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Netiquette Guidelines

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Abstract

This document provides a minimum set of guidelines for Network Etiquette (Netiquette) which organizations may take and adapt for their own use. As such, it is deliberately written in a bulleted format to make adaptation easier and to make any particular item easy (or easier) to find. It also functions as a minimum set of guidelines for individuals, both users and administrators.

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[1.0](#) Introduction

In the past, the population of people using the Internet had "grown

up" with the Internet, were technically minded, and understood the nature of the transport and the protocols. Today, the community of Internet users includes people who are new to the environment. These "Newbies" are unfamiliar with the culture and don't need to know about transport and protocols. In order to bring these new users into the Internet culture quickly, this Guide offers a minimum set of behaviors

which organizations and individuals may take and adapt for their own use. Individuals should be aware that no matter who supplies their Internet access, be it an Internet Service Provider through a private account, or a student account at a University, or an account through a corporation, that those organizations have regulation about ownership of mail and files, about what is proper to post or send, and how to present yourself. Be sure to check with the local authority for specific guidelines.

We've organized this material into three sections: One-to-one communication, which includes mail and talk; One-to-many communications, which includes mailing lists, and NetNews; and Information Services, which includes ftp, WWW, Wais, Gopher, MUDs and MOOs. Finally, we have a Selected Bibliography, which may be used for reference.

2.0 One-to-One Communication (electronic mail, talk)

We define one-to-one communications as those in which a person is communicating with another person as if face-to-face: a dialog. In general, rules of common courtesy for interaction with people should be in force for any situation and on the Internet it's doubly important where, for example, body language and tone of voice must be inferred. For more information on Netiquette for communicating via electronic mail and talk, check references [1,23,25,27] in the Selected Bibliography.

2.1 User Guidelines

2.1.1 For mail:

- Unless you have your own Internet access through an Internet provider, be sure to check with your employer about ownership of electronic mail. Laws about the ownership of electronic mail vary from place to place.
- Unless you are using an encryption device (hardware or software), you should assume that mail on the Internet is not secure. Never put in a mail message anything you would not put on a postcard.
- Respect the copyright on material that you reproduce. Almost every country has copyright laws.

- If you are forwarding or re-posting a message you've received, do not change the wording. If the message was a personal message to you and you are re-posting to a group, you should ask permission first. You may shorten the message and quote only relevant parts, but be sure you give proper attribution.
- Never send chain letters via electronic mail. Chain letters are forbidden on the Internet. Your network privileges will be revoked. Notify your local system administrator if you ever receive one.
- A good rule of thumb: Be conservative in what you send and liberal in what you receive. You should not send heated messages (we call these "flames") even if you are provoked. On the other hand, you shouldn't be surprised if you get flamed and it's prudent not to respond to flames.
- In general, it's a good idea to at least check all your mail subjects before responding to a message. Sometimes a person who asks you for help (or clarification) will send another message which effectively says "Never Mind". Also make sure that any message you respond to was directed to you. You might be cc:ed rather than the primary recipient.
- Make things easy for the recipient. Many mailers strip header information which includes your return address. In order to ensure that people know who you are, be sure to include a line or two at the end of your message with contact information. You can create this file ahead of time and add it to the end of your messages. (Some mailers do this automatically.) In Internet parlance, this is known as a ".sig" or "signature" file. Your .sig file takes the place of your business card. (And you can have more than one to apply in different circumstances.)
- In general, most people who use the Internet don't have time to answer general questions about the Internet and its workings. Don't send unsolicited mail asking for information to people whose names you might have seen in RFCs or on mailing lists.
- Remember that people with whom you communicate are located across the globe. If you send a message to which you want an immediate response, the person receiving it might be at home asleep when it arrives. Give them a chance to wake up, come to work, and login before assuming the mail didn't arrive or that they don't care.
- Verify all addresses before initiating long or personal discourse. It's also a good practice to include the word "Long" in the subject header so the recipient knows the message will take time to read and respond to. Over 100 lines is considered "long".

