

Unconventional

*To be unconventional is to deviate from the more or less agreed on norms of one's society. There is a wide range of ways to be unconventional, ranging from personal eccentricities—he wears shorts to mass; she goes to her lady's club with a pronounced cleavage—to bizarreries, like my habit of dressing up, at home, in order to administer telephone oral exams. None of these behaviors is **untraditional**, for none of them flies in the face of settled cultural or intellectual opinion. None of them claims that Charles Darwin was sent by the devil in order to deceive mankind into thinking there is no God.*

Examples

1 Dressing for dinner

Unlike most (maybe all) of my fellow townspeople, in Mt. Vernon, I dress up for dinner. (I have been doing this since I retired from the world of public classroom teaching.) In late afternoon, usually timed to the four o'clock radio news, I pick out an outfit for the evening, take a shower, and dress in slacks, sports coat, and tie. (The tie choice sets the tone for the occasion, and requires brisk but deep attention in the closet.) I put in a few minutes dressing, feel sharper, and settle down to the work plateau of the last two hours of the day. I believe this behavior is unconventional; it jams together a private setting with memories of public activity, my classroom teaching outfit. Doubtless the present unconventionality would in today's classroom seem as bizarre as it does in the home.

2 The logic of eccentricity

The unconventional frequently follows an inner logic not at first apparent. At Harvard I took a renowned course in the History of Religion, and had a professor who was considered unconventional. Our class was held in an old building which had once been a laboratory; in the corner, opposite the entry door, was an old lab sink, with a faucet. Whenever Prof X entered the room to teach, he would go first to the sink, turn on the tap, lather his hands, rinse them, and dry them. Then, without explanation, he would proceed to teach. It was not until later in the class that we began to see the point of his entry ritual, which seemed more than unconventional to us. (We laughed and sniggered.) Our attention was drawn to the importance of ablutions and ritual cleansing in the development of the Mosaic religions, where cleansing waters sustain purity of soul.