visual images, so it is necessary to create a positive image of oneself through what is said in writing and posted in the form of photos or videos on one's page/site/timeline. The idea is not necessarily to speak and act professionally within these platforms but, rather, simply to avoid any content that would create doubt or raise questions as to the appropriateness of how personal time is spent.

The following are some tips for keeping a “clean” image within social media:

- Avoid images that are inappropriate. Profile images, for example, should be a photo you are comfortable showing to a family member or boss/manager at your job.
- Avoid slang as much as possible. Communicating too much in this type of lingo creates the impression that your written communication skills may not be on par with professional correspondence and documentation.
- Avoid bad language, such as profanities and terms that reflect hatred or anger. When this type of language is associated with you, it conveys personal instability and lack of self-control.
- Avoid negativity in your attitude toward life. This shows through your written content. Sometimes it is okay to be honest if you are posting
to friends that you had a bad day, but showing the down side of life regularly or often can make it appear that you lack a positive outlook and tend to stay stuck in problems, which may affect your ability to focus and be productive.

- Avoid any inappropriate written content. In determining what qualifies as inappropriate, simply consider whether you would want your family members or potential employers to come across the content you post. If it is not something you would share with them, then it is best to keep it off the site.

Keeping your social media activities free of questionable content will help employers develop a good impression of your personal life when it matters or is important to a certain position or to an organization’s overall vision and mission in serving patients and/or customers.

HIGHLIGHT

TIPS FROM PROFESSIONALS

Always present yourself as professional - this includes how you speak as well as how you appear. Show up on time to the site each day looking neat and clean. You are pursuing your career, so make sure you reflect a professional image in all aspects.

–Medical Assistant (Cardiology office)
Conclusion

These aspects of etiquette are significant as you enter the allied health industry. The more personal contact and communication you have with patients, customers, and other health care professionals, the more important your manners become. The best way to ensure a good start is to visualize yourself working with patients or customers in the setting and to zoom in to the impressions being developed about you as their service or care provider. Think carefully about what areas you may need to improve upon before beginning your practicum so that you do not have any etiquette issues interfering with your professional performance.

Self-Prep Questions

1. Name at least five behaviors or manners that are unacceptable.

2. What aspects of etiquette do you feel you should improve on for your practicum?

3. What are your etiquette strengths? How do you think these will promote you as a professional in your allied health specialty?
4. What social media site(s) do you use? How do you feel about the content they contain? Do you think that you need to change any aspects of your online etiquette so that your personal life appears more appealing to potential employers or site managers who check in for further insight?

__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________

Role-Play Scenario

This scenario requires four to ten individuals, depending on class size (more if feasible). An audience is also needed to actively critique the created scene. The scenario is an office party for a physician’s birthday. The office is usually closed daily for the lunch hour, which is when the party is being held in the facility’s break room. Set up a table with snacks and beverages for the celebration. One to three students can be designated as the student-trainees, while the others participating in the scenario are the employees. The group performing should act out the office party scene, focusing on proper etiquette but at the same time carrying on with normal eating, conversation, and interaction with others. The audience should have paper and pen readily available during the scene to critique observable etiquette and to present these details to the acting group at the end of the scene. Look for positive and negative aspects of etiquette to note among all participants.

1. Make two lists, recording “appropriate” etiquette observations in one list and “needs improvement” etiquette observations in the other.

__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
2. Were any differences noted between the manners of the student-trainees and those of the employees? If not, should there have been any?

3. In a constructive manner, give your advice to the actors on how they can improve their etiquette. Reinforce the positive aspects you noticed.

Readiness Checklist

____ I understand the overall picture of how my manners or etiquette in the professional setting contribute to my professional demeanor.
____ I have considered and recognize any changes I should make in my posture or demeanor.
____ I understand the possible consequences of not appearing to have a positive attitude, confidence, and a noticeable interest in my field.
____ I have considered ways in which I can improve my verbal manners.
____ I have gauged my level of appropriate wording in general professional conversation and am aware of any challenges I need to overcome.
____ I recognize the major distracting behaviors, and I have thought of ways to overcome those that may apply to me.
____ I understand the guidelines for the use of personal portable electronic devices such as phones and tablets while on site.
____ Concerning my use of social media, I am aware of the actions to avoid in order to demonstrate a “clean” personal image.