- Know who to contact for help. Usually you will have resources close at hand. Check locally for people who can help you with software and system problems. Also, know who to go to if you receive anything questionable or illegal. Most sites also have "Postmaster" aliased to a knowledgeable user, so you can send mail to this address to get help with mail.
- Remember that the recipient is a human being whose culture, language, and humor have different points of reference from your own. Remember that date formats, measurements, and idioms may not travel well. Be especially careful with sarcasm.
- Use mixed case. UPPER CASE LOOKS AS IF YOU'RE SHOUTING.
- Use symbols for emphasis. That **is** what I meant. Use underscores for underlining. War and Peace is my favorite book.
- Use smileys to indicate tone of voice, but use them sparingly. :-) is an example of a smiley (Look sideways). Don't assume that the inclusion of a smiley will make the recipient happy with what you say or wipe out an otherwise insulting comment.
- Wait overnight to send emotional responses to messages. If you have really strong feelings about a subject, indicate it via FLAME ON/OFF enclosures. For example:
FLAME ON: This type of argument is not worth the bandwidth it takes to send it. It's illogical and poorly reasoned. The rest of the world agrees with me.
FLAME OFF
- Do not include control characters or non-ASCII attachments in messages unless they are MIME attachments or unless your mailer encodes these. If you send encoded messages make sure the recipient can decode them.
- Be brief without being overly terse. When replying to a message, include enough original material to be understood but no more. It is extremely bad form to simply reply to a message by including all the previous message: edit out all the irrelevant material.
- Limit line length to fewer than 65 characters and end a line with a carriage return.
- Mail should have a subject heading which reflects the content of the message.
- If you include a signature keep it short. Rule of thumb is no longer than 4 lines. Remember that many people pay for connectivity by the minute, and the longer your message is, the more they pay.

- Just as mail (today) may not be private, mail (and news) are (today) subject to forgery and spoofing of various degrees of detectability. Apply common sense "reality checks" before assuming a message is valid.
- If you think the importance of a message justifies it, immediately reply briefly to an e-mail message, to let the sender know you got it, even if you will send a longer reply later.
- Delivery receipts, non-delivery notices, and vacation programs are neither totally standardized nor totally reliable across the range of systems connected to Internet mail. They are invasive when sent to mailing lists, and some people consider delivery receipts an invasion of privacy. In short, do not use them.
- "Reasonable" expectations for conduct via e-mail depend on your relationship to a person and the context of the communication. Norms learned in a particular e-mail environment may not apply in general to your e-mail communication with people across the Internet.
- The cost of delivering an e-mail message is, on the average, paid about equally by the sender and the recipient (or their organizations). This is unlike other media such as physical mail, telephone, TV, or radio. Sending someone mail may also cost them in other specific ways like network bandwidth, disk space or CPU usage. This is a fundamental economic reason why unsolicited e-mail advertising is unwelcome (and is forbidden in many contexts).
- Know how large a message you are sending. Including large files such as Postscript files or programs may make your message so large that it cannot be delivered or at least consumes excessive resources. A good rule of thumb would be not to send a file larger than 1 Megabyte. Consider file transfer as an alternative.
- If your mail system allows you to forward mail, beware the dreaded forwarding loop. Be sure you haven't set up forwarding on several hosts so that a message sent to you gets into an endless loop from one computer to the next to the next.

2.1.2 For talk:

Talk is a set of protocols which allow two people to have an interactive dialogue via computer.

- Use mixed case and proper punctuation, as though you were typing a letter or sending mail.
- Don't run off the end of a line and simply let the terminal wrap; use a Carriage Return (CR) at the end of the line. Also, don't

assume your screen size is the same as everyone else's. A good rule of thumb is to write out no more than 70 characters, and no more than 24 lines.

- Leave some margin; don't write to the edge of the screen.
- Use two CRs to indicate that you are done and the other person may start typing. (blank line).
- Always say goodbye, or some other farewell, and wait to see a farewell from the other person before killing the session. This is especially important when you are communicating with someone a long way away. Remember that your communication relies on both bandwidth (the size of the pipe) and latency (the speed of light).
- Remember that talk is an interruption to the other person. Only use as appropriate.
- Talk shows your typing ability. If you type slowly and make mistakes when typing it is often not worth the time of trying to correct, as the other person can usually see what you meant.

2.2 Administrator Issues

- Be sure you have established written guidelines for dealing with situations especially illegal, improper, or forged traffic.
- Handle requests in a timely fashion - within 24 hours.
- Respond promptly to people who have concerns about receiving improper or illegal messages. Requests concerning chain letters should be handled immediately.
- Explain any system rules, such as disk quotas, to your users. Make sure they understand implications of requesting files by mail such as: Filling up disks; running up phone bills, delaying mail, etc.
- Make sure you have "Postmaster" aliased.

3.0 One-to-Many Communication (Mailing Lists, NetNews)

Any time you engage in One-to-Many communications, all the rules for mail should also apply. After all, communicating with many people via one mail message or post is quite analogous to communicating with one person with the exception of possibly offending a great many more people than in one-to-one communication. Therefore, it's

quite important to know as much as you can about the audience of your message.

