

# 10 Netiquette: Learning Etiquette of Computer Mediated Communication

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## Abstract

The Internet has really contracted the world into a 'global village.' Nonetheless, the way the Stone Age man communicated using images, symbols, and gestures seem to be less complicated than the postmodern man's multi-channeled transactions in the Age of Information. Despite the flow and exchange of information in various channels as Usenet, mailing lists, blogs, forums and chats, the efficacy of communication in all these forms is still very much in question. In this context, this article attempts to illustrate some significant norms to be followed while communicating using computer and the Internet. The Internet-etiquette ('netiquette') norms, if followed properly, can reduce friction in communication, enhance content clarity and result in harmonious and favorable transactions in cyberspace.

## About the Author



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"The real danger is not that computers will begin to think like men, but that men will begin to think like computers."

~Sydney J. Harris

## What is netiquette?

'Netiquette' is a portmanteau word combined of 'Internet'/ 'network' and 'etiquette'. Simply speaking, etiquette is an umbrella term for rules governing socially and culturally acceptable behavior. Netiquette thus refers to the correct, polite, acceptable, social, official, professional norms, behavioral patterns, and expected decorum for using the Internet or the cyberspace for various communication purposes.

## The need for netiquette in e-mail communication

The Internet, in its attempt to enlarge the vistas of human mind, has actually narrowed down the values of human heart! Sending e-mails has become the most used and abused form of cyber-communication. Today, there are more hate mails, more sites that violate privacy policies, and frequently we hear about hacking of e-mail identities. People misunderstand and lose precious relationships built over years by a casual click of 'send' button. In terms of business communication, for instance, people are generally trained to write business letters and learn the nuances of sending effective letters. However, people do not receive any formal training for sending e-mails. E-mails are thus written in an impromptu manner and sent abruptly, often without even giving a second thought to the aspect of communication involved in the transaction process. The result invariably is miscommunication. This could be possibly avoided if people learn, understand, and follow simple norms for communication in cyberspace.

Here are some simple netiquette rules for you to follow:

## • Do not forget that the receiver is a human being

Often when people type a message on the computer and mail it using the internet connection, they tend to forget that the person who receives the mail at the other end is a human being. That is why people write curt messages that can hurt the sentiments of the receivers. Beyond the blank computer screen, one needs to empathize with feelings of the human who receives the message. Unlike in direct, oral communication, where one can see the receiver face-to-face and modify the message according to the receiver's facial expressions, gestures and tonal variations, while using the electronic medium, one has to cut across the impersonal and make a personal appeal through suitable use of words and emoticons. Smileys or emoticons can be used to indicate your mood, or to reduce the monotony of the message you want to convey. Simple type keys as : - ) can be used to create the following figures: 😊 😐 😞 such additions also tell the receiver how much care you take in communicating your message with the right tone and attitude. Consideration for others is, thus, the cardinal netiquette principle one should always bear in mind.

## • Remember: Written words can be stored permanently

Since written words can be stored permanently, one should be very careful in choosing the right words for communication. The e-mail sent casually can return with so much malignity that the sender regrets throughout his life for having sent that one thoughtless mail!

## • Ironically, the receiver controls the sent e-mail!

You have no control over your e-mails once you press the 'send' button. Once sent, ironically, it is the receiver who has absolute control over your mails! The receiver decides,



even if you have requested that the mail be deleted immediately, whether to delete or store the mail for future use. The receiver also can use it against you, send it to numerous others, get a print out of it and post it on public notice boards and put you to shame. So you have to be careful again in sending a message that would embarrass you if shared with others or exposed to the general public.

- **Be ethically correct!**

The old saying, "All is fair in love and war," may be modified to suit the mind-set of many internet users and as: "All is fair in love, war, and cyberspace." Or, at least, that is what many net work users believe when they post materials which are unethical or communicate by lowering their ethical standards for the internet. While unethical means may win short term gains, one has to maintain high ethical standards in cyberspace too to gain a truly professional image. One should be ethically correct because there exists a very high risk of being caught in unethical practice, and also the fact that, if caught, it can damage reputation gained over years.

- **Make sense, though it is difficult to!**

It is rather easy to cause confusion in written communication, especially when one writes whatever comes to one's mind without bothering to know whether what is expressed clearly reflects one's thoughts. Making sense is difficult—as it means curtailing some bad writing habits accumulated over a period of time. Avoid using worn-out phrases that do not make any sense in the context. Idiomatic expressions, metaphors and similes, if not used properly, may confuse the reader and lead to miscommunication. Use simple words with short sentence constructions instead of flowery, poly-syllabled words and long, complicated sentences.

- **Spend an extra minute to save an hour of the receiver!**

Often spending some extra minutes could help in saving many hours of the receivers. The extra time can be spent on editing the text, checking the spelling, inserting emoticons, making use of punctuation marks, dividing lengthy matter into readable paragraphs, remembering to type a descriptive subject line, and finally, by not sending an unsolicited and irrelevant mail! Let us briefly look at each of these aspects in the following sub-headings.

- **Keep it short**

Keep your e-mails focused in content and short in length. People generally do not have time and patience to read long mails. Some of them simply delete lengthy mails! The thumb rule is that if you cannot convey an idea effectively in a short paragraph, you can never do the same in a long essay. In case an e-mail has to be significantly and justifiably lengthy owing to the nature of the subject matter, then use subheadings, paragraph divisions and spaces in between paragraphs to make it easy for reading and understanding.

