The Basics of Email Netiquette

Learn to get your message across without offending anyone
Email has developed its own etiquette and customs. In fact, a whole new word has been coined to describe proper Internet (and email) behavior: Netiquette. Short for "network etiquette," netiquette means much more than just being polite. The main rule to stick by is just **treat people like you would want to be treated**. Very biblical, I know, but it's true. You have to be polite and considerate to anyone you meet. There's a tendency on the Internet to abuse your anonymity and go all-out insulting people, but that's just sad. Always consider whether your comment may be appropriate, and whether it could cause hurt feelings. Be careful about how your words come across — misunderstandings can be common. Without a tone of voice, unless you're a great writer, a sarcastic or otherwise harmless comment can often come off the wrong way. Use emoticons to show your tone. The rules of netiquette can help you avoid misunderstandings and get your message across without offending anyone.

Emphasis
Emphasizing a certain word in a sentence can change the whole meaning of the sentence. You can add light emphasis to a word by surrounding it with asterisks:
Is there *any* movie you haven't seen yet?
For strong emphasis, use capital letters and exclamation points:
If I don't finish that report tonight I'll be in BIG TROUBLE!!!!

Please Don't Shout
But -- and this is important -- use capital letters sparingly. One of the most important rules of netiquette is to turn off the "Caps Lock" key. Why? Because when you type in all capital letters, it comes across as shouting. Most of the time, writing an entire sentence in capital letters is overkill:

I AM FINE THANK YOU. HOW ARE YOU DOING?

Capital letters, besides being considered rude, are harder to read than mixed-case letters. If, for some reason, you cannot type in mixed case, choose all lower-case letters instead.
Unless your message is vitally important, mixed case is better. or even lower case is ok.

Replying
Although email is delivered quickly, the reply may not necessarily be immediate. So it is usually preferable to repeat (quote) some of the message back in your reply. For instance, rather than answering:
Yes

Put your answer at the top of the quoted message:
Yes
> Can we meet for lunch this Friday?

In the above example, the quote from the original message starts with ">." This is intended to set apart your reply. Most email programs will add the ">" for you automatically when you click the "Reply" button.

Copy and Paste or Cut Forwards

Use the Copy (Ctrl + C) and Paste (Ctrl + V) or Cut (Ctrl + X) features to create a new message or cut all the extra names that the previous person included in their email. Otherwise, the recipient has to wade through dozens of annoying lists before getting to your content. Be sure to ask if it's alright for you to include someone on your forwarding list. Some people may appreciate a few rare forwards, but not passing on all the mail you get into your box into theirs!

Don't Quote Me
If the message you are responding to is very long, don't quote the entire message in your reply. You can quote only the part of the message that is relevant, and leave out plenty in between. It is considered wasteful to quote a very long message for a one-sentence reply, and your message can get lost in all the clutter. If you like, you can show that you edited out parts of the message with an ellipsis:

Wow! That's quite a story!
> And when I woke up this morning...
> so I didn't even realize it until dinnertime!

Someone may reply to your reply:
Great! How about 11:30?
> Yes
>> Can you meet for lunch this Friday?

Time Out
The great thing about email is when you click the "Send" button, your message rushes across the Internet almost instantaneously to someone else's computer. The unfortunate thing about email? Once your message is sent, it's gone. You cannot change your mind and take it back.

There have been many times when a click of the mouse has sent the wrong message, sometimes to many people at once. To avoid embarrassing and potentially job-threatening mistakes, take a minute before you click the "Send" button to re-read your message. Make sure what you have written cannot be easily misunderstood.
If you are sending a message in anger, take this advice one step further. Before you send the message, take five. Go get some coffee, or just walk outside for a moment. When you return, read your message again. You may want to tone down your message after a second look.

Most email programs let you set a delay for outgoing messages. That way, when you click "Send," the message actually goes into a queue and is sent the next time your email is checked. For example, in Microsoft's Outlook, look under **Tools > Options**. Under the **Send** tab, make sure "Send messages immediately" is unchecked. This gives you a short time to stop your message from going out, in case you change your mind.

To, Cc and Bcc

With only three choices for addressing an e-mail, i.e. the 'To', 'Cc' and 'Bcc' fields, you would think addressing would be trouble free. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

First, there are the users who have no idea that the 'Cc' exists. Every address is listed in the 'To' even if the email is only directed to one person. In cases such as this the receivers have no clue as to who should take action so either they all do something or they all do nothing.

