SOFTWARE & TECH

George Washington Rules Of Civility

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795580685516252

Introduction: The Timeless Wisdom of George Washington's Rules of Civility

Long before George Washington became the commanding general of the Continental Army, the first President of the United States, and the "Father of His Country," he was a young boy growing up on a Virginia plantation. At the age of just sixteen, Washington painstakingly copied out a list of 110 social and moral precepts into a schoolbook. This document, known today as the **George Washington Rules of Civility**, would profoundly shape his character and public life. Far more than a simple etiquette guide, these rules offered a blueprint for self-discipline, respect for others, and dignified conduct. In an era often marked by political incivility and social fragmentation, revisiting these principles provides a refreshing perspective on leadership, virtue, and the art of living well with others.

The Rules of Civility were not original to Washington. They were based on a French etiquette manual composed by Jesuit priests in the late 16th century, which was later translated into English. Washington's act of copying them—and, more importantly, internalizing them—reveals a young man hungry for moral structure and social polish. Throughout his life, contemporaries remarked on Washington's remarkable poise, his ability to command respect without arrogance, and his unwavering sense of duty. These qualities did not emerge by chance; they were cultivated, in no small part, through the daily practice of the **George Washington Rules of Civility**. This article will explore the rich history of these rules, examine their core themes, and uncover why they remain a potent guide for personal and professional excellence today.

The Historical Roots of the Rules of Civility

To truly appreciate the **George Washington Rules of Civility**, one must first understand their origin. The original text was a French work titled *Les Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne*(Rules of Good Conduct and Christian Civility), written by the Jesuits of a college in Bordeaux. It was intended to teach young nobles proper behavior in court and society. The work was translated into English and became a standard textbook in colonial America. Young Washington, with his characteristic diligence, copied the rules into his copybook as a handwriting exercise—but he clearly absorbed their lessons with seriousness.

Washington's education was practical rather than classical; he never attended university. Yet his ambition to rise in Virginia society and later in military and political circles demanded a mastery of deportment. The Rules of Civility provided a systematic framework for how to treat others, how to carry oneself, and how to earn respect. Historians note that Washington's commitment to these rules was lifelong. He frequently referenced similar principles in his letters and official orders, emphasizing punctuality, honesty, and respect for rank and age. The **George Washington Rules of Civility**thus became a kind of moral compass—guiding his interactions with everyone from fellow generals to servants.

Why Washington Valued These Rules

Washington understood that leadership is built on trust, and trust is built on small, consistent acts of consideration. The rules taught him to control his temper, to listen before speaking, and to show deference to others. In a time when dueling and violent disputes were common, Washington's measured demeanor set him apart. His ability to remain calm under pressure—whether facing defeat on the battlefield or political intrigue in the cabinet—owed much to the self-discipline he honed through these practices.

George Washington Rules of Civility were not merely about dining etiquette; they were about cultivating the inner virtues of a gentleman.

Core Themes of the 110 Rules

The 110 rules cover a wide array of topics, from table manners to conversation, from personal hygiene to respect for elders. But certain overarching themes emerge, each of which contributed to Washington's character and can inform modern readers.

Respect for Others and Self

Many rules emphasize showing deference to others: "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those present." Others focus on self-respect: "Let your countenance be pleasant but in serious matters somewhat grave." Washington internalized the balance between humility and dignity. He never sought to dominate a room through loudness, but his composed presence commanded attention. This theme is especially relevant today, when respect in public discourse often seems scarce.

Conversation and Listening

A substantial number of rules address conversation. Rule 73, for instance, advises: "Think before you speak; pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your words too hastily." Rule 35 states: "Let your discourse be with men of quality and of quality in their speech." Washington was known as a reserved speaker, but when he spoke, he was direct and meaningful. He understood that listening was as important as speaking—a lesson for modern leaders in any field.

Table Manners and Cleanliness

While some rules about table manners seem quaint today—such as "Cleanse not your teeth with the table cloth" or "Spit not into the fire"—they underscore a deeper principle: that our behavior in small, mundane matters reveals our character. Washington's attention to detail, even in dining, contributed to the respect he inspired. For modern professionals, similar attention to etiquette in meetings and social settings remains a marker of competence.

Self-Control and Moderation

Perhaps the most essential theme is self-control. Rule 1 states: "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those present." But more directly, Rule 110: "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience." Washington's legendary temper was checked by his conscious effort to follow these rules. He learned to pause, to reflect, and to act with deliberation—a skill that any leader could benefit from cultivating.

How the Rules of Civility Shaped Washington's Leadership

The impact of the **George Washington Rules of Civility** on Washington's career cannot be overstated. As commander of the Continental Army, he faced a ragtag group of soldiers, scarce supplies, and powerful enemies. His ability to maintain order and morale required immense personal discipline. He treated his officers and men with a consistent respect, never humiliating them publicly. He insisted on punctuality (Rule 18: "Read no letters, books, or papers in company; but when there is a necessity for the doing of it, you must ask leave").

