

Netiquette and Effective Electronic Communication

The rules of “netiquette,” the do’s and don’ts of online communication, provide concrete ways to make our communication more effective, and increase the probability that our messages will be well received and understood by others. The netiquette rules outlined below pertain to email, newsgroups, and listservs. Consider sharing some of these tips with your students.

Structuring Messages

- Focus on one subject per message. If you need to write about more than one subject, especially if each item needs a response, compose a separate message for each subject.
- Type a specific subject heading that summarizes the content of your message. Add FYI, RE, REQUEST, URGENT where applicable. This helps readers scan through inbox and newsgroup postings.
- State your purpose clearly in the body of your message. Subject lines are used to facilitate scanning and filing, not to provide readers with your document’s purpose.
- Provide and retain context when replying to a message. Quote explicitly from the original message to provide context, using > signs on the left margin to mark the quoted passages. Usually three to four lines is sufficient. If you need to quote the entire original message, put your response before the original message. When specifically responding to a message, choose “reply” instead of beginning a new thread or composing a new message. This makes it easier to file the messages within the appropriate context.
- Structure your message according to your purpose. If your message is positive, use a Direct Sequence: Start with your most important point; state your request, ask your question, or express your thanks or congratulations. Then, give supporting details, such as the context or reasons. Finally, end with a goodwill statement that expresses appreciation, offers help, and looks to future relationships. If your message is negative (anything that might cause a negative emotional reaction), use an Indirect Sequence: Begin with a statement that you and the recipient can agree on, preferably something related to the subject of your message. Then, give reasons leading to the bad news. Next, state your bad news as positively as possible and provide an alternative. Close your message with a goodwill statement.

Formatting Messages for Maximum Readability

- Keep all aspects of your message short in general. Use mostly short sentences and paragraphs. To prevent problems with word wrap, keep lines to 70 characters or less. If possible, keep your message to one “page”—about 25 lines of text.

- Avoid using formatted text (e.g. HTML, RTF). It is not compatible with all servers/email clients. If you need to send something with special formatting, attach it to the message.
- If providing a URL in your message, preface it with `http://`. Most software packages use this prefix to recognize a web address and will create a hotlink that can be clicked right from the message.
- Present your material graphically. Readers tend to scan rather than read onscreen text. Use subheadings, keywords, and bulleted/numbered lists. Put a blank line between paragraphs.
- Remember that salutations are less formal than in paper communication. Address your readers as you would address them in person. In most cases, “Dear [Name]” or “[Name]” is sufficient. You can omit the salutation altogether, particularly if the message is going to a group of people, but be aware that no salutation can make a message abrupt and impersonal. It also creates extra confusion if you accidentally send a message to the wrong address.
- Create an appropriate electronic signature. Strive for five lines or less. Include your name, email address, title and company name if applicable. If you include a quote, keep it short, and make it reflect yourself. Be thoughtful about what you include, since your signature conveys something of your personality, not just your contact information.
- Consider using special characters and formatting to convey emotion and tone. Use asterisks (*important*), upper case letters (AAHH!), punctuation (um...), and white space (I can’t do this) appropriately. Be familiar with at least the basic emoticons but use them sparingly. Avoid upper case unless you want to shout and excessive punctuation (e.g., I love that idea!!!!).
- Use common abbreviations and acronyms. Short forms common to the English language (e.g., FYI, BTW) are appropriate. Don’t use those that will confuse your reader (e.g., THSTAAFL – “There’s no such thing as a free lunch!”).
- Check all messages before sending. Use your spell-checker or grammar-checker.
- With large attachments, consider whether the recipients can handle them. Do they have the right software? Do they have enough disk space? If you are uncertain, send an initial message to ask permission.

Remembering the human side

Maintain recipients’ privacy. With email, use the blind carbon copy (BCC) field when sending a message to multiple recipients (unless you have obtained permission from these people to publish their addresses). Don’t forward a message without the author’s permission.

- If you receive an aggravating message, do not respond immediately. If possible, ignore the message. If you must reply, take time to calm down before writing a courteous reply. If you’re not sure whether your response is appropriate, save it and read it over later.

- Remember that messages might be read by people other than your intended recipients.
- System managers, postmasters, or accidental recipients may read messages, so send something only if you wouldn't mind letting your supervisor see it.
- Don't write a message if you would not feel comfortable conveying that message in person.

Resources

- [Netiquette Guidelines, from Brock University](#)