

# Norms

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the following topics and their importance to culture:

1. Norms
2. Mores
3. Folkways

## 1. NORMS

**Norms** can be either formal or informal. We define norms as formal or informal rules of conduct and behavioral expectations in social interaction.

- An informal norm could be classroom etiquette. You're expected to sit there, not interrupt the teacher, be quiet, and not distract other students.
- A formal norm are legal obligations, laws, etc. Those are more formal, written types of norms.

In addition to norms being formal and informal, there are also what are called prescriptive norms and proscriptive norms.

- **Prescriptive norms** are norms that tell you what you should do. They prescribe what you should do in social interaction.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You should sit quietly in a classroom. You should obey the law of society. These are prescriptive norms telling you what to do.

- **Proscriptive norms**, on the other hand, prescribe what an individual is not to do, what should be avoided.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You should not talk while another is talking, or steal from the boss at work. These are proscriptive norms, because they tell you what you should not do, what kind of behavior should be avoided.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Norms

Formal and informal rules of conduct and behavioral expectations in social interaction.

### Prescriptive Norms

Norms that prescribe what one should do in social interaction.

### Proscriptive Norms

Norms that prescribe what one should not do in social interaction.

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## 2. MORES

William Graham Sumner was an early American sociologist who died in 1910. Sumner held the first sociology professorship at Yale College. He developed the ideas of mores and folkways, terms that are still used today.

**Mores** are elevated norms with moral dimensions that are widely observed in society, for example, murder, incest, and child abuse. As members of society, you are morally obligated to behave in certain ways, and most people observe these behaviors. Most people don't go around killing each other or abusing children.

These types of awful behaviors in society are also **taboo**. Taboos are mores that have proscriptive bans on the worst conduct in society.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** You might be familiar with the show *To Catch A Predator*, in which a decoy goes online and chats with somebody looking to solicit sex from an underage person. When the predator goes to meet the decoy, they find Chris Matthews waiting to trap him. This is an example of taboo behavior because you're not allowed to solicit sex from somebody who's underage.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Mores

Elevated norms with moral dimensions that are widely observed.

#### Taboo

Mores that are proscriptive bans on the worst conduct in society.

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## 3. FOLKWAYS

**Folkways**, on the other hand (another of Sumner's terms), are norms that govern casual interaction, whose violation often has little consequence for the offender. Despite the lack of consequence, they're still widely observed.

### IN CONTEXT

Think about all the meaningless interactions you have on a given day, like when you return to work on a Monday and have this exchange with your coworker:

- “How was your weekend?”
- “Good. Yours?”
- “Good.”

This conversation doesn't really reveal anything to either party, yet people engage in this kind of

behavior all the time. To not do it would seem odd. These are simply day-to-day interaction with casual norms or folkways.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you get invited to a dinner party, it might be thoughtful to bring an appetizer, bottle of wine, or small gift to the host. You're won't be ostracized if you don't do it, but you might still do it because it is a widely observed folkway.



#### HINT

Folkways can vary by subculture, whereas mores are more universally held.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Why is it important to study norms, mores, and folkways? Because they are the foundation of culture. They're the rules that enable us to live together in groups and form relatively stable societies that can last over time and not come apart because we all know how to behave together. We need rules, laws, mores, and norms to exist.

The better you are at learning all of these little subtleties, the more socially aware you are and the more likely you're going to have success. Nobody likes that coarse, uncouth, or crass person who doesn't seem to understand the subtle rules of interaction that the rest understand. The more familiar you are with all these things, the better off you're going to be, and you learn it through socialization, through watching others as you grow.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Folkways

Norms for casual interaction whose violation often has little consequence but are widely observed nonetheless.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about **norms**, formal or informal rules of conduct and behavioral expectations in social interaction, as well as two different types of norms, **mores**, and **folkways**, and their importance in culture and society.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Folkways

Norms for casual interaction whose violation often has little consequence but are widely observed nonetheless.

##### Mores

Elevated norms with moral dimensions that are widely observed.

**Norms**

Formal and informal rules of conduct and behavioral expectations in social interaction.

**Prescriptive Norms**

Norms that prescribe what one should do in social interaction.

**Proscriptive Norms**

Norms that prescribe what one should not do in social interaction.

**Taboo**

Mores that are proscriptive bans on the worst conduct in society.