

Etiquette Guidelines for Electronic Mail

This document presents some simple guidelines for electronic mail etiquette and usage. It does not try to mandate any particular style or rules, but is rather an attempt to highlight important issues affecting the clarity of the electronic mail we send -- after all, electronic mail is about communication, so clarity should be our goal.

Addresses and personal names

A *personal name* is an arbitrary string of text that many mailers will allow you to define, and will attach to your e-mail address as a textual comment. So, in the example address "David Harris <david@example.com>", the personal name part is "David Harris".

- Always provide a personal name if your mail system allows it - a personal name attached to your address identifies you better than your address can on its own.
- Use a sensible personal name: "Guess who" or other such phrases are annoying as personal names and hinder the recipient's quick identification of you and your message. Most mail programs will show only your personal name (not your e-mail address) in recipients' folder lists, so using a sensible name is essential in allowing them to identify you as the sender.
- If your mail system lets you use personal names in the addresses to which you *send* mail, try to use them. This will often help a postmaster recognize the real recipient of the message if the address is invalid.

Example: The address `344188@foo.chaos.com` conveys less information on its own than if it were written as `344188@foo.chaos.com (Ford Prefect)`

Subject lines

- Always include a subject line in your message. Almost all mailers present you with the subject line when you browse your mailbox, and it's often the only clue the recipient has about the contents when filing and searching for messages.
- Make the subject line meaningful. For example, sending a message to Microsoft Technical Support with the subject "*Windows*" is practically as unhelpful as having no subject at all.
- If you are replying to a message but are changing the subject of the conversation, change the subject too - or better still, start a new message altogether. The subject is usually the easiest way to follow the thread of a conversation, so changing the conversation without changing the subject can be confusing and can make filing difficult.

Message Length, Content and Format

- Try to match your message length to the tenor of the conversation: if you are only making a quick query, then keep it short and to the point.
- It has become increasingly common for people to try to cram their entire message into the "subject" line, but you shouldn't do this - it is visually confusing to open a message and see nothing in the body: many people will mistake such messages for botched delivery attempts and will delete them without necessarily noticing the subject. Make your subject descriptive, by all means, but ensure that the message body also contains meaningful text.

- In general, keep to the subject as much as possible. If you need to branch off onto a totally new and different topic then it's often better to send a new message, which allows the recipient the option of filing it separately.
- Don't type your message in ALL-UPPERCASE - it's the Internet equivalent of yelling, and can be extremely difficult to read (although a short stretch of uppercase may serve to emphasize a point heavily).
- Try to break your message into logical paragraphs and restrict your sentences to sensible lengths.
- Use correct grammar and spelling. Electronic mail is all about communication - poorly-worded and misspelled messages are hard to read and potentially confusing. Just because electronic mail is fast does not mean that it should be slipshod, yet the worst language-mashing I have ever seen has been done in e-mail messages. If your words are important enough to write, then surely they are also important enough to write properly?
- Avoid public "flames" - messages sent in anger. Messages sent in the heat of the moment generally only exacerbate the situation and are usually regretted later. Settle down and think about it for a while before starting a flame war. (Try going and making yourself a cup of coffee - it's amazing how much you can cool down even in that short a time, besides which a cup of good coffee is a great soother).
- If your mail program supports fancy formatting (bold, italic and so on) in the mail messages it generates, make sure that the recipient has a mail program that can display such messages. At the time of writing, many Internet mail programs still do not support anything other than plain text in messages, although this will change over time.
- Be very careful about including credit card numbers in electronic mail messages. Electronic mail can be intercepted in transit and a valid credit card number is like money in the bank for someone unscrupulous enough to use it.

Replies

- Avoid using "group reply" (reply-to-all) functions whenever possible: the vast majority of messages that receive group replies each day do not warrant them. Abuse of this function generates an enormous amount of unwanted and unnecessary mail: always consider carefully whether a group reply is really required before using it.
- Include enough of the original message to provide a context. Remember that Electronic Mail is not as immediate as a telephone conversation and the recipient may not recall the contents of the original message, especially if he or she receives many messages each day. Including the relevant section from the original message helps the recipient to place your reply in context.
- Include only the minimum you need from the original message. One of the most annoying things you can encounter in e-mail is to have your original 5-page message quoted back at you in its entirety, with the words "Me too" added at the bottom. Quote back only the smallest amount you need to make your context clear.
- Use some kind of visual indication to distinguish between text quoted from the original message and your new text - this makes the reply much easier to follow. ">" is a traditional marker for quoted text, but you can use anything provided its purpose is clear and you use it consistently.

- Pay careful attention to where your reply is going to end up: it can be embarrassing for you if a personal message ends up on a mailing list, and it's generally annoying for the other list members.
- Ask yourself if your reply is really warranted - a message sent to a list server that only says "I agree" is probably better sent privately to the person who originally sent the message.

SPAM (unsolicited commercial e-mail)

- If you are tempted to advertise your business or service by sending out e-mail to large lists of people, then we have one word for you: DON'T. This is called spamming, and it is the single most reviled practice on the Internet. Sending unsolicited commercial e-mail will have the opposite effect from anything you might intend, and because it is explicitly mentioned in most Internet Service Providers' terms and conditions as a prohibited practice, it may end up costing you your e-mail address. At the very least, you will get hundreds or thousands of deeply irate people screaming at you. We can't stress this one enough - **DON'T SEND SPAM**; it is nothing but trouble.
- If you receive a spam message (and who doesn't, these days?) don't assume that the person in the "From" field of the message is actually the person who sent it. It is a very common practice for spammers to forge the headers of their messages to deflect the blame for their evildoing onto someone else.
- This one is not etiquette, exactly, but it's so important we have to mention it here. Most spam mail will claim to have a "remove" option - an address to which you can send a message so that you will supposedly never get spam from the sender again. Never, never EVER use such remove options - they simply confirm to the spammer that your address is valid and that you read your mail. Rather than reducing the amount of spam you get, using a "remove" option will almost certainly result in you getting *even more* spam.
- Spam is one of the most emotive, complex social issues facing the Internet. If you are interested in helping to curb this abusive practice, you might like to consider joining one of the anti-spam action groups, such as CAUCE (the Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial E-mail) - visit their web page at <http://www.cauce.org>.

