Tipping Around the World: Who Pays, Who Does Not, and Why

Name Date Class

Reading

1 You finish dinner at a restaurant in Chicago. The card reader turns toward you and **prompts** you to choose 18, 20, or 25 percent, while the server stands a few steps away. Now picture the same moment in Tokyo. If you try to hand over extra money there, the staff will probably look surprised, because tipping is not expected. Neither country is being strange. Each follows its own **etiquette**, and the gap between them is wider than many travelers realize.

2 In the United States, leaving a tip is **customary** in restaurants, and surveys show that most diners do it. In a large national survey in 2023, about nine in ten adults who eat at sit-down restaurants said they always or often leave a **gratuity**. Yet only about one in three adults said it was easy to know whether to tip for different services, and about seven in ten said tipping is expected in more places than it was five years earlier. Requests now appear in cafes, on delivery apps, and on some self-service screens, so it is not surprising that many people find the rules **bewildering**.

3 Part of the reason is legal. Under federal law, employers can pay many tipped workers a cash wage of only $2.13 an hour, a figure that has not changed since 1991. Tips are meant to **supplement** that wage. If a worker's tips do not bring the total up to the federal minimum of $7.25 an hour, the employer must cover the **shortfall**. Even so, a server's earnings can depend heavily on customers, so the arrangement asks diners to pay part of a wage that the menu does not show. A handful of states, including California and Washington, require employers to pay tipped staff the full minimum wage, and tips there are simply extra.

4 Elsewhere the logic is different. In Australia, tipped workers have no lower wage rate, so a tip is a bonus, not a necessity. In Japan, service charges are often built into prices, and good service is seen as part of the job, so extra money may **come across as** awkward or even insulting. In Germany, tipping is normal but modest: diners usually **round up** the bill or add a few percent, and the usual advice is to say the total when you pay. In Italy, the cover charge called coperto is not a tip for the server. Some restaurants also add a **mandatory** service charge. If the bill already includes one, you may not need to add more, so it is worth reading the bill carefully.

5 Tipping did not begin in America. Historians trace it to England, where wealthy guests in the 1500s gave small payments called vails to the servants of their hosts, and where coffeehouse customers later tipped for better service. When the habit spread in the United States after the Civil War, many Americans disliked it. They thought it was **demeaning** to workers and wrong for a country of equals. One writer in 1916 argued that tipping threatened American democracy. Between 1909 and 1915, six states tried to **outlaw** it, but the laws were largely ignored, and all of them had been repealed by the 1920s.

6 Does tipping at least reward good service? The evidence suggests only partly. Research by Michael Lynn, a professor at Cornell University, has found that tip size is only weakly related to how customers rate their service. Small things, such as a server crouching next to the table, seem to raise tips more than you might expect. If the amount can depend on such **arbitrary** details, critics argue, tipping is a weak **incentive** to work well. These findings come from restaurant studies, and they may not hold in every country or every kind of job.

7 Today the debate is moving again. In the 2023 survey, four in ten American adults opposed businesses suggesting tip amounts on screens, and about seven in ten opposed automatic charges. That **backlash** may mean that many customers want to know the full price in advance, but the survey did not ask why. Would you accept a higher menu price in exchange for no tipping, or would you miss the choice?

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**prompts**	_____	**A**	accepted rules of polite behavior
2	**etiquette**	_____	**B**	based on chance, not on a clear reason
3	**customary**	_____	**C**	a reason that makes people try harder
4	**gratuity**	_____	**D**	to raise an amount to a whole number
5	**bewildering**	_____	**E**	to seem a certain way to others
6	**supplement**	_____	**F**	a strong negative reaction to a change
7	**shortfall**	_____	**G**	very confusing and hard to follow
8	**come across as**	_____	**H**	usual and accepted in a place
9	**round up**	_____	**I**	an amount that is less than needed
10	**mandatory**	_____	**J**	making people feel less respected
11	**demeaning**	_____	**K**	to make something illegal by law
12	**outlaw**	_____	**L**	a small extra payment for a service
13	**arbitrary**	_____	**M**	to add to something that exists
14	**incentive**	_____	**N**	encourages someone to take action
15	**backlash**	_____	**O**	required by a rule or by law

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

arbitrary	**backlash**	**bewildering**	**customary**	**demeaning**	**etiquette**	**gratuity**	**incentive**	**mandatory**
outlaw	**prompts**	**round up**	**shortfall**	**supplement**				