3.1 User Guidelines

3.1.1 General Guidelines for mailing lists and NetNews

- Read both mailing lists and newsgroups for one to two months before you post anything. This helps you to get an understanding of the culture of the group.
- Do not blame the system administrator for the behavior of the system users.
- Consider that a large audience will see your posts. That may include your present or your next boss. Take care in what you write. Remember too, that mailing lists and Newsgroups are frequently archived, and that your words may be stored for a very long time in a place to which many people have access.
- Assume that individuals speak for themselves, and what they say does not represent their organization (unless stated explicitly).
- Remember that both mail and news take system resources. Pay attention to any specific rules covering their uses your organization may have.
- Messages and articles should be brief and to the point. Don't wander off-topic, don't ramble and don't send mail or post messages solely to point out other people's errors in typing or spelling. These, more than any other behavior, mark you as an immature beginner.
- Advertising is welcomed on some lists and Newsgroups, and abhorred on others! This is another example of knowing your audience before you post. Unsolicited advertising which is completely off-topic will most certainly guarantee that you get hate mail.
- If you are posting a reply to a message or a posting be sure you summarize the original at the top of the message, or include just enough text of the original to give a context. This will make sure readers understand when they start to read your response. Since NetNews, especially, is proliferated by distributing the postings from one host to another, it is possible to see a

response to a message before seeing the original. Giving context helps everyone.
- Again, be sure to have a signature which you attach to your

message. This will guarantee that any peculiarities of mailers or newsreaders which strip header information will not delete the only reference in the message of how people may reach you.

- Be careful when you reply to messages or postings. Frequently replies are sent back to the address which originated the post - which in many cases is the address of a list or group! You may accidentally send a personal response to a great many people, embarrassing all involved. It's best to type in the address instead of relying on "reply."
- If you find a personal message has gone to a list or group, send an apology.
- If you should find yourself in a disagreement with one person, make your responses to each other via mail rather than continue to send messages to the list or the group. If you are debating a point on which the group might have some interest, you may summarize for them later.
- Don't get involved in flame wars. Neither post nor respond to incendiary material.
- Avoid sending messages or posting articles which are no more than gratuitous replies to replies.
- There are Newsgroups and Mailing Lists which discuss topics of wide varieties of interests. These represent a diversity of lifestyles, religions, and cultures. Posting articles or sending messages to a group whose point of view is offensive to you simply to tell them they are offensive is not acceptable. Sexually and racially harassing messages may also have legal implications. There is software available to filter items you might find objectionable.

3.1.2 Mailing List Guidelines

There are several ways to find information about what mailing lists exist on the Internet and how to join them. Make sure you understand your organization's policy about joining these lists and posting to them. In general it is always better to check local resources first before trying to find information via the Internet. Nevertheless, there are a set of files posted periodically to news.answers which list the Internet mailing lists and how to subscribe to them. This is an invaluable resource for finding lists on any topic. See also references [9,13,15] in the Selected Bibliography.

- Send subscribe and unsubscribe messages to the appropriate address. Although some mailing list software is smart enough to catch these, not all can ferret these out. It is your

responsibility to learn how the lists work, and to send the correct mail to the correct place. Although many many mailing lists adhere to the convention of having a "-request" alias for

sending subscribe and unsubscribe messages, not all do. Be sure you know the conventions used by the lists to which you subscribe.

- Save the subscription messages for any lists you join. These usually tell you how to unsubscribe as well.
- In general, it's not possible to retrieve messages once you have sent them. Even your system administrator will not be able to get a message back once you have sent it. This means you must make sure you really want the message to go as you have written it.
- The auto-reply feature of many mailers is useful for in-house communication, but quite annoying when sent to entire mailing lists. Examine "Reply-To" addresses when replying to messages from lists. Most auto-replies will go to all members of the list.
- Don't send large files to mailing lists when URLs or pointers to ftp-able versions will do.
- Consider unsubscribing or setting a "nomail" option (when it's available) when you cannot check your mail for an extended period.
- When sending a message to more than one mailing list, especially if the lists are closely related, apologize for cross-posting.
- If you ask a question, be sure to post a summary. When doing so, truly summarize rather than send a cumulation of the messages you receive.
- Some mailing lists are private. Do not send mail to these lists uninvited. Do not report mail from these lists to a wider audience.
- If you are caught in an argument, keep the discussion focused on issues rather than the personalities involved.