Secondly, there are users who feel that every single e-mail should be copied to their entire address book whether it's relevant to those receiving it or not. These are the 'cry for attention' crowd.

Lastly, there are users who never read the names of the people who receive a copy of an e-mail. They are the 'Did you see this?' crowd. For example, person X sends an e-mail to persons A, B and C. C immediately forwards it to A and B with the question 'Did you see this?' not bothering to see that X already sent A and B copies.

In summary, here's a rough guide on how to populate the address fields:

The addresses in the 'To' are for the people you are directly addressing.

The addresses in the 'Cc' are for the people you are indirectly addressing. They are the FYI-ers or CYA-ers. Don't over do it here. Copy only those who need to be copied; not your entire universe of contacts.

The addresses in the 'Bcc' are like 'Cc' except that the addresses in 'To' and 'Cc' do not know that the addresses in the 'Bcc' are included in the conversation. The 'To' and 'Cc' addresses are blind to the 'Bcc' addresses. As you can imagine, use of the 'Bcc' is somewhat unethical and therefore its use is discouraged

Reply To All

The 'Reply to All' button is just a button, but it can generate tons of unnecessary e-mails. For example, if I send a dozen people an e-mail asking if they are available at a certain time for a meeting I should get a dozen replies and that's it. However, if each person hits the "Reply to All' button not only do I get a dozen replies, but so does everyone else for a total of 144 messages!

I'm not saying that the 'Reply to All' button should not be used. I'm saying that it should be used with care.

Don't Be A Novelist

Messages should be concise and to the point. Think of it as a telephone conversation, except you are typing instead of speaking. Nobody has ever won a Pulitzer Prize for a telephone conversation nor will they win one for an e-mail message.

It's also important to remember that some people receive hundreds of e-mail messages a day (yes, there are such people), so the last thing they want to see is a message from someone who thinks he/she is the next Dickens.

Too Much Punctuation!!!

Don't get caught up in grammar and punctuation, especially excessive punctuation. You'll see lots of e-mail messages where people put a dozen exclamation points at the end of a sentence for added emphasis. Big deal. Exclamation points (called "bangs" in computer circles) are just another form of ending a sentence.

If something is important it should be reflected in your text, not in your punctuation.

Formatting Is Not Everything

Formatting can be everything, but not here. Plain text is it. Period. End of sentence.

Using HTML, or heaven forbid the Microsquish Rich Text Format, to format messages so that they have fancy fonts, colors or whatever is asking for trouble. There are lots of e-mail clients (and some servers) which cannot handle messages in these formats. The message will come in as utter gibberish or in the worst case, crash the e-mail client. I've seen it happen.

If you absolutely, positively feel that it's good karma to use HTML e-mail, stick with the default fonts and simple formatting. Leave the colorful backgrounds, scripty fonts and animated images for your personal web site.

Smilies

Part of the nature of a good one-on-one conversation is the use of visual cues. How important are facial expressions and body gestures to a conversation? A simple eye movement can mean the difference between "yes" and "YES". What about auditory cues? The results are the same.

Since there are no visual or auditory cues with e-mail, users have come up with something called "smilies". They are simple strings of characters that are interspersed in the e-mail text to convey the writer's emotions (cues). The most common example is :-). Turn your head to the left and you should see a happy face (the colon are the eyes, the dash is the nose and the parentheses is the mouth).

They are typically found at the end of sentences and will usually refer back to the prior statement.

I would recommend you use these sparingly. There are hundreds of these things and their translations are by no means universal (a miss-interpreted smilie could lead to a flame).

Abbreviations

Abbreviation usage is quite rampant with e-mail. In the quest to save keystrokes, users have traded clarity for confusion (unless you understand the abbreviations). Some of the more common abbreviations are listed in the table below. I would recommend that you use abbreviations that are already common to the English language, such as 'FYI' and 'BTW'. Beyond that, you run the risk of confusing your recipient.

Salutations

The question here is "How personal is too personal?" or to be more specific, how do you open your e-mail: "Dear Sir", "Dear Mr. Smith", "Joe" or none of the afore-mentioned.

If you posed this question to Miss Manners, I expect she would come back with a quick answer - use the standard formalities -- but I don't know that I would agree.

In a non-business situation, I would recommend that you bypass the standard formalities. At most, I would only include something along the lines of "Dear Virgil" or just "Virgil".