- **Subject lines**

Tell me the subject lines that you keep sending, I can tell you who you are! Subject lines, apart from describing the inner content of the matter, have much to tell about you as a person—whether you are sloppy, casual, flippant, uncouth or sincere, serious, meticulous, dedicated, professional, sophisticated and stylish. The worst subject line that an e-mail can have is "[No Subject]." That is, the e-mail is either sent in a hurry without a subject line, or the subject is just not thought of. In both cases, the sender is unmindful of the precious time the receiver has to spend in opening, reading, and understanding the subject, and quite often realize that it is an irrelevant message that

needs to be deleted. The subject should clearly express the content at the outset giving freedom to the receiver to exercise an option of opening the mail or deleting it. But, this does not mean that you should use tempting subject lines like: 'Free holiday trip to Florida', 'Open and become Bill Gates!' or 'Stay young forever.' Nor should you over-emphasize the subject by capitalizing them or by creating a false sense of urgency. As the story goes, the employees of a reputed computer manufacturing company never responded to their manager's e-mails immediately despite the standard subject line: "URGENT MATTER: RESPOND IMMEDIATELY." You can easily understand that when the same subject matter is repeated, it loses its sense of urgency and importance. So, always use a short, descriptive phrase for the subject line indicating the gist of the e-mail. If it is a meeting, mention the time, date and venue in the subject line [e.g.: DPGC Meeting: 21 June 2010, 10 A. M., FB 620]. If it is an e-mail invitation for a talk, you can mention the name of the speaker and the topic on the subject line [e.g.: Talk on Cybernetics, Kevin Warwick, LH-16, 28 June 10, 4 P. M.] This will help the receiver to have a quick idea about the mail even without opening it.

- **Respect reply! {Avoid: Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:}**

Whenever it is possible, and found necessary, use a subject line while replying a mail instead of leaving the automated 'Re:' for reply. For instance, for an e-mail request from an employee to sanction certain amount urgently owing to medical reasons, the employer's reply with the subject line 'Re: Amount Sanctioned' can be a great relief to the employee even before opening the mail. Conversely, using an old mail for the sake of address, but not changing the subject matter, can be worse than sending the mail without any subject! As the Convener of the Department's Postgraduate Committee, I received a mail from a colleague of mine with

the subject matter: 'Re: Vending Machine' but the mail requested me to forward a new PG course developed by the sender! Obviously, my colleague has used an earlier mail in which we had shared some suggestions on the Vending Machine, but to have that as a subject line for a course forwarding request is too inappropriate!

- **Avoid typing in FULL CAPITALS**

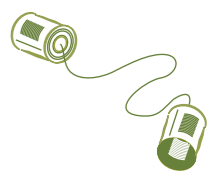
Although many net-users think that capital letters are to be used for emphasis, in reality, unnecessary use of capitals is considered SHOUTING or YELLING. MOREOVER, LONG SENTENCES WITH FULL CAPITAL LETTERS ARE DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND AND EYES TAKE MORE TIME TO CAPTURE THE MESSAGE. You could see the difference just by reading the previous sentence itself!

- **No random Ccing/ do not 'reply all'**

Copying to many or replying all when the message seeks the attention of a single receiver is considered rude on the part of the sender. This is treated bad-mannered, discourteous and even uncouth because the sender is taking for granted the time of unsolicited receivers. Even just the time it takes to identify that the mail is unwarranted and then to delete it is unworthy. Hence, habitual or inadvertent copying to many or replying all should be avoided at all cost.

- **Use of abbreviations**

While using abbreviations or acronyms, use the ones which are commonly known and universally recognizable. For instance, the following ones are commonly in use: AKA (also known as), ASAP (as soon as possible), BTW (by the way), CUL8R (see you later), FYI (for your information), KIT (keep in touch), LOL (laughing out loud), SYS (see you again), TYVM (thank you very much), WRT (with respect to). However, using abbreviations according to one's whims and fancy, and that too with inconsistent spellings would cause



confusion to the receiver. The message can be distorted or misrepresented and result in evoking a negative response.

- **Spelling mistakes/ typographical errors**

You should check your mail for spelling mistakes and typographical errors. Most of the e-mail clients have in-built spell checker that underlines errors while typing itself. If you pay attention to these underlined words, you will not only save plenty of receiver's time but also ensure that your message is communicated effectively. Bad spelling and frequent typographical errors reflect illiteracy and lack of professionalism.

- **Punctuation**

There prevails a misconception that punctuation marks are not necessary while sending e-mails. But punctuation marks, capitalization, and spaces after punctuation marks are very necessary for clear communication. Have a look at the following mail that I received from a research scholar. You can note how the sender's scant regard for punctuation, capitalization, and rampant use of personal abbreviations has immensely affected the readability and effectiveness of the mail:

Thanks for d suggestion sir

If u can give me some more suggestions so it l be very kind from ur side.  
Actually I m P.G wd 67% in lnd year n wd 62% as al over i was doing ph.d under Mrs. C. Rastogi, bt coz of d entrance announcement in kanpur university i could nt get my thesis registered n it was also coz of the busy schedule of my guide. So as per my per n ds situation wt should i do.

Kindly send ur suggestions. I wil be obliged.

- **Check your computer clock**

Last but not the least, set your system clock right before sending an e-mail. You will profusely confuse your reader during the fixing of an appointment for future while your mail would indicate a time lapsed in the past!

### **Conclusion**

One can go on and on about netiquette. These days there are books coming out on this subject and research organizations sponsoring projects to study the behavioral pattern of various user groups based on their netiquette. I have fairly summarized the most important netiquette norms that, if followed, could generate a high level of professionalism and likeability and result in getting favorable responses in internet based communication. Just the next time when you intend to send an important e-mail, before pressing the send-icon in a hurry, use this article as a quick check list for netiquette and build up a reputation for sending good, engaging, thoughtful, time-saving and useful mails!

### **For Further Reference:**

Although there are plenty of materials available on 'netiquette' on the internet, the following ones offer comprehensive views on the subject:

1. <http://networketiquette.net/>
2. <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>