1 A short message on the screen _____ you to save your work.

2 In many countries, learning local _____ helps visitors avoid embarrassment.

3 It is _____ to remove your shoes before entering a home in many countries.

4 The menu said that a 15 percent _____ would be added for tables of six or more.

5 The airport signs were so _____ that we missed our gate.

6 Some farmers _____ their income by renting rooms to tourists.

7 The school faced a _____ of funds after the grant was cancelled.

8 Many people _____ the bill to the next euro when they pay.

9 Helmets are _____ for riders on this road.

10 She quit because she found the way her manager spoke to staff _____ .

11 The government plans to _____ the sale of fireworks to children.

12 The prices seemed _____ , changing from day to day for no clear reason.

13 A bonus can be a strong _____ for staff to work harder.

14 The new fee caused a public _____ and the company withdrew it.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What contrast does the opening paragraph draw between a restaurant in Chicago and one in Tokyo?

2 What do the survey results in paragraph 2 suggest about how Americans feel about tipping rules?

3 Why does the federal tipped wage help to explain why tipping matters so much in the United States?

4 What must an employer do in the United States if a worker's tips and cash wage add up to less than the federal minimum?

5 Give two reasons from the reading why a tip may come across as awkward in Japan.

6 What is the difference between a mandatory service charge and a tip? Why does the writer advise reading the bill carefully?

7 Why did many Americans dislike tipping after the Civil War, and what happened to the laws against it?

8 What does the research described in paragraph 6 suggest about tipping and service quality? Why does the writer add a caution at the end?

9 In paragraph 7, what might the opposition to suggested tips and automatic charges mean, and what does the writer admit the survey cannot show?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Servers in Japan earn higher wages than servers in the United States."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that tipping is always a fair reward for good service."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer open the reading with a scene at a card reader in Chicago and then move to Tokyo? What does this add?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** In the reading, the card reader in Chicago suggests tip amounts.

2 **T / F** Most US adults say it is easy to know whether to tip.

3 **T / F** The federal cash wage of $2.13 an hour has not changed since 1991.

4 **T / F** Every US state lets employers pay tipped workers only $2.13 an hour.

5 **T / F** In Australia, tipped workers have no lower wage rate.

6 **T / F** The reading says diners in Italy must give the coperto to the server.

7 **T / F** Tipping began in the United States and later spread to England.

8 **T / F** Six US states tried to outlaw tipping between 1909 and 1915.

9 **T / F** Small things, such as a server crouching next to the table, seem to raise tips.

10 **T / F** The 2023 survey found that most adults favored automatic charges.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 When did you last leave a tip, and how did you decide how much to give?

2 Do you ever feel pressure when a screen or a server asks you to tip? Describe a time when this happened.

3 What are the tipping customs in your country for restaurants, taxis, and hotels? If tipping is rare, why do you think that is?

4 Have you ever been confused about tipping while traveling? What happened, and what did you learn?

5 Which workers do you think deserve a tip, even if tipping is not customary for their job?

6 Is it better to round up the bill, add a percentage, or leave nothing? Explain your choice.

7 The reading says extra money may come across as awkward in Japan. What gifts or gestures from your culture might be received differently abroad?

8 Would you accept higher menu prices if restaurants stopped asking for tips? Why or why not?

9 Should most of a worker's income come from the employer or from customers? Explain your view.

10 Many Americans once thought tipping was demeaning to workers. Can receiving a tip feel demeaning today? Why or why not?

11 The research in the reading suggests that tip size is only weakly related to service quality. If that is true, what should tips be for?

12 Some countries add service charges instead of asking for tips. What are the advantages and disadvantages for customers, workers, and owners?

13 Can good service be rewarded fairly with money, or are there better ways to show appreciation? Who should decide?

14 How might tipping customs change in the next twenty years as more people pay by phone or card?

Language Focus: Zero and First Conditionals

A conditional sentence has an if clause and a main clause. In the zero conditional, the if clause uses the present simple and the main clause states a general rule or a fact that is always true, often with must, can, or may. In the first conditional, if plus the present simple is followed by will, may, or another future form, to talk about a real possibility.

In the reading:

- "**If** you try to hand over extra money there, the staff will probably look surprised…"
- "**If** a worker's tips do not bring the total up to the federal minimum of $7.25 an hour, the employer must cover the shortfall."
- "**If** the bill already includes one, you may not need to add more…"

Practice: Write two sentences about tipping or gift customs in your own country: one zero conditional (a general rule) and one first conditional (a real possibility for a visitor).

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/tipping-around-world

Notes