

5 Making friends

In this chapter, we'd like to help you to understand the best ways to make friends and to get involved in student life at your college/university. Although studies are very important, it's also important to remember that college life can be a wonderful opportunity to meet native-speaker students, as well as other international students from every corner of the globe.

Try to make friends with people who don't speak the same first language as you. This doesn't necessarily have to be native speakers of English. Being friends with other international students from other parts of the world who don't speak the same first language as you will mean that you have to speak English to communicate. Although it seems very comfortable and safe to make friends with people of the same nationality as you, you will not improve your English or learn the host culture or learn about other cultures in any deep way. Remember that college/university abroad is about much more than just your degree. You're also improving your foreign language skills, and learning about a new culture.

What kind of accommodation is best?

Try to live with native-speaker students, or at least a mix of nationalities. If you live with your own nationality, it makes it more difficult to meet native-speaker students. One of the best ways to do this, if you're an undergraduate, is to live at the dormitory/student halls of residence. There's always lots going on and lots of people to talk to in these places, and there's often a sense of community.

Another great option that is often available to college- and university-level students is a homestay. In a homestay, you'll live with a local family. At their best, homestays provide many benefits such as:

- better speaking and listening skills because of the opportunities to practice with the family;
- detailed cultural knowledge;
- a view of life “from the inside” of a culture;
- a quieter living option than the typical dormitory or shared apartment;
- people who look after you and can help you;
- a home environment;
- experience with children and the elderly, who you don't often interact with on a college/university campus.

What if you're just not meeting people from the host country?

If you do end up spending time with other students who speak the same first language as you, make an agreement with your friends to speak in English at all times. The key is to make yourself aware of the fact that you can't keep going back to your first language. This way you'll still get to practice English.

Contact with home

Don't stay in constant contact with home! Some students try to call home every day, or at least several times a week. This is a big mistake. You'll make it harder for yourself to adjust to your new place and life if you're always thinking about what's going on in your country. You'll also lose your focus on what you're doing: studying. You need to explain to your friends and family at home that you need to focus now. Make a plan to contact them once a week if necessary,

but not more than that unless there's a problem. Also remind them that it's best if you're not told about every problem and crisis at home. This can cause a lot of stress and worry for international students. It's often difficult for the family and friends back home who have not studied abroad to understand just how stressful it can be for you to constantly hear about crises that you can't do anything about.

Finding friends at your college/university

Whether you're trying to make friends with local students, or just want to feel like you're really involved in the life of your new college, there are usually many different opportunities for you to become an important part of your college or university's social life.

The student union

On many college/university campuses, there will be a student union or common building that will have many different events happening. These are usually the social heart of the college. From rock concerts to free classes, there is usually much more going on than you could possibly have time for!

The student council

At many colleges/universities, there are opportunities for students to become involved in the political planning and activities of the college. Student councils' members work with the college or university's administrators. They represent the students and help with decision-making on policies at the college or university. These are usually voted-for positions, so even the process of trying to become a council member will help you meet and network with many different types of people across the campus.

Clubs/Student organizations

Depending on the size of your college or university, there should be many different clubs to join. These clubs give

you a perfect opportunity to meet other students who share the same interests as you. In the UK these clubs are usually called “societies.”

The clubs are usually focused on things such as:

- sports;
- foreign languages;
- music (anything from booking bands to playing in one);
- film;
- art;
- dance;
- subject-based, academic clubs (astronomy, history);
- political groups;
- martial arts;
- religious groups;
- interests (baking, knitting, gaming, books);
- sober (people who don't drink alcohol) social groups (a great option for people who don't like drinking or who can't drink due to religious beliefs or health issues).

In Australia, many campuses have an International Students' Society which you may like to join.

Fraternities and Sororities

In the US, there's the opportunity to join a fraternity (for men) or sorority (for women) on many campuses. These are formal, lifelong organizations that usually involve much of your social time being spent with your fraternity and sorority “brothers” and “sisters.” The process of joining a fraternity or sorority is long and involves many rituals and meetings, where both you and the house decide if you're a good fit for each other. It's a good option for people who want a very strong social network, but it's not suitable for everyone.

