SOFTWARE & TECH

George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795580670740114

The Enduring Wisdom of George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation

Before he led the Continental Army, before he crossed the Delaware, and before he became the first President of the United States, a teenage George Washington sat down with a quill pen and carefully copied out 110 maxims. These were not his original ideas, but a translation of a French etiquette manual from the 16th century, originally written by Jesuits. Yet, in the act of transcribing them, young George internalized a code of conduct that would shape his character, his leadership, and ultimately, the very fabric of a new nation. Today, we know this collection as **George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation**. More than a dusty artifact of colonial life, these rules offer a surprisingly relevant blueprint for personal integrity, social grace, and professional success in the 21st century. They are less about which fork to use and far more about how to treat people with genuine respect and self-awareness.

In a world that often feels fractured by incivility, where digital communication can strip away tone and empathy, revisiting these principles feels less like nostalgia and more like a necessity. The rules are not a rigid legal code; they are a mirror reflecting the values of self-control, consideration, and honor. This article explores the origins of these rules, breaks down their core themes, and demonstrates how their ancient wisdom can transform your modern interactions, from the boardroom to the dinner table.

The Origins: A Schoolboy's Assignment

Around the year 1744, at the age of 14 or 16 (historians debate the exact date), George Washington was a young man from a well-to-do, but not aristocratic, Virginia family. He was acutely aware that his future depended on climbing the social ladder, which required mastering the art of genteel behavior. His father had died when he was 11, and his older half-brother Lawrence became a crucial mentor. As part of his education, he was tasked with copying a set of maxims into a notebook he titled "Forms of Writing."

The source material was a translation of a French book by the Jesuit priests, which itself was derived from an earlier 16th-century Dutch text. The fact that Washington copied these **Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour** by hand is deeply significant. This was not a passive reading exercise; it was an act of meditation. By physically writing each rule, he engraved the principles onto his mind. He was literally practicing the discipline he was trying to learn. This notebook was not for public consumption but was a private guide for self-improvement. It is remarkable how closely his later life as a general and president aligned with the maxims he memorized as a boy.

The 110 rules cover a vast range of social situations. However, they are not a random list. They can be grouped into several powerful, interconnected themes that form a complete philosophy of social interaction.

The Primacy of Respect and Consideration for Others

The single most dominant theme running through **George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation**is the idea of empathy and putting others at ease. Rule #1 sets the tone: "Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present." This is the golden rule of social interaction. It is a profound call to be mindful that your actions and words affect the people around you.

This respect manifests in specific behaviors that are surprisingly modern:

- Don't interrupt: Rule #31 is a classic: "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." This is about not imposing your bodily functions on others. Rule #36 takes it further: "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." This is about respecting personal space and status.
- Don't be a bore: Rule #40 advises, "Think before you Speak pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your Words too hastily but orderly & distinctly." This is about clear, thoughtful communication. Rule #45 is blunt: "Be not Angry at 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 Humour makes one Dish a Feast." This is classic emotional intelligence – managing your own mood for the comfort of the group.
- Listen actively: Rule #33 instructs, "Undertake not to teach a person what he himself would be better understood; for it is an Insolence in you to instruct him, who stands in no need of it." This is a powerful lesson in humility and knowing when to hold your tongue. Rule #35 is equally direct: "Let your Discourse be with Men of good Sense and not with every Body; and avoid much talking especially in company."

Self-Control and Emotional Mastery

Washington lived in an era of duels and passionate honor. For a young man with a fiery temper (which many historians believe he possessed), learning to control his emotions was critical. The rules are a manual for emotional regulation.

Rule #48 is a masterclass in this: "Wherein you reprove Another be unblameable yourself; for example is more prevalent than Precepts." You cannot correct others if you are not living correctly yourself. Rule #56 warns against gossip and rumor: "When you speak of God or his Attributes, let it be Seriously & with Reverence. Honor & obey your Natural Parents although they be Poor." This is about respect for authority and the divine, but also about maintaining a serious and respectful tone.

The ultimate expression of self-control is found in Rule #108: "When you are with a Wife, a Friend, or a relation, be not too free with them; for it is a great folly to be too open with them; and it is a great imprudence to be too free with them." This is a nuanced rule about maintaining healthy boundaries, even with those closest to you. It is not about being cold, but about preserving dignity and mystery. Rule #110, the final rule, is a summation: "Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience." This is the core of the entire system: an inner moral compass.

Practical Advice for Modern Life & Leadership

While some rules are specific to the 18th century (like how to bow or remove your hat), the underlying principles are timeless. They form the basis of what modern business gurus call "emotional intelligence" and "executive presence." A leader who follows **George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation** would naturally be a better leader.

1. In the Workplace: Imagine a manager who never interrupts, never loses their temper at a table, listens more than they speak, and shows respect to everyone from the CEO to the intern. Rule #2 states, "In the Presence of Others, Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet," which is a fantastic reminder to avoid distracting behavior in a shared office space. Rule #73 says, "Reproach none for their Infirmities, nor be importunate to see them," which is a beautiful way to say "don't mock someone's weaknesses."
2. In Digital Communication: The rules were written for face-to-face conversation, but their spirit applies perfectly to email and social media. "Think before you Speak" (Rule #40) translates to "Think before you send that angry email." "Undertake not to teach a person what he himself would be better understood" (Rule #33) is a perfect antidote to the know-it-all comments on social media. "Speak not Evil of the absent" (Rule #89) is a direct command against gossiping online.
3. In Personal Relationships: The rules about putting others at ease, controlling your temper at the table, and being a good listener are the bedrock of healthy friendships and romantic partnerships. They teach us that true civility is not about being a pushover, but about being a person of strength and consideration. They teach respect. And as Washington understood, respect is the foundation of all decent behavior.

Why These Rules Matter More Than Ever

We live in an age of incredible communication tools, yet loneliness and social anxiety are rampant. We have more ways to connect than ever, but our connections often feel shallow. The reason is simple: we have focused on the "what" of technology rather than the "how" of human interaction. **George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation** provides the "how." They are a manual for building trust, showing honor, and creating a sense of safety in any interaction.

These rules are not about being stiff or formal. In fact, many of them encourage warmth, humor, and a cheerful countenance. Rule #25 is wonderful: "Superfluous Complements and all Affectation of Ceremony are to be avoided, yet where due demands of Respect it is not to be omitted." Be natural, be authentic, but be respectful. The ultimate goal is not to impress others with your rigid etiquette, but to make them feel comfortable and valued. When you feel good about someone after a conversation, it is often because they practiced these rules without you even noticing.

They are a profound lesson in humility. The young man who would become the most powerful figure in America spent his teenage years learning how to put others first. He understood that power without grace is tyranny, and that leadership without respect is failure. By studying and practicing these 110 simple maxims, he built the character that would sustain him through the darkest days of the Revolutionary War and the immense pressures of the presidency.

Conclusion: A Living Legacy

George Washingtons Rules Of Civility And Decent Behaviour In Company And Conversation are far more than a historical curiosity. They are a practical, timeless guide to being a better human being. They teach that true civility begins with a spark of conscience within us and extends outward in every action, glance, and word. In a world that desperately needs more respect, more empathy, and more grace, we would do well to revisit the notebook of a teenage boy who decided to write his way to a better character. The rules he copied are not a relic of the past; they are a roadmap for a better future, for our conversations, our companies, and our communities. As Washington himself would learn, the greatest power is not the ability to command others, but the ability to command oneself. That lesson, written in ink by a young man's hand, is as valuable today as it was over two centuries ago.

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