

Netiquette

Introduction

by Virginia Shea

What is Netiquette? Simply stated, it's network etiquette -- that is, the etiquette of cyberspace. And "etiquette" means "the forms required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be required in social or official life." In other words, Netiquette is a set of rules for behaving properly online.

When you enter any new culture -- and cyberspace has its own culture -- you're liable to commit a few social blunders. You might offend people without meaning to. Or you might misunderstand what others say and take offense when it's not intended. To make matters worse, something about cyberspace makes it easy to forget that you're interacting with other real people -- not just ASCII characters on a screen, but live human characters.

So, partly as a result of forgetting that people online are still real, and partly because they don't know the conventions, well-meaning cyberspace travelers, especially new ones, make all kinds of mistakes.

The book Netiquette has a dual purpose: to help net newbies minimize their mistakes, and to help experienced cyberspace travelers help the newbies. The premise of the book is that most people would rather make friends than enemies, and that if you follow a few basic rules, you're less likely to make the kind of mistakes that will prevent you from making friends.

The list of core rules below, and the explanations that follow, are excerpted from the book. They are offered here as a set of general guidelines for cyberspace behavior. They won't answer all your Netiquette questions. But they should give you some basic principles to use in solving your own Netiquette dilemmas.

Rule 1: Remember the human

The golden rule your parents and your kindergarten teacher taught you was pretty simple: Do unto others as you'd have others do unto you. Imagine how you'd feel if you were in the other person's shoes. Stand up for yourself, but try not to hurt people's feelings.

In cyberspace, we state this in an even more basic manner: Remember the human.

When you communicate electronically, all you see is a computer screen. You don't have the opportunity to use facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to communicate your meaning; words -- lonely written words -- are all you've got. And that goes for your correspondent as well.

When you're holding a conversation online -- whether it's an email exchange or a response to a discussion group posting -- it's easy to misinterpret your correspondent's meaning. And it's frighteningly easy to forget that your correspondent is a person with feelings more or less like your own.

It's ironic, really. Computer networks bring people together who'd otherwise never meet. But the impersonality of the medium changes that meeting to something less -- well, less personal. Humans

exchanging email often behave the way some people behind the wheel of a car do: They curse at other drivers, make obscene gestures, and generally behave like savages. Most of them would never act that way at work or at home. But the interposition of the machine seems to make it acceptable.

The message of Netiquette is that it's not acceptable. Yes, use your network connections to express yourself freely, explore strange new worlds, and boldly go where you've never gone before. But remember the Prime Directive of Netiquette: Those are real people out there.

Would you say it to the person's face?

Writer and Macintosh evangelist Guy Kawasaki tells a story about getting email from some fellow he's never met. Online, this fellow tells Guy that he's a bad writer with nothing interesting to say.

Unbelievably rude? Yes, but unfortunately, it happens all the time in cyberspace.

Maybe it's the awesome power of being able to send mail directly to a well-known writer like Guy. Maybe it's the fact that you can't see his face crumple in misery as he reads your cruel words. Whatever the reason, it's incredibly common.

Guy proposes a useful test for anything you're about to post or mail: Ask yourself, "Would I say this to the person's face?" If the answer is no, rewrite and reread. Repeat the process till you feel sure that you'd feel as comfortable saying these words to the live person as you do sending them through cyberspace.

Of course, it's possible that you'd feel great about saying something extremely rude to the person's face. In that case, Netiquette can't help you. Go get a copy of Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior.

Another reason not to be offensive online

When you communicate through cyberspace -- via email or on discussion groups -- your words are written. And chances are they're stored somewhere where you have no control over them. In other words, there's a good chance they can come back to haunt you.

Never forget the story of famous email user Oliver North. Ollie, you'll remember, was a great devotee of the White House email system, PROFS. He diligently deleted all incriminating notes he sent or received. What he didn't realize was that, somewhere else in the White House, computer room staff were equally diligently backing up the mainframe where his messages were stored. When he went on trial, all those handy backup tapes were readily available as evidence against him.

You don't have to be engaged in criminal activity to want to be careful. Any message you send could be saved or forwarded by its recipient. You have no control over where it goes.

Rule 2: Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life

In real life, most people are fairly law-abiding, either by disposition or because we're afraid of getting caught. In cyberspace, the chances of getting caught sometimes seem slim. And, perhaps because people sometimes forget that there's a human being on the other side of the computer, some people think that a lower standard of ethics or personal behavior is acceptable in cyberspace.

The confusion may be understandable, but these people are mistaken. Standards of behavior may be different in some areas of cyberspace, but they are not lower than in real life.

Be ethical

Don't believe anyone who says, "The only ethics out there are what you can get away with." This is a book about manners, not about ethics. But if you encounter an ethical dilemma in cyberspace, consult the code you follow in real life. Chances are good you'll find the answer.

One more point on Netiquette ethics: If you use shareware, pay for it. Paying for shareware encourages more people to write shareware. The few dollars probably won't mean much to you, and they benefit all of cyberspace in the long run.