Foreign language exchange

Many foreign students meet native-speaker students through foreign language exchanges. When you find a partner, usually through the foreign language departments of your college/university, you then meet regularly with your partner. Usually, one hour is spent speaking in your language, and the other hour in English. Many strong friendships have been formed this way, and even if you don't become friends, it's a great way to help other students learn more about your language and culture, while you learn from them.

Community involvement

Many colleges and universities encourage students to become a part of the wider community than the college is in. English-speaking countries have a long history of charity and charity organizations that are run for the most part by volunteers who work without pay. Students in the social sciences such as social work might enjoy working with the elderly, for example. There is usually a charity organization to fit any area of interest that you might have from helping with homelessness or working with wild animals.

Religious institutions

Pretty much every religion is represented in English-speaking countries. Going to mosque, for example, is usually possible wherever you study. Students will often meet native-speaker Muslims in that situation, for example, which can mean an easier friendship due to having similar values or beliefs. Most religious institutions in English-speaking countries, of course, are Christian. These churches will often have many different social organizations attached to them. Many churches throughout the English-speaking world have strong ties and experience with charity organizations in the community. Many also have "international friendship" groups that like to reach out to foreigners in the area. If there isn't a group like this on your campus, there's likely to

be one in the wider community. These groups don't usually try to change your mind about your religion, but rather offer friendship and opportunities to get to know the locals.

Making friends with internationally-minded native speakers

Native-speaker students are often a mystery to international students, especially to those students who come from cultures that are very different from English-language culture. But hopefully we can help take the mystery out of making friends with native speakers.

Students from English-speaking countries are usually very casual and can be quite friendly. Here are some basics you need to know.

Friendships in English-speaking countries can be made very quickly (especially in the US and Canada), but they may not involve the same level of closeness and obligation that many friendships in places such as Asia and the Middle East can.

Friends in English-speaking countries love to spend time together, but they also need time apart. Don't expect to get calls and texts from your English-speaking friends all the time, and you shouldn't call them all the time either.

The beginning of a friendship may be a little confusing and difficult. You may also find that not all native speakers want to make friends with international students. Try to find out if people you talk to are "internationally minded" that is they want to learn about other cultures. These native speakers are often interested in becoming friends with international students.

Starting a conversation

Don't be embarrassed about your English! Try to be confident and don't worry about asking people to repeat themselves or explain things that you don't understand. Speaking to you is

often an opportunity for English-speaking students to learn something about a new culture. But how do you start the first conversation? What you need is an “icebreaker” to help you do this.

icebreaker (noun): An icebreaker is something that someone says or does in order to make it easier for people who have never met before to talk to each other.

Other ways to “break the ice” (or start a conversation)

There are a few common ways that English speakers usually break the ice. If you’re interested in sports, you might mention something about the local sports team.

“How about those Giants?” (the New York Giants American football team)

If you’re interested in fashion, you might compliment someone on her clothes, nails, or jewelry.

“I love your bracelet! Where did you get it?”

Weather is also a common thing to start talking about.

“Wow! It’s so cold today!”

Lastly, if you can’t think of a subject, you can make a comment about the room or situation you’re in.

“Is Professor Jones always this late?” or “Nice painting, isn’t it? Do you know the name of the painter?”

One of the most common ways to start a conversation in college/university, however, is: “What is your major?” or “What are you studying?” If you’re lucky, you’ll know something about the person’s course. If you don’t, however, it’s a great chance for you to ask him or her questions about it.

Another way to start a conversation is to ask a native speaker to explain something you’ve seen other native speakers doing, or to give you advice about the local area. Most people will be very happy to help.

Slang

Remember that, just like in your country, students often like to use a lot of slang typically used by college-aged English speakers. It will be helpful for you to spend some time researching college/university slang online to help you with those things that most English classes wouldn't cover. At first, you don't need to try to use it, but it's very helpful to know it.

Here are some examples of slang used by college/university students in English-speaking countries you might be studying in.