3.1.3 NetNews Guidelines

NetNews is a globally distributed system which allows people to communicate on topics of specific interest. It is divided into hierarchies, with the major divisions being: sci - science related discussions; comp - computer related discussions; news - for discussions which center around NetNews itself; rec - recreational activities; soc - social issues; talk - long-winded never-ending discussions; biz - business related postings; and alt - the alternate hierarchy. Alt is so named because creating an alt group does not go through the same process as creating a group in the other parts of the

hierarchy. There are also regional hierarchies and your place of business may have its own groups as well. Recently, a "humanities" hierarchy was added, and as time goes on its likely more will be added. For longer discussions on News see references [2,8,22,23] in the Selected Bibliography.

- In NetNews parlance, "Posting" refers to posting a new article to a group, or responding to a post someone else has posted. "Cross-Posting" refers to posting a message to more than one group. If you introduce Cross-Posting to a group, or if you direct "Followup-To:" in the header of your posting, warn

readers! Readers will usually assume that the message was posted to a specific group and that followups will go to that group. Headers change this behavior.

- Read all of a discussion in progress (we call this a thread) before posting replies. Avoid posting "Me Too" messages, where content is limited to agreement with previous posts. Content of a follow-up post should exceed quoted content.
- Send mail when an answer to a question is for one person only. Remember that News has global distribution and the whole world probably is NOT interested in a personal response. However, don't hesitate to post when something will be of general interest to the Newsgroup participants.
- Check the "Distribution" section of the header, but don't depend on it. Due to the complex method by which News is delivered, Distribution headers are unreliable. But, if you are posting something which will be of interest to a limited number of readers, use a distribution line that attempts to limit the distribution of your article to those people. For example, set the Distribution to be "nj" if you are posting an article that will be of interest to New Jersey readers.
- If you feel an article will be of interest to more than one Newsgroup, be sure to CROSSPOST the article rather than individually post it to those groups. In general, probably only five-to-six groups will have similar enough interests to warrant this.
- Consider using Reference sources (Computer Manuals, Newspapers, help files) before posting a question. Asking a Newsgroup where answers are readily available elsewhere generates grumpy "RTFM" (read the fine manual - although a more vulgar meaning of the word beginning with "f" is usually implied) messages.
- Although there are Newsgroups which welcome advertising, in general it is considered nothing less than criminal to advertise off-topic products. Sending an advertisement to each and every group will pretty much guarantee your loss of

connectivity.

- If you discover an error in your post, cancel it as soon as possible.
- DO NOT attempt to cancel any articles but your own. Contact your administrator if you don't know how to cancel your post, or if some other post, such as a chain letter, needs canceling.
- If you've posting something and don't see it immediately, don't assume it's failed and post it again.
- Some groups permit (and some welcome) posts which in other circumstances would be considered to be in questionable taste. Still, there is no guarantee that all people reading the group will appreciate the material as much as you do. Use the Rotate utility (which rotates all the characters in your post by 13 positions in the alphabet) to avoid offense.
- In groups which discuss movies or books it is considered essential to mark posts which disclose significant content as "Spoilers". Put this word in your Subject: line. You may add blank lines to the beginning of your post to keep content out of sight, or you may Rotate it.
- Forging of news articles is generally censured. You can protect yourself from forgeries by using software which generates a manipulation detection "fingerprint", such as PGP (in the US).
- Postings via anonymous servers are accepted in some Newsgroups and disliked in others. Material which is inappropriate when posted under one's own name is still inappropriate when posted anonymously.
- Don't get involved in flame wars. Neither post nor respond to incendiary material.

3.2 Administrator Guidelines

3.2.1 General Issues

- Clarify any policies your site has regarding its subscription to NetNews groups and about subscribing to mailing lists.
- Clarify any policies your site has about posting to NetNews groups or to mailing lists, including use of disclaimers in .sigs.
- Clarify and publicize archive policy. (How long are articles kept?)

- Investigate accusations about your users promptly and with an open mind.

3.2.2 Mailing Lists

- Keep mailing lists up to date to avoid the "bouncing mail" problem.
- Help list owners when problems arise.
- Inform list owners of any maintenance windows or planned downtime.
- Be sure to have "-request" aliases for list subscription.

3.2.3. NetNews

- Publicize the nature of the feed you receive. If you do not get a full feed, people may want to know why not.
- Be aware that the multiplicity of News Reader clients may cause the News Server being blamed for problems in the clients.
- Honor requests from users immediately if they request cancellation of their own posts or invalid posts, such as chain letters.