During the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Washington's presence as presiding officer was stabilizing. His refusal to dominate debate, his careful listening, and his insistence on procedural fairness reflected the civility

he had practiced since youth. When he became president, he set precedents for dignified behavior—such as bowing rather than shaking hands (a custom of the time), avoiding excessive pomp, and maintaining

George Washington Rules of Civility

were his invisible guide, helping him navigate the untested waters of an infant republic without succumbing to ambition or arrogance.

Modern Relevance: Why These Rules Matter Today

In our fast-paced, often rude digital age, the **George Washington Rules of Civility** offer a remedy. While many of the specific behaviors (like not chewing your nails or not looking at others' papers) seem dated, the underlying principles are timeless: respect, consideration, self-discipline, and mindfulness of how our actions affect others. Social media, for instance, often encourages impulsive, hurtful remarks. Washington's rule "Think before you speak" would serve us well online. His emphasis on honoring elders and those in authority can help rebuild trust in institutions.

Business leaders, educators, and parents can draw from these rules to foster better communication. A simple practice of listening without interrupting (Rule 32: "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") may seem trivial, but it reflects an awareness of others' comfort. In the workplace, punctuality, polite greetings, and respectful disagreement—all found in Washington's rules—are foundational to a healthy culture.

Applying the Rules in Personal Development

Many modern self-improvement programs echo Washington's wisdom. The idea of "emotional intelligence" borrows from his emphasis on self-awareness and empathy. The "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey includes "Seek first to understand, then to be understood," which aligns with Washington's rules on listening. By studying the **George Washington Rules of Civility**, we can systematically cultivate virtues that enhance our relationships and careers.

A Closer Look at Selected Rules

To illustrate the depth of the **George Washington Rules of Civility**, here are a few noteworthy precepts and their modern interpretations:

- Rule 1: "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those present." Modern take: Be present; put away your phone when with others. Acknowledge people with eye contact and greeting.
- Rule 4: "In the presence of others, sing not to yourself with a humming noise, nor drum with your fingers or feet." Modern take: Avoid distracting behaviors in meetings; be mindful of your fidgeting.
- Rule 22: "Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another, though he were your enemy." Modern take: Practice grace; celebrate others' successes; do not gloat over rivals' failures.
- Rule 35: "Let your discourse be with men of quality and of quality in their speech." Modern take: Seek out wise conversation partners; elevate your own speech with clear, thoughtful language.
- Rule 56: "Keep your nails clean and short, also your hands and teeth clean, yet without showing great concern for them." Modern take: Good grooming is important, but avoid excessive vanity; cleanliness shows respect for others.
- Rule 110: "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience." Modern take: Cultivate your inner moral compass; let integrity guide your decisions.

These ten rules represent just a fraction of the whole, but they capture the essence of Washington's approach to life: a blend of self-respect, respect for others, and commitment to moral excellence.

Criticism and Context: Are All Rules Relevant?

Some critics argue that the **George Washington Rules of Civility** are outdated and even classist. They reflect

the hierarchical society of 18th-century Virginia, where deference to rank and status was expected. Rules about bowing to superiors, yielding the way to those of higher station, and not questioning elders may seem antithetical to modern egalitarian values. However, it is important to view the rules in their historical context. Washington himself lived in a time of great inequality, yet he used these rules to treat everyone—from slaves to generals—with a measured dignity. Today, we can adapt the core spirit: treat all people with respect, regardless of status, while still acknowledging positions of legitimate authority.

Moreover, the rules are not rigid dogma. Washington selectively applied them; he was not a robot. He allowed himself breaks from formality when genuine connection was needed. The lesson is not to copy the 110 rules literally, but to extract their timeless wisdom and apply it appropriately in our own lives.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Civility

The **George Washington Rules of Civility** are far more than a historical curiosity. They are a testament to the power of deliberate character formation. Young George Washington committed these principles to heart, and they guided him through a life of extraordinary

Related Articles

- **Are James Blunt And Emily Blunt Related**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/are-james-blunt-and-emily-blunt-related.pdf
- **Was Remember Me Based On A True Story**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/was-remember-me-based-on-a-true-story.pdf
- **Ess Employee Self Service Costco**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/ess-employee-self-service-costco.pdf
- **The Case For Christianity By Cs Lewis**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/the-case-for-christianity-by-cs-lewis.pdf

TOPIC INDEX

#george • #washington • #rules • #civility

DIGITAL EDITION

george-washington-rules-of-civility

DIGITAL EDITION

george-washington-rules-of-civility

DIGITAL EDITION

george-washington-rules-of-civility

DIGITAL EDITION

george-washington-rules-of-civility