In the business situation, things are much more complicated. Each situation will need to be evaluated on its on, but in general, I would use the following as a guide: If you normally address a person as Miss/Mrs./Ms./Mr. Smith then that's the way I would initially address them in e-mail. If you normally call them by their first name then I would either omit the salutation or follow the guideline specified in the prior paragraph. If you are unsure, stick to the formal salutation. It's the safest bet.

Signatures

If you had to guess what a signature was (the e-mail version), you would probably be close.

On a paper document (save a tree, send e-mail) it's typical to close the document with the following:

Gene Wicker, Jr.
I Will Follow... Services

Since it's not possible (yet) to sign your e-mail, users will sometimes include the same information (minus the signature) at the bottom of their e-mail messages.

I would highly recommend this practice because the originator is not always clear to the recipient. Lots of companies use abbreviated names or numbers for employee e-mail addresses and those abbreviations or numbers will mean little to someone not familiar with their significance.

I would also recommend that you included your e-mail address in this information. Sometimes it can be very difficult to locate your e-mail address in the information that's a part of transmission, especially if it's going across the Internet.

If your e-mail address is a business address, I would include your title and company name in the signature. Normally, this might be part of a letterhead, but in the e-mail world letterheads are not used (wasted space).

You will sometimes run across a user's signature that contains a quote (as in "...the secret to life is that there is no secret.") after the person's name. This has become a fairly common practice. If you choose this option I would recommend that the quote be something that is a reflection of yourself. Keep it short. You don't want the quote to be longer than the message.

Also you will run across signatures that contain images built out of keyboard characters. These are kind of hard to describe unless you've seen one, but you will surely know one when you see it. As with the quote, the image should be a reflection of the person.

Whether you choose to add a quote, an image or both, I would recommend that you keep the total number of lines for the signature down to four or less.

Attachments

Back in dial-up days I would have recommended that all attachments be held to 1MB in size. However, in today's ever expanding broadband world, things are a little different.

For users on dial-up, the 1MB limit still applies. For users on broadband or a direct connection, I would up the limit to 5MB. HOWEVER, this is not a blanket recommendation to send attachments of this size. Even if user is on broadband or a direct connection, there is no guarantee that their mailbox can handle it. With limits this small you can see that sending someone a 5MB attachment will quickly fill their mailbox and cause other e-mails to bounce.

Generally, the only time I send attachments of the 5MB size is when I know the other party is expect it.

vCards

vCards are simply a nightmare for a user of Outlook (which I am). They make every e-mail appear as if it has an attachment. It does in one respect, but it's not what you would normally consider an attachment i.e. a document, a spreadsheet, etc. Therefore, I recommend against using them.

Threads

Once you send that first e-mail, you will probably get a response. If you want to reply to that response what should you do? The wrong thing to do is to start a new e-mail message. This breaks the link (called a "thread") between the original message and your soon-to-be-created response. Without the link, it can get difficult for the users on each end to follow the sequence of messages, especially after several exchanges. This becomes an even larger problem when you are dealing with newsgroups (more later) where several people may be replying to messages and trying to follow the thread of exchanged information. The correct thing to do is to reply, which is essentially the same thing as creating a new message, but maintains the thread.

Quotes

Nothing is more wasteful than to reply to an e-mail by including a complete copy of the original with the words "I agree", "Okay" or "Ditto" at the bottom.

The correct method is to use quoting. This is best explained by an example:

>and do you agree with the proposal to hire Ms. Ross to
>handle our legal services?

Yes. Please make the necessary arrangements.

The '>' in front of the text indicates to the recipient that this is quoted material from his/her last e-mail message. The second sentence is your response to the quoted material. The key with quoting is to include enough material in the quote so that it will be relevant to the recipient. Imagine that the original message was a hundred lines long and the only question that required a response was located in the

last sentence. Why send the whole message back in the reply? That would cause the recipient to scroll through the hundred line message again just to find your response at the bottom.

Quoting can occur again and again as in the example:

>>and do you agree with the proposal to hire Ms. Ross to
>>handle our legal services?
>
>Yes. Please make the necessary arrangements.

Arrangements made. Our first meeting is scheduled for tomorrow morning.

From this we see both two level quoting (>>) and one level quoting (>). The (>>) indicate that the sender is quoting your quote and the (>) is a quote of part of your message you sent in reply.

