

Guidelines for Electronic Communication

Platform: N/A

Level of Difficulty: Beginner

Introduction

Electronic mail, Netnews, and similar services have changed the way computer-literate people communicate. As means of communication, these services fall somewhere between the telephone and the written letter: faster than a letter but without the ongoing verbal feedback of speech. This combination of immediacy and insularity can lead people to regret a message sent in haste, whether it be unclear or written in anger.

People working with electronic mail have had time to do some casual analysis of what makes effective electronic communication. While some of the information listed here is specific to the electronic media, many basic principles of clear grammar and rhetoric also apply. This document is therefore presented as a set of guidelines, not rules.

Much of this information comes from the Usenet's news.announce.newusers newsgroup and is appropriate for most types of electronic communication, whether e-mail or postings. You can use a news reader, such as **nn**, on the Unix machines to consult **news.announce.newusers** for more information.

Writing Style

Your normal writing style may not be the most appropriate one for electronic communications. Here are some recommendations for making your messages easier to read.

- Keep paragraphs short and sweet. Keep sentences shorter and sweeter. This means “concise”, not cryptic. Leaving out articles (such as “the,” “a,” “an,” etc.) for “brevity” mangles the meaning of your sentences and takes longer to read. It saves you time at the expense of your reader.
- White space is not wasted space—it greatly improves clarity. A blank line only adds a byte to the article length, so don't be stingy if it will help make your meaning clearer.
- Subject lines should be meaningful. Many REPLY-type commands add “RE:” to an existing subject line. In an ongoing discussion, these can get very deeply nested. If the discussion has strayed from the original subject, you should change the line.

- Quote, but don't resend. When you answer mail, you have the original message fresh in your mind. When I receive your answer, I don't. However, you shouldn't quote the entire message just to send a brief reply. Excerpt quotes from previous messages, when necessary, or summarize ongoing discussions.
- It's much easier to read a mixture of upper- and lowercase letters than to read all uppercase or all lowercase. All uppercase is generally considered to be the electronic equivalent of SHOUTING!
- Because of the wide variety of equipment used to read e-mail, lines should be between 72 and 80 characters long. Not every editor automatically starts new lines when a preset limit is reached. Know your editor's features, and, if necessary, use that carriage return!
- Not every mail system recognizes control characters (such as those used to start a new page) or interprets them in the same way. It's best not to include them in your messages at all.

Reading a few newsgroups will give you a feeling for what reads easily and what does not. You can then model your messages on those you find easiest to read.

Netiquette

Some general principles of cooperation have developed on the Usenet over the years. These principles are informally referred to as "Netiquette". Those particularly pertinent to e-mail are below.

Never Forget that the Person on the Other Side is Human. Because your direct interaction is with a machine, it is easy to forget that the *ultimate* interaction is with another human being. Just as people tend to act differently when speaking over the telephone, they also tend to write things in e-mail they'd ordinarily never say to a person's face.

Be Careful with Humor and Sarcasm. Because the visual cues are absent, many people cannot tell if your comments are meant seriously or facetiously. The sideways "smiley face", :-), has become the accepted symbol for indicating humor, but be warned that some people (intentionally or unintentionally) do not use it.

Be Brief. *Someone* pays for all e-mail. While there is no policy at Rutgers directly charging users for e-mail privileges, the money, in some way, partially comes out of *your* pocket (i.e., taxes).

Don't Overdo Signatures. Long signatures (over 5 lines) tend to waste resources and are boring to read after the first few times.

Copyrights and Privacy

The U. S. Copyright Law is unclear on the matter of electronic communication. Anything posted to an electronic bulletin board or newsgroup is probably in the public domain, unless you wrote it and have included a valid copyright notice (such as Copyright 1992 Your Name Here; the phrase All Rights Reserved helps protect any international copyrights, as well). Even then, there being no explicit precedent, a court may still decide it to be public domain. Think about this before you send out anything to which you (or others) wish to hold a valid copyright.

The privacy issue is equally cloudy. While the philosophy that anything in your account is your personal property has a long history among system administrators, the University explicitly states

University material, property, facilities or the time of University personnel on duty may be used only for purposes directly related to the academic programs or the business affairs of the University. (The Rutgers *Regulation and Procedures Manual*, Regulation 6.4.2, Section C.) So it is *possible* that what you consider to be private communications could be removed by University officials if those communications do not pertain to University business of some sort. As of this writing, this has not yet happened, but be warned.

You should also not assume that the contents of an e-mail letter are as secure from prying eyes as are the contents of a letter sent by U. S. Mail. There are no laws protecting e-mail the way paper mail is protected.

It is also considered to be polite to ask for permission before quoting private e-mail correspondence between yourself and another person to a third person, just as it would be when quoting paper correspondence.