

16.3.6: A Word about Netiquette

Netiquette is simply the concept of courtesy and politeness when working on the Internet. The common sense “golden rule” of every day life—“do unto others as you would want them to do to you”—is the main rule to keep in mind online as well.

But there are two reasons why practicing good netiquette in discussion forums like email, newsgroups, and chat rooms is more difficult than practicing good etiquette in real life. First, many people new to the Internet and its discussion forums aren’t aware that there are differences between how one behaves online versus how to behave in real life. Folks new to the Internet in general or to a specific online community in particular (sometimes referred to as **newbies**) often are inadvertently rude or inconsiderate to others. It is a bit like traveling to a different country: if you are unfamiliar with the language and customs, it is easy to unintentionally do or not do something that is considered wrong or rude in that culture.

Second, the Internet is a volatile and potentially combative discussion space where people can find themselves offending or being offended by others quickly. The main reason for this is the Internet lacks the visual cues of “face to face” communication or the oral cues of a phone conversation. We convey a lot of information with the tone of our voice, our facial expression, or hand gestures. A simple question like “Are you serious?” can take on many different meanings depending on how you emphasize the words, whether or not you are smiling or frowning, whether or not you say it in a laughing tone or a loud and angry tone, or whether or not you are raising your hand or pointing a finger at the speaker.

The lack of visual or oral cues is also a problem with writing, of course, but online writing tends to be much more like speaking than more traditional forms of writing because it is usually briefer and much quicker in transmission. It’s difficult to imagine a heated argument that turns into name calling happening between two people writing letters back and forth, but it is not at all difficult to imagine (or experience!) an argument that arose out of some sort of miscommunication with the use of email messages that travel from writers to readers in mere seconds.

This phenomenon of the Internet making it possible for tempers to rise quickly and for innocent conversations to lead to angry arguments even has a name: **flaming**. An ongoing and particularly angry argument that takes place in a newsgroup or emailing list forum is called a **“flame war.”** Flames (like conventional “fighting words”) often are the result of intentional rudeness, but they are also the result of simple miscommunications.

Here are some basic guidelines for practicing good netiquette:

- **Use “common sense courtesy.”** Always remember that real people are on the other side of the email or newsgroup message you are responding to or asking about. As such, remember to try and treat people as you would want them to treat you.
- **Don’t type in all capital letters.** “All caps” is considered shouting on the Internet. Unless you mean to shout something, don’t do this.
- **Look for, ask for, and read discussion group FAQs.** Many discussion groups have a “Frequently Asked Questions” document for their members. Before posting to an Internet group, try to read this document to get an idea about what is or isn’t discussed in the forum.
- **Read some of the messages before posting to your electronic group.** Make sure you have a sense of the tone and type of conversation that takes place in the forum before posting a message of your own.
- Do not send advertisements, chain letters, or personal messages to a discussion group.
- **Ask permission to quote from others on the list.** If someone writes something in a newsgroup or an emailing list discussion forum you think might be useful to quote in your research project, send a private email to the author of the post and ask for permission. Along these lines, do not post copyrighted material to the Internet without getting permission from the holder of the copyright to do so.
- **Make sure your email messages and other discussion forum posts have subjects.** Keep the subject line brief and to the point, but be sure to include it. If your message is part of an ongoing conversation, make sure your subject is the same as the other subject lines in the conversation.

Be on the look out for new technologies!

One of the challenges I face in offering advice on how to use the Internet for your research is that the tools available on the Internet keep changing at an extremely rapid rate. New and exciting technologies are emerging all the time, and many of them become popular in an amazingly short period of time. Conversely, older Internet tools (Telnet, Gopher, newsgroups, etc.) are more fitting in a history of the Internet textbook than this one.

Here's just a partial list of emerging technologies you might be using for Internet research in the near future (if you're not using them already):

- **Blogs.** A blog (or "web log") is a web-based publication of articles, usually dated and published with the most current entries first. Many blogs are very similar to a personal journal or diary, though other blogs are maintained collaboratively and by academic or professional writers. Two of the most popular services are Blogger <www.blogger.com> and Xanga <<http://www.xanga.com>>.
- **Podcasting.** A "podcast" is a way of publishing sound files and making them available for others to listen to over the Internet. Despite its name, you don't actually have to have an iPod to listen to a podcast, just a computer that can play MP3 sound files. Similar to blogs, podcasts range from individual broadcasts about virtually anything on their minds to news organizations producing professional shows. See iPodder.org <www.ipodder.org> to get started.
- **Instant Messaging.** My experience has been that most of my students are more familiar with IM than most of my fellow faculty members. Instant messaging allows users to chat with each other in real time. Most cell phones support IM-ing, too, called text messaging (?).
- **Peer-to-Peer file sharing.** "Peer-to-peer" sharing is a technology that allows users on a network to share files with each other. Usually, this is associated with music sharing, and it has been controversial because of the possibility of illegally copying music files.
- **Scholarly Publishing online.** There are currently significant differences between the materials available on the Internet and in an academic library. Obviously, libraries have books and the Internet doesn't. But that might be changing sooner than you might think. For example, Google is working with several academic libraries around the world to scan their books into their database. (See <http://www.google.com/press/pressrel/print_library.html>). More and more periodicals are making their articles available electronically, both via "full text" databases like WilsonSelect.

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