Don't get hung up in quoting. After so many levels, all you end up with is a bunch of ">" and very little substance.

Save A Tree

Sometimes I think that the best thing that could happen would be for someone to take away the printer. Why? Every time I send an e-mail out to a large group, a third of the group will print the message even before reading it, a third will read it and then print it, and the last third will simply delete it.

One of the goals for e-mail usage is to eliminate (or greatly reduce) the shuffling of paper, but what chance does that have if a significant number of people are going to print every message they receive. I'm not saying that all messages should not be printed. I'm saying that too many messages are printed for no reason (a lot are printed and never retrieved from the printer).

Unless you have a very primitive e-mail system, it probably has some system (usually called "folders") that can be used to permanently store messages for recall at any time in the future. If the same people who print messages for paper file systems would create the same structure in the e-mail system with folders, it would accomplish the same goal, but would save an enormous amount of paper (and trees).

Privacy, Are You Kidding?

Stop right where you are and set aside a couple of brain cells for the following statement: there is no such thing as a private e-mail. I don't care what anybody says, states, swears or whatever, there is just no such thing as private e-mail. The reason? Keep reading.

With some e-mail systems, the e-mail administrator has the ability to read any and all e-mail messages. If this is the case where you are located you better hope that there is a honest and respectable person in that position.

Some companies monitor employee e-mail (I consider this one of the worst forms of censorship). The reasons for this obtrusive behavior range from company management wanting to make sure users are not wasting time on frivolous messages to making sure that company secrets are not being leaked to unauthorized sources.

E-mail software is like all software in that occasionally things go wrong. If this happens, you may end up receiving e-mail meant for another person or your e-mail may get sent to the wrong person. Either way, what you thought was private is not private anymore.

Somewhere in the world there is a person (usually a hacker) who is able to read your e-mail if he/she tries hard enough. Of course "Tries hard enough" is the key. It's not that simple to read another person's e-mail (usually). There are (usually) security measures in place to prevent this from happening, but no security is one hundred percent hacker-proof. I have "usually" in parenthesis in the prior two sentences because I'm making the assumption that the person/persons who install and operate your e-mail system have taken the necessary precautions. Of course, the same must also be true for the person/persons on the receiving end of your e-mail.

So where does this leave us. First, let me reiterate the initial statement: there is no such thing as a private e-mail. Got it? Second, don't send anything by e-mail that you would not want posted on the company bulletin board. If it's safe enough for the bulletin board, it's safe enough for e-mail. Finally, if you are debating whether or not to send something personal by e-mail, either deliver it by hand or send it by snail mail.

If You Send It From the Office, It Comes From The Office

Personal e-mails sent from the office are regarded as official company communications regardless of content and could possibly expose you and your company to unnecessary risk. Scary, huh?

Flames

What is a "flame" or specifically what does it mean "to be flamed?" To be flamed means that you've sent an e-mail to a person(s) that has caused that person(s) to respond in many, not-so-nice words. It's basically a verbal attack in electronic form. I would provide examples, but I'm not too sure of the age of my audience and I, in turn, do not want to end up getting flamed from the readers of this document.

Sometimes the reason for a flame is quite obvious (keep reading), but in other cases you just never know. You might send what you think is a harmless e-mail to ten people. Nine people respond in a rational tone while number ten sends you a flame. Just remember that everyone sees the world differently. You may be lucky and spend your whole life dealing only with the people in the group of nine, but I'll bet that sooner or later you will run into person ten.

How do you respond to flame? Tough question. The best answer would be to ignore it and go about your life as logical and rational human being. If this is not your first reaction, it probably will be after you've been flamed a couple dozen times. You will find out that responses just aren't worth the effort. Remember that old saying about "You can please some of the people...".

If you do choose to respond you will probably end up in what is known as a "flame war". This is where two or more people end up exchanging flames for an extended period of time, usually to the point that users start making references to one's mother, one's mental capability, etc... At some point, all those participating in the war will eventually forget what originally started it and go back to being normal human beings.

Never been flamed? Well if you are begging for it, I would suggest one of the following:

Send an e-mail in all UPPER-CASE. Use of upper-case words is the equivalent of shouting in some one's ear. ONLY use upper-case words when trying to make a point (such as I just did). Even at that, you should be careful with who you are exchanging messages.

Make a comment about grammar or punctuation. Nobody wants to feel like they are exchanging e-mail with their eighth-grade English teacher.

