
A Cultural Difference: Being on Time

• Prereading Preparation

1. What does **on time** mean?
2. Is it always important to be on time? Look at the table below. How important is it to be on time for each appointment? Put a check mark in the box to show your answer. Discuss your answers with the class.

How Important Is It . . . ?

Type of Appointment	Scheduled Time	Very Important	Slightly Important	Not Important
dentist	9 A.M.			
university class	11 A.M.			
lunch with a friend at school	12 P.M.			
dinner with your spouse	7 P.M.			
a friend's party	9 P.M.			
job interview in a bank	2 P.M.			

3. Are you usually on time, or are you usually late? Why?
4. Read the title of the article. What do you think this article is about?

1 In the United States, it is important to be on time, or
2 punctual, for an appointment, a class, a meeting, etc.
3 However, this may not be true in all countries. An
4 American professor discovered this difference while
5 teaching a class in a Brazilian university. The two-hour
6 class was scheduled to begin at 10 A.M. and end at 12 P.M.
7 On the first day, when the professor arrived on time, no

8 one was in the classroom. Many students came after 10
9 A.M. Several arrived after 10:30 A.M. Two students came
10 after 11 A.M. Although all the students greeted the pro-
11 fessor as they arrived, few apologized for their lateness.
12 Were these students being rude? He decided to study
13 the students' behavior.

14 The professor talked to American and Brazilian stu-
15 dents about lateness in both an informal and a formal
16 situation: lunch with a friend and in a university class,
17 respectively. He gave them an example and asked them
18 how they would react. If they had a lunch appointment
19 with a friend, the average American student defined
20 lateness as 19 minutes after the agreed time. On the
21 other hand, the average Brazilian student felt the friend
22 was late after 33 minutes.

23 In an American university, students are expected to
24 arrive at the appointed hour. In contrast, in Brazil, nei-
25 ther the teacher nor the students always arrive at the
26 appointed hour. Classes not only begin at the scheduled
27 time in the United States, but they also end at the sched-
28 uled time. In the Brazilian class, only a few students left
29 the class at noon; many remained past 12:30 to discuss
30 the class and ask more questions. While arriving late
31 may not be very important in Brazil, neither is staying
32 late.

33 The explanation for these differences is complicated.
34 People from Brazilian and North American cultures have
35 different feelings about lateness. In Brazil, the students
36 believe that a person who usually arrives late is prob-
37 ably more successful than a person who is always on
38 time. In fact, Brazilians expect a person with status or
39 prestige to arrive late, while in the United States late-
40 ness is usually considered to be disrespectful and unac-
41 ceptable. Consequently, if a Brazilian is late for an
42 appointment with a North American, the American may
43 misinterpret the reason for the lateness and become
44 angry.

45 As a result of his study, the professor learned that
46 the Brazilian students were not being disrespectful to
47 him. Instead, they were simply behaving in the appro-
48 priate way for a Brazilian student in Brazil. Eventually,
49 the professor was able to adapt his own behavior so that
50 he could feel comfortable in the new culture.