3.3 Moderator Guidelines

3.3.1 General Guidelines

- Make sure your FAQ is posted at regular intervals. Include your guidelines for articles/messages. If you are not the FAQ maintainer, make sure they do so.
- Make sure you maintain a good welcome message, which contains subscribe and unsubscribe information.
- News groups should have their charter/guidelines posted regularly.

4.0 Information Services (Gopher, Wais, WWW, ftp, telnet)

In recent Internet history, the 'Net has exploded with new and varied Information services. Gopher, Wais, World Wide Web (WWW), Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs) Multi-User Dimensions which are Object Oriented (MOOs) are a few of these new areas. Although the ability to find information is exploding, "Caveat Emptor" remains constant. For more information on these services, check references [[14](#),[28](#)] in the Selected Bibliography.

4.1 User Guidelines

4.1.1. General guidelines

- Remember that all these services belong to someone else. The people who pay the bills get to make the rules governing usage.
- If you have problems with any form of information service, start problem solving by checking locally: Check file configurations, software setup, network connections, etc. Do this before assuming the problem is at the provider's end and/or is the provider's fault.
- Although there are naming conventions for file-types used, don't depend on these file naming conventions to be enforced.
- Information services also use conventions, such as `www.abc.com`. While it is useful to know these conventions, again, don't necessarily rely on them.
- Know how file names work on your own system.
- Be aware of conventions used for providing information during sessions. FTP sites usually have files named README in a top level directory which have information about the files available. But, don't assume that the files are necessarily up-to-date and/or accurate.
- Do NOT assume that ANY information you find is up-to-date and/or accurate. Remember that new technologies allow just about anyone to be a publisher, but not all people have discovered the responsibilities which accompany publishing.
- Remember that unless you are sure that security and authentication technology is in use, that any information you submit to a system is being transmitted over the Internet "in the clear", with no protection from "sniffers".
- Since the Internet spans the globe, remember that Information Services might reflect culture and life-style markedly different from your own community. Materials you find offensive may originate in a geography which finds them acceptable. Keep an open mind.
- When accessing a popular site, be sure to use a mirror that's close if a list is provided.
- Do not use someone else's FTP site to deposit materials you wish other people to pick up.

4.1.2 Real Time Interactive Services Guidelines (MUDs MOOs IRC)

- It's not necessary to greet everyone on a channel or room personally. Usually one "Hello" or the equivalent is enough. Using the automation features of your client to greet people is not acceptable behavior.
- Warn the participants if you intend to ship large quantities of information. If all consent to receiving it, you may send, but sending unwanted information without a warning is considered bad form.
- Don't assume that people who you don't know will want to talk to you. If you feel compelled to send private messages to people you don't know, then be willing to accept gracefully the fact that they might be busy or simply not want to chat with you.
- Don't badger other users for personal information such as sex, age, or location. After you have built an acquaintance with another user, these questions may be more appropriate, but many people hesitate to give this information to people with whom they are not familiar.
- If a user is using a nickname, respect that user's desire for anonymity. Even if you and that person are close friends, it is more courteous to use his nickname. Do not use that person's real name online without permission.

4.2 Administrator Guidelines

4.2.1 General Guidelines

- Make clear what's available for copying and what is not.
- Describe what's available on your site, and your organization. Be sure any general policies are clear.
- Keep information, especially READMEs, up-to-date. Provide READMEs in plain ascii text.
- Present a list of mirrors of your site. Make sure you include a statement of copyright applicable to your mirrors. List their update schedule if possible.
- Make sure that popular (and massive) information has the bandwidth to support it.
- Use conventions for file extensions - .txt for ascii text; .html or .htm for HTML; .ps for Postscript; .pdf for Portable Document

Format; .sgml or .sgm for SGML; .exe for executables, etc.

- For files being transferred, try to make filenames unique in the first eight characters.
- When providing information, make sure your site has something unique to offer. Avoid bringing up an information service which simply points to other services on the Internet.
- Remember that setting up an information service is more than just design and implementation. It's also maintenance.
- Make sure your posted materials are appropriate for the supporting organization.
- Test applications with a variety of tools. Don't assume everything works if you've tested with only one client. Also, assume the low end of technology for clients and don't create applications which can only be used by Graphical User Interfaces.
- Have a consistent view of your information. Make sure the look and feel stays the same throughout your applications.
- Be sensitive to the longevity of your information. Be sure to date time-sensitive materials, and be vigilant about keeping this information well maintained.
- Export restrictions vary from country to country. Be sure you understand the implications of export restrictions when you post.

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This bibliography was used to gather most of the information in the sections above as well as for general reference. Items not specifically found in these works were gathered from the IETF-RUN Working Group's experience.

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