Breaking the law is bad Netiquette

If you're tempted to do something that's illegal in cyberspace, chances are it's also bad Netiquette.

Some laws are obscure or complicated enough that it's hard to know how to follow them. And in some cases, we're still establishing how the law applies to cyberspace. Two examples are the laws on privacy (see Rule 8 and "Email Privacy -- a Grand Illusion" on page 125) and copyright (see "Copyright in Cyberspace" on page 133).

Again, this is a book on manners, not a legal manual. But Netiquette mandates that you do your best to act within the laws of society and cyberspace.

Rule 3: Know where you are in cyberspace

Netiquette varies from domain to domain

What's perfectly acceptable in one area may be dreadfully rude in another. For example, in most TV discussion groups, passing on idle gossip is perfectly permissible. But throwing around unsubstantiated rumors in a journalists' mailing list will make you very unpopular there.

And because Netiquette is different in different places, it's important to know where you are. Thus the next corollary:

Lurk before you leap

When you enter a domain of cyberspace that's new to you, take a look around. Spend a while listening to the chat or reading the archives. Get a sense of how the people who are already there act. Then go ahead and participate.

Rule 4: Respect other people's time and bandwidth

It's a cliché that people today seem to have less time than ever before, even though (or perhaps because) we sleep less and have more labor-saving devices than our grandparents did. When you send email or post to a discussion group, you're taking up other people's time (or hoping to). It's your responsibility to ensure that the time they spend reading your posting isn't wasted.

The word "bandwidth" is sometimes used synonymously with time, but it's really a different thing. Bandwidth is the information-carrying capacity of the wires and channels that connect everyone in cyberspace. There's a limit to the amount of data that any piece of wiring can carry at any given moment - even a state-of-the-art fiber-optic cable. The word "bandwidth" is also sometimes used to refer to the storage capacity of a host system. When you accidentally post the same note to the same newsgroup five times, you are wasting both time (of the people who check all five copies of the posting) and bandwidth

(by sending repetitive information over the wires and requiring it to be stored somewhere).

You are not the center of cyberspace

Presumably, this reminder will be superfluous to most readers. But I include it anyway, because when you're working hard on a project and deeply involved in it, it's easy to forget that other people have concerns other than yours. So don't expect instant responses to all your questions, and don't assume that all readers will agree with -- or care about -- your passionate arguments.

Rules for discussion groups

Rule 4 has a number of implications for discussion group users. Most discussion group readers are already spending too much time sitting at the computer; their significant others, families, and roommates are drumming their fingers, wondering when to serve dinner, while those network maniacs are catching up on the latest way to housebreak a puppy or cook zucchini.

And many news-reading programs are slow, so just opening a posted note or article can take a while. Then the reader has to wade through all the header information to get to the meat of the message. No one is pleased when it turns out not to be worth the trouble. See "Netiquette for Discussion Groups" on page 65 for detailed rules.

To whom should messages be directed? (Or why "mailing list" could become a dirty word)

In the old days, people made copies with carbon paper. You could only make about five legible copies. So you thought good and hard about who you wanted to send those five copies to.

Today, it's as easy to copy practically anyone on your mail as it is not to. And we sometimes find ourselves copying people almost out of habit. In general, this is rude. People have less time than ever today, precisely because they have so much information to absorb. Before you copy people on your messages, ask yourself whether they really need to know. If the answer is no, don't waste their time. If the answer is maybe, think twice before you hit the send key.

Rule 5: Make yourself look good online

Take advantage of your anonymity

I don't want to give the impression that the net is a cold, cruel place full of people who just can't wait to insult each other. As in the world at large, most people who communicate online just want to be liked. Networks -- particularly discussion groups -- let you reach out to people you'd otherwise never meet. And none of them can see you. You won't be judged by the color of your skin, eyes, or hair, your weight, your age, or your clothing.

You will, however, be judged by the quality of your writing. For most people who choose to communicate online, this is an advantage; if they didn't enjoy using the written word, they wouldn't be there. So spelling and grammar do count.

If you're spending a lot of time on the net and you're shaky in these areas, it's worth brushing up on them. There are plenty of books available, but you'll learn more -- and possibly have more fun -- if you take a course. If you're an older adult, you don't have to take a "bonehead grammar" course with a bunch of

bored teenagers. Instead, look for courses on proofreading and copyediting; they usually cover the basic rules of grammar pretty thoroughly, and they'll be filled with motivated students who are there because they want to be. Check your local community college and university extension catalogs -- you'll be amazed at what they offer. A side benefit is that taking courses involves meeting people you can actually see.

Know what you're talking about and make sense

Pay attention to the content of your writing. Be sure you know what you're talking about -- when you see yourself writing "it's my understanding that" or "I believe it's the case," ask yourself whether you really want to post this note before checking your facts. Bad information propagates like wildfire on the net. And once it's been through two or three iterations, you get the same distortion effect as in the party game "Operator": Whatever you originally said may be unrecognizable. (Of course, you could take this as a reason not to worry about the accuracy of your postings. But you're only responsible for what you post yourself, not for what anyone else does with it.)