US slang:

- bucks = dollars, so “five bucks” is \$5
- to boot = to vomit
- awesomesauce = amazing, incredible
- strugglebus = a very difficult course load
- cray cray adorbs = incredibly adorable

UK slang:

- quid = pounds, so “five quid” is £5
- a fiver/a tenner = a five pound note/a ten pound note
- booze = alcohol
- cheers/ta = thank you
- loo = toilet

Australian slang:

- tute = tutorial
- arvo = afternoon
- bring a dish = bring a plate of food (not an empty plate!)
- brekky = breakfast
- See you later = good-bye (does not necessarily mean they plan to see you later!)

Invitations/Suggestions for things to do together

As in all cultures, the beginning stage of a new friendship is a kind of dance. It's difficult to reach out to a new friend or understand the new friend's actions when you come from a different culture and you don't understand the process of making a friend.

When you start to get to know someone at your college/university, you'll notice that English speakers will often say things like, "You should come over some time" or, "We should go out some time." When they say this, it can be a real invitation, or it could just be a polite statement to make you feel good. You must then wait to see what happens next when you see this person. Do not take "You should come over some time" to mean, "come over." Don't suddenly show up, unexpected, at the person's dorm room/halls of residence or apartment door. This situation has occurred many times before and it's incredibly embarrassing for the international student (as well as annoying for the native-speaker student who at the time might be busy with other things).

The best way to know if a suggestion to get together is real is a specific date, time, and place. English speakers are usually very specific in this situation.

So, that conversation might go something like this:

American: "You should come over some time, Chung!"

Chung: "That would be fun."

American: "Are you doing anything on Friday night?"

Chung: "No."

American: "Why don't you come over around six and we can hang out with my roommates."

Chung: "Great! I'll see you then."

This is the important first step.

Friendships between men and women, men and men, and women and women

Men and women can have close friendships that aren't sexual. We call these platonic relationships. Because there's almost no separation of the sexes in English-speaking countries, the students you meet will probably have a mix of male and female friends. This is especially true during the college/university years, when people do a lot of things together in groups.

Sometimes, of course, the situation in your friendship may change, and the friend of the opposite sex may decide that they're attracted to you. That can be the wonderful start of a serious romantic relationship, or the end of a great friendship if both sides don't feel the same way about each other.

platonic (adj): Platonic relationships or feelings of affection do not involve sex.

Friendship between men

In some countries, such as India and much of the Middle East, there's a lot of physical contact between male friends. You must understand that in English-speaking countries, that is not the situation. The main form of contact you'll see is handshakes and high-fives. Most men who make affectionate physical contact are gay. But even for gay men, walking with your arm around your friend's waist, for example, as some men in India do, isn't acceptable in most places. The best way to avoid any serious misunderstandings or embarrassment is: no touching in friendships between men.

You'll notice, depending on what ethnic group your male friend comes from, that there may be some back-slapping and even a hug in a moment of high emotion or drunkenness, but this is because of the situation.

Men will also keep a distance between themselves when sitting. Touching legs or feet makes them uncomfortable, so don't sit right next to them at a table or in a booth. This also

goes for speaking distance while standing. The “personal space bubble” in English-speaking countries is about 1.5ft (0.5m) but this depends on the situation and environment, for example, at a party, it might be a bit less. If you stand too close to an American, Brit, or Australian, he’ll probably feel uncomfortable and start to move back to make more space between you. This is true for women, as well.

Young men in English-speaking countries often share interests in sports and the opposite sex, and many other things, depending on what they are interested in. Much of the time spent together will be in front of a TV watching sports, playing video games, going to a bar or party, or at some other activity, often involving running, cycling, playing soccer/football, tennis, basketball, or some other active pastime. Drinking will probably be a large part of whatever evening outings you have.

Friendship between women

Women in English-speaking countries make more physical contact with their friends than men do, but it’s still probably much less than many other parts of the world.

When female friends see each other for a planned outing, they’ll have a variety of physical greetings, depending on the country and again, the ethnic background. In the US, most female friends hug on greeting each other. In the UK, many university students will kiss once on each cheek (an “air” kiss, where you just touch cheeks) or just give a very friendly hello.

