

Office Culture

&

Etiquette

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Forward

Please remember you are in a different country, there is a different culture and there are many unwritten rules that are deeply embedded in Japanese DNA. The way they do things is not necessarily right, it's not necessarily wrong – it's just different. If you remember this when you are faced with a situation you don't understand, try not to become offended or shocked, remember that it's just *different*. This will alleviate much of your stress and you will be happier in general if you can accept that things aren't the same the world over. No one way suits us all. It's just *different* here.

Arriving at school

- Being punctual is important. If possible, try to get to school ten minutes early. Nobody wants to be THAT GUY/THAT GIRL who sneaks in late and disrupts the morning meeting.
- Morning meetings are held before school starts. Normally, this is the time that teachers announce things and let everyone know what's going on. If you don't understand everything, that's okay. Just try not to be disruptive.
- It's always a good idea to talk to your tantousha before classes start for the day. However at times, this is easier said than done. Realize that often times, tantoushas are incredibly busy and may be hard to track down.

Hima desu neeeee

- Being an ALT means that sometimes we occasionally have a bit of free time. Sometimes we have a looooot of free time. If possible, try to look busy during these times. It's a better reflection on you.
- Some ideas to keep you busy include making things for an English board, making flashcards, studying Japanese etc. Be creative!

Leaving school

- When it's time to go, quietly gather your things and take your leave.
- The proper phrase to say is "Osaki ni shitsureishimasu" (roughly translated: I'm rudely leaving before you).

What to Wear: Classy Lads and Elegant Gals

Gentleman: In the summer, Japan has the wonderful concept of 'Cool Biz'. Short sleeve, collared shirts and slacks are acceptable fare. Tank tops and shorts are pretty much a no-go. Try to wear a light undershirt – not only does this help fight sweat stains, your schools most likely aren't ready for your manly chest hair.

In the winter, collared long sleeve shirts and sweaters are acceptable.

Ladies: In the summer, the wonderful concept of 'Cool Biz' also applies to women! However, sleeveless or super low cuts shirts are never worn to work. Skirts should touch or be slightly above your knees. Avoid showing your shoulders and back.

In the winter, long sleeve shirts and sweaters are acceptable.

Enkai etiquette (how to party with class)

- Dress to impress, especially if it is your welcome enkai. The enkai begins with formal speeches and everybody sitting politely in seiza (sitting with legs tucked under), then a kampai (toast). After that let the eating, drinking and conversation begin.
- Be careful to drink at your own pace at enkai, the drinking can be fast-paced at times. You can also ask to drink oolong tea if you don't want to drink alcohol.
- After the first enkai there is usually a second or even third party, which are good chances to socialize further and sing karaoke.

Some helpful Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Be punctual and on time to the office. If you're running late, let them know with a quick call to your BOE or tantousha.
- Greet everyone upon entering the staffroom. Some days, it may be hard to muster up enough 'genki' to do so, but a loud, genki aisatsu will definitely serve as a good reflection on you.
- Be aware of how you dress for work. Remember to always try and keep an air of professionalism in what you wear.

- Be sure to know your schedule and what classes you're teaching for the day. This may be easier said than done because teachers are so busy. Politely approaching your teachers and asking them is not seen as intrusive, so don't hesitate. It'll save you a lot of stress.
- Keep your phone on silent mode. If you have to make a call, step out of the staffroom/office and make it.
- Try and keep yourself busy (or at the very least, look busy). Sometimes we have a lot of free time. Try and fill these gaps with productive things to do like English boards, flashcards, offering to grade things etc.
- Partake in cleaning time. It'll help you talk to your students and feel more like you're part of the school. Plus, you don't want to be *THAT ALT* who all the students awkwardly clean around.
- Try and participate in club activities. If something interests you, don't hesitate to ask if you can join in occasionally. The students will appreciate it and it's fun to get to know your kids outside of English class.
- Go to at least one enkai. They're a lot of fun, even if you don't drink. It's a chance to get to see your teachers let their hair down and have a good time. You can also chat with other teachers that you don't normally get the chance to during work hours.
- Relax and let everyone get used to having you in the office. It might take some time, but eventually they'll feel comfortable with you and want to get to know you more.
- Omiyage is great to give to your school after going for a vacation but it may be difficult to buy for all your schools. In such a case, buy omiyage for your main schools. However, if you go for a long vacation, back to your home country for example, it is a good idea to try to buy omiyage for all your schools.

Don't:

- **Important:** Don't do something stupid that breaks school rules or Japanese law. Examples include drinking and driving, trying to smuggle in marijuana or driving without a license. If caught you will lose your job and have to leave Japan. The rules are very strict for such cases.
- Don't expect your co-workers to fully understand your home culture. There are different expectations when working in Japan. For example, make sure you look busy even when you aren't.
- Don't be surprised by seemingly strange comments. Co-workers may not follow the same cultural guidelines as you regarding what and what not to say to a person. Comments such as "you are very big" or "you have put on weight!" are not unusual.
- Don't put up with crude comments from your students. Sometimes you may be asked sexually related questions and you need a strategy to answer back. You can be firm or you can work out creative ways to brush off questions without answering. One possible answer is to say "shitsurei, omae", which lets the student know they have been rude.
- Don't complain about your work hours, salary, or job requirements to co-workers. Many teachers at your schools work longer hours, have more things required of them, and get paid less. If you have a legitimate complaint, talk privately with your supervisor.
- Don't cancel your spot at an enkai without a very good reason (you're having surgery, you've become violently ill, etc.). It takes a lot of planning to set up a nomikai and backing out at the last moment isn't good. It is also good for office relations to go!
- Don't use computers at school for personal activities like games or shopping. Studying and working on something for schools or ekaiwa is fine but non-work related activities should be avoided.
- Don't get personally involved if you see a teacher physically punish a student. If you see a teacher do something inappropriate then you should tell your supervisor.

- Don't forget about the indoor shoes and outdoor shoe rules. And toilet slippers and separate indoor gym shoes! Also, as a general rule, most of the time you have to take off your shoes before entering the principal's office.
- Don't start eating lunch until "itadakimasu" has been said. Also, don't stand your chopsticks in your rice as that is a ritual performed at funerals only. A good way to find out how to eat something that looks difficult is to ask a teacher or student: "douyatte tabetara iideska?" which means "how do I eat this properly?".
- Don't talk loudly in the office. Your schools and offices have open work spaces and people will usually have their heads down, working. It is fine to talk to your supervisor or other teachers but don't attract unwanted attention by being too noisy.
- Don't eat breakfast at your desk. It is not usual in Japan. If you buy something for breakfast on the way to school, go into the teacher's kitchen to eat it quickly.
- Don't forget the snacks and coffee. Some offices have snack baskets and you can eat the snacks (check first) but people usually pool money once a month to buy the next month's snacks and coffee. You'll probably have to pay your share too, even if you don't eat the snacks!