In addition, make sure your notes are clear and logical. It's perfectly possible to write a paragraph that contains no errors in grammar or spelling, but still makes no sense whatsoever. This is most likely to happen when you're trying to impress someone by using a lot of long words that you don't really understand yourself. Trust me -- no one worth impressing will be impressed. It's better to keep it simple.

Don't post flame-bait

Finally, be pleasant and polite. Don't use offensive language, and don't be confrontational for the sake of confrontation.

Q. Is swearing acceptable on the net?

Only in those areas where sewage is considered an art form, e.g., the USENET newsgroup alt.tasteless. Usually, if you feel that cursing in some form is required, it's preferable to use amusing euphemisms like "effing" and "sugar." You may also use the classic asterisk filler -- for example, s***. The archness is somehow appropriate to the net, and you avoid offending anyone needlessly. And everyone will know exactly what you mean.

Rule 6: Share expert knowledge

Finally, after all that negativity, some positive advice.

The strength of cyberspace is in its numbers. The reason asking questions online works is that a lot of knowledgeable people are reading the questions. And if even a few of them offer intelligent answers, the sum total of world knowledge increases. The Internet itself was founded and grew because scientists wanted to share information. Gradually, the rest of us got in on the act.

So do your part. Despite the long lists of no-no's in this book, you do have something to offer. Don't be afraid to share what you know.

It's especially polite to share the results of your questions with others. When you anticipate that you'll get a lot of answers to a question, or when you post a question to a discussion group that you don't visit often, it's customary to request replies by email instead of to the group. When you get all those responses,

write up a summary and post it to the discussion group. That way, everyone benefits from the experts who took the time to write to you.

If you're an expert yourself, there's even more you can do. Many people freely post all kinds of resource lists and bibliographies, from lists of online legal resources to lists of popular UNIX books. If you're a leading participant in a discussion group that lacks a FAQ, consider writing one. If you've researched a topic that you think would be of interest to others, write it up and post it. See "Copyright in Cyberspace" on page 133 for a few words on the copyright implications of posting research.

Sharing your knowledge is fun. It's a long-time net tradition. And it makes the world a better place.

Rule 7: Help keep flame wars under control

"Flaming" is what people do when they express a strongly held opinion without holding back any emotion. It's the kind of message that makes people respond, "Oh come on, tell us how you really feel." Tact is not its objective.

Does Netiquette forbid flaming? Not at all. Flaming is a long-standing network tradition (and Netiquette never messes with tradition). Flames can be lots of fun, both to write and to read. And the recipients of flames sometimes deserve the heat.

But Netiquette does forbid the perpetuation of flame wars -- series of angry letters, most of them from two or three people directed toward each other, that can dominate the tone and destroy the camaraderie of a discussion group. It's unfair to the other members of the group. And while flame wars can initially be amusing, they get boring very quickly to people who aren't involved in them. They're an unfair monopolization of bandwidth.

Rule 8: Respect other people's privacy

Of course, you'd never dream of going through your colleagues' desk drawers. So naturally you wouldn't read their email either.

Unfortunately, a lot of people would. This topic actually rates a separate section. For now, here's a cautionary tale. I call it

The case of the snoopy foreign correspondent

In 1993, a highly regarded foreign correspondent in the Moscow bureau of the Los Angeles Times was caught reading his coworkers' email. His colleagues became suspicious when system records showed that someone had logged in to check their email at times when they knew they hadn't been near the computer. So they set up a sting operation. They planted false information in messages from another one of the paper's foreign bureaus. The reporter read the notes and later asked colleagues about the false information. Bingo! As a disciplinary measure, he was immediately reassigned to another position at the paper's Los Angeles bureau.

The moral: Failing to respect other people's privacy is not just bad Netiquette. It could also cost you your job.

Rule 9: Don't abuse your power

Some people in cyberspace have more power than others. There are wizards in MUDs (multi-user dungeons), experts in every office, and system administrators in every system.

Knowing more than others, or having more power than they do, does not give you the right to take advantage of them. For example, sysadmins should never read private email.

Rule 10: Be forgiving of other people's mistakes

Everyone was a network newbie once. And not everyone has had the benefit of reading this book. So when someone makes a mistake -- whether it's a spelling error or a spelling flame, a stupid question or an unnecessarily long answer -- be kind about it. If it's a minor error, you may not need to say anything. Even if you feel strongly about it, think twice before reacting. Having good manners yourself doesn't give you license to correct everyone else.

If you do decide to inform someone of a mistake, point it out politely, and preferably by private email rather than in public. Give people the benefit of the doubt; assume they just don't know any better. And never be arrogant or self-righteous about it. Just as it's a law of nature that spelling flames always contain spelling errors, notes pointing out Netiquette violations are often examples of poor Netiquette.