Native-speaker women don’t generally hold hands unless they’re an older and younger family member or they’re gay. Most would also feel a bit uncomfortable if you tried to walk arm-in-arm with them down the street as, say, many Taiwanese and Korean women do. There are close friends who do this, but as an international student, you should probably wait to follow someone else’s lead, that is, you should wait for your friend to do this first. Native-speaker

women do sit closer together than men, however, but you should still avoid touching legs or feet. Just as with men, these rules change a bit if there's drinking involved. They'll then be more comfortable with touching.

Young women are typically highly active in much of the English-speaking world, and often enjoy a variety of physical activities such as going to the gym, running, cycling, playing sports such as soccer/football and tennis, and yoga. Many enjoy shopping very much, but also go out to bars and parties, as well as hair and nail salons. Just as with men, the variety of activities women enjoy with their friends are endless. And, just as with young men, going out in the evening will often include drinking.

During conversations with English-speaking female friends, try to stay on the positive unless you know each other fairly well, or are having a particularly bad day. Women are not usually very direct, especially when criticizing. This is important because if you're too blunt or honest with women, they'll probably find it hard to be friends with you. If you're very close, this changes a bit, but still, overall, women like to avoid direct, confrontational statements. Don't give advice or make negative comments about another woman's looks or clothes unless she asks for your opinion. Even then, be very careful! For example, in some cultures it's culturally acceptable to tell your female friend she's "getting a bit fat," (you're showing concern for her health). In English-speaking countries, however, it's not appropriate and it may well mean the end of your friendship.

Friendship between students with different sexual preferences

One very important thing to remember is that being gay (homosexual) or bisexual (attracted to both men and women) has become accepted throughout many English-speaking countries. Many colleges/universities have social and campaigning societies for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people. You'll see that people with

different sexual preferences are often platonic friends. This is sometimes difficult for foreign students to understand. A straight friend and gay friend might go to a “gay bar” (a bar where lots of people, but not everyone, may be gay or bisexual) together. If the straight person gets sexual attention from gay people at the bar (or anywhere else), they can just explain politely that they’re straight or not interested, and that’s usually just fine.

The majority of young people in colleges/universities are comfortable with people with different sexual preferences to their own, and most straight people have gay friends or family members, or deeply admire famous gay people, such as Ellen DeGeneres (of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in the US).

Maintaining friendships

Once you’ve made new friends at your college/university, you’ll feel so much more comfortable and at home. Of course, as you’ve seen already, the culture of making friends and keeping friends can vary dramatically between different cultures.

Here are some ideas on how to keep those friends for a long time.

Obligation in friendships

Friendship in English-speaking countries comes in different forms. Most people have a small number of best, or very close, friends. These are people that are as close at times as a sister or brother. Some people are also close friends with their siblings (brothers and sisters), others aren’t. Just because someone is a brother or sister, it doesn’t automatically mean they’re friends. People will do many things for and to help their close friends, especially when they’re in trouble.

For other friends who aren’t as close, it’s not appropriate to ask for money, a ride from the airport, etc. The level of obligation to friends is different in English-speaking countries from many others. For example, some international students might be willing to miss an exam to help someone who is

unable to get a cab/taxi home from the airport. This would not happen in English-speaking countries. Friends know that their friends have multiple different obligations that usually follow in this order of priority:

1. family (usually very close family like parents, siblings, grandparents)
2. pets (dogs and cats ... they're like family to most people. Don't be surprised if someone decides he can't go to the party because he has a new puppy to look after)
3. work
4. studies
5. friends

So, the exam, and the grade in the course, is more important than whatever trouble you're having at the airport.

obligation (noun): If you have an obligation to do something, it is your duty to do that thing.

Advice and opinions

In many cultures, giving advice that's not asked for is OK. In English-speaking countries, however, people usually ask for advice only if they really want it. If you give too much advice that's not asked for, you'll be seen as a bossy know-it-all and it may affect friendships.

Birthdays/Celebrations

Most college/university students love to celebrate their birthdays with friends. The biggest birthday you'll see in the college system in the US is 21—when people reach the legal age for drinking alcohol. This is a very important birthday because they can now go to bars. That night is usually a huge outing, with lots of drinking. In the UK, this is 18.

Celebrations such as Christmas and Thanksgiving are usually spent with family. Sometimes, however, friends will invite other friends to join their family for these holidays. This is usually quite an honor and is a sign that you're very close.