Forwarding mail

- When forwarding a message, think carefully about whether the recipient will actually appreciate it. It's become common for people to forward jokes, funny pictures and other incidental items on an almost open-slayer basis, without first checking whether or not the people to whom the items are being forwarded really want to receive them. Always ask before forwarding incidental mail to someone.
- If a message contains a request that you forward it to other people, then that's almost always a good reason not to do so. There are many well-known hoaxes and chain letters that have been going around the Internet for years - for instance, the letter with the heart-rending tale of the sick child who before he dies wants to set a record for the most e-mail greeting cards received... The message goes on to urge you to send a postcard to the child, then forward the e-mail to all your friends. Don't just blindly fall for hoaxes like this one - either ignore them, or if they seem especially worthy, ask around and find out whether or not they are kosher before proceeding.

Signatures

A Signature is a small block of text appended to the end of your messages, which usually contains your contact information. Many mailers can add a signature to your messages automatically. Signatures are a great idea but are subject to abuse; balance is the key to a good signature.

- Always use a signature if you can: make sure it identifies who you are and includes alternative means of contacting you (phone and fax are usual). In many systems, particularly where mail passes through gateways, your signature may be the only means by which the recipient can even tell who you are.
- Keep your signature short - four to seven lines is a handy guideline for maximum signature length. Unnecessarily long signatures waste bandwidth (especially when distributed to lists) and can be annoying.
- Some mailers allow you to add random strings to your signature: this is well and good and can add character if done carefully. You should consider the following basic rules though:
 - Keep it short. The length of your quote adds to the length of your signature. A 5,000 word excerpt from Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason' used as a signature will not win you many friends.
 - Definitions of "offensive" vary widely: avoid quotes that might offend people on the grounds of religion, race, politics or sexuality.
 - Avoid topical or local quotes, since they may be meaningless to recipients in other towns, countries or cultures.

Variable signatures are usually best if they're amusing; polemical outbursts on politics or other such topics will turn most people off, but a one-liner that brings a smile can make someone's day.

Courtesy

Electronic mail is all about communication with other people, and as such some basic courtesy never goes amiss.

- If you're asking for something, don't forget to say "please". Similarly, if someone does something for you, it never hurts to say "thank you". While this might sound trivial, or even insulting, it's astonishing how many people who are perfectly polite in everyday life seem to forget their manners in their e-mail.
- Don't expect an immediate answer. The fact that you don't get an answer from someone in ten minutes does not mean that he or she is ignoring you, and is no cause for offense. Electronic mail is all about dealing with your communications when you are able to do so.
- Always remember that there is no such thing as a secure mail system. It is unwise to send very personal or sensitive information by e-mail unless you encrypt it using a reliable encryptor. Remember the recipient - you are not the only person who could be embarrassed if a delicate message falls into the wrong hands.
- Include enough information: if you are sending in a question to which you expect a response, make sure you include enough information to make the response possible. For example, sending the message *My spreadsheet program doesn't work* to Microsoft Technical Support really doesn't give them very much to work with; similarly, sending the message *What has happened to my order?* to a vendor is also unhelpful. When requesting technical support, include a description of the problem and the version of the program you're using; when following up on an order, include

the order number, your name and organization, and any other details that might assist in tracing your order - and so on.

"Smiley faces" (Emoticons)

Electronic mail has very nearly the immediacy of a conversation, but is totally devoid of "body language". As many new e-mail users quickly discover, it is depressingly easy to send what you feel is a completely innocent mail message, only to find that the recipient has read things into it that you never intended, and has taken offense. The Internet "counter-culture" has had an answer to this problem for years - "smiley faces" (also known as "emoticons"), or sequences of characters that are meant to look like a face turned on its side: the idea is that using a smiley face simulates some of the cues you would use in a face-to-face conversation, and reduces the likelihood of being misinterpreted.

The most common smiley faces are probably these:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <code>: -)</code> or <code>:)</code> | A smiling face seen side-on; generally used to indicate amusement, or that a comment is intended to be funny or ironic (" <code><g></code> " or " <code><grin></code> " is also sometimes used for the same purpose). |
| <code>: - (</code> or <code>: (</code> | An unhappy face seen side on; generally used to express disappointment or sorrow. |
| <code>;-)</code> | A winking smiley face; usually indicates that something should be taken "with a grain of salt". |
| <code>> ; -></code> | A mischievous smiley face (note the devil's horns); usually indicates that a comment is intended to be provocative or racy. |

There are hundreds of others, some more recognizable than others.

Using the common smiley faces appropriately can markedly improve the clarity of your message and can allow you to express a wider range of sentiments and emotions in what you write. Like any embellishment, however, overusing them will destroy their value - use them sparingly.

The Bottom Line

Above all else, remember that electronic mail is about communication with other people. When you compose an e-mail message, read it over before sending it and ask yourself what your reaction would be if you received it. In the end, any time we spend on making our e-mail clearer is time well-spent, so let's start taking the time.

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