Send a mass-mailing advertisement. This is numero uno on the don'ts list and will generate more flames than the devil himself.

Think about the amount of junk mail you receive everyday by snail mail. Even though you don't want it, you find you must look through all of it because somewhere in that stack of unwanted advertisements and wasted paper could be your monthly water bill. The same principle applies to the e-mail. Would you want to search through a mailbox full of advertisements simply to find that all-important message from your boss?

Request computer help without providing system-specific information. For example, if I submitted an e-mail that stated "I've got this problem with Word...". Well is that Word 97, Word 98, Word 2000, Word for XP or Word for 2003? Tell them the version and if there are any service releases installed.

Remember, the world (and its users) is made up of every kind of computer imaginable, from PCs to Macs to Linux workstations to the one your neighbor assembled in his garage.

The correct method would be to list all the system specifics first, then describe the problem or question. For example, if I were seeking answers to questions about Microsquish Word for my computer at home, I would list Windoze 2000 with SP5, Orfice 2000 with SR3, HP Kawack, dual Pentium IIs, 512MB of RAM and 4GB SCSI hard drive and then state the problem in detail.

Better Than Snail Mail

You would think that since e-mail is electronic and electronic information is suppose to move at the speed of light, your e-mail message would arrive seconds after you send it. If you're sending e-mail to the person in the office next to yours it might happen that way. In most cases, however, the message will probably take anywhere from a couple of minutes (majority of the time) to a couple of days (in which case there is usually a problem).

Think of it this way. Sending e-mail locally is as easy as delivering it by hand. Following that premise, if you had to hand deliver mail to someone clear across the country, doesn't that take a little more effort?

The reason it takes longer is that in the transmission of a message from point A to point B, the message may pass across one, two, or up to who-knows-how-many different types of mail systems before it reaches its destination. Remember my earlier statement? All computers (and e-mail systems) are not the same.

No matter how far away you are sending your e-mail message I'll guarantee that it will beat snail mail. On top of that you save the cost of a stamp.

A Blessing And A Curse

E-mail is a conversation that does not require an immediate response (like a telephone). If someone calls you on the telephone, you pick it up (unless you have an answering machine, voice mail or you are just plain rude) and the conversation begins. This is an interactive conversation.

With e-mail you send a message and then wait for a response. The response may come in five minutes or the response may come in five days. Either way it's not an interactive conversation.

If a hundred people send you e-mail in one day, so what? You didn't have to talk with all one hundred. Just think of all the hellos, good-byes and other unnecessary chit-chat you avoided. With e-mail you only deal with their messages (which usually omit hellos, good-byes and such) and you deal with them on your own time. That's the blessing.

Now for the curse.

Too many users assume that the minute someone receives an e-mail it, the person will read it. Bad assumption.

If you schedule a meeting for an hour from now and send an e-mail to each attendee, the chance that all the attendee's will read that message within the hour will be pretty small. On the other hand, if you schedule the meeting for the next day, the chance that they will read the message will be pretty high. Remember, e-mail is not designed for immediacy (that's why you have a telephone), it's designed for convenience.

Some (not all) e-mail systems have features that try to combat this problem. These features (usually called "notification") will notify you when a person has received your e-mail and may also notify you when the person has read it (really all it can do is assume you that the person has looked at the first screen of the message -- it has no way to know if the person has read the message word for word). Referring back to the example in the last paragraph, you could check to see who has checked their e-mail before the meeting and then telephone those who have not read it.

These Basic Netiquette Rules can be found by visiting this link: http://www.iwillfollow.com/email.htm

What Your Friends Would Like to Tell You, But Are Too Afraid You'll Get Offended and Send Them a Scathing Capitalized Response:

1. We prefer to get our latest and greatest news updates from our feed aggregators, not email. We assume this of our friends as well;
2. We tend to not believe everything we read but instead take Paul's advice to the 1 Thessalonians 5:21 and "test everything" against the snopes.com urban legend database;
3. We believe that there is no need to cut-and-paste any article that is on the web when it is far more considering to write a single original sentence describing why the content is so compelling that ends with the URL of online article;
4. We get really, really grumpy when we see our email addresses exposed with several hundred in the others by an individual forwarding a message without the benefit of using or understanding the purpose and benefits of their email program's BCC feature; and
5. We've received enough of this Christian spam that we don't even bother to read it before summarily pressing the delete button