

Netiquette

A Primer on How to Work With the Usenet Community by Chuq Von Rospach

*** This message describes the Usenet culture and customs that have developed over time. Other documents in this newsgroup describe what Usenet is and manuals or on-line help on your system should provide detailed technical documentation. All new users should read this message to acclimate themselves to Usenet. (Old users could read it, too, to refresh their memories.) ***

It is the people participating in Usenet that make it worth the effort to read and maintain; for Usenet to function properly those people must be able to interact in productive ways. This document is intended as a guide to using the net in ways that will be pleasant and productive for everyone.

This document is not intended to teach you how to use Usenet. Instead, it is a guide to using it politely, effectively and efficiently. Communication by computer is new to almost everybody, and there are certain aspects that can make it a frustrating experience until you get used to them. This document should help you avoid the worst traps.

The easiest way to learn how to use Usenet is to watch how others use it. Start reading the news and try to figure out what people are doing and why. After a couple of weeks you will start understanding why certain things are done and what things shouldn't be done. There are documents available describing the technical details of how to use the software. These are different depending on which programs you use to access the news. You can get copies of these from your system administrator. If you do not know who that person is, they can be contacted on most systems by mailing to account "news", "usenet" or "postmaster".

Never Forget that the Person on the Other Side is Human.

Because your interaction with the network is through a computer it is easy to forget that there are people "out there." Situations arise where emotions erupt into a verbal free-for-all that can lead to hurt feelings.

Please remember that people all over the world are reading your words. Do not attack people if you cannot persuade them with your presentation of the facts. Screaming, cursing, and abusing others only serves to make people think less of you and less willing to help you when you need it.

If you are upset at something or someone, wait until you have had a chance to calm down and think about it. A cup of (decaf!) coffee or a good night's sleep works wonders on your perspective. Hasty words create more problems than they solve. Try not to say anything to others you would not say to them in person in a room full of people.

Don't Blame System Admins for their Users' Behavior.

Sometimes, you may find it necessary to write to a system administrator about something concerning his or her site. Maybe it is a case of the software not working, or a control message escaped, or maybe one of the users at that site has done something you feel requires comment. No matter how steamed you may be, be polite to the sysadmin -- he or she may not have any idea of what you are going to say, and may not have any part in the incidents involved. By being civil and temperate, you are more likely to obtain their courteous attention and assistance.

Never assume that a person is speaking for their organization.

Many people who post to Usenet do so from machines at their office or school. Despite that, never assume that the person is speaking for the organization that they are posting their articles from (unless the person explicitly says so). Some people put explicit disclaimers to this effect in their messages, but this is a good general rule. If you find an article offensive, consider taking it up with the person directly, or ignoring it. Learn about "kill files" in your newsreader, and other techniques for ignoring people whose postings you find offensive.

Be Careful What You Say About Others.

Please remember -- you read netnews; so do as many as 3,000,000 other people. This group quite possibly includes your boss, your friend's boss, your girl friend's brother's best friend and one of your father's beer buddies. Information posted on the net can come back to haunt you or the person you are talking about.

Think twice before you post personal information about yourself or others. This applies especially strongly to groups like soc.singles and alt.sex but even postings in groups like talk.politics.misc have

included information about the personal life of third parties that could get them into serious trouble if it got into the wrong hands.

Be Brief.

Never say in ten words what you can say in fewer. Say it succinctly and it will have a greater impact. Remember that the longer you make your article, the fewer people will bother to read it.

Your Postings Reflect Upon You -- Be Proud of Them.

Most people on Usenet will know you only by what you say and how well you say it. They may someday be your co-workers or friends. Take some time to make sure each posting is something that will not embarrass you later. Minimize your spelling errors and make sure that the article is easy to read and understand. Writing is an art and to do it well requires practice. Since much of how people judge you on the net is based on your writing, such time is well spent.

Use Descriptive Titles.

The subject line of an article is there to enable a person with a limited amount of time to decide whether or not to read your article. Tell people what the article is about before they read it. A title like "Car for Sale" to rec.autos does not help as much as "66 MG Midget for sale: Beaverton OR." Don't expect people to read your article to find out what it is about because many of them won't bother. Some sites truncate the length of the subject line to 40 characters so keep your subjects short and to the point.

Think About Your Audience.

When you post an article, think about the people you are trying to reach. Asking UNIX(*) questions on rec.autos will not reach as many of the people you want to reach as if you asked them on comp.unix.questions or comp.unix.internals. Try to get the most appropriate audience for your message, not the widest.

It is considered bad form to post both to misc.misc, soc.net-people, or misc.wanted and to some other newsgroup. If it belongs in that other newsgroup, it does not belong in misc.misc, soc.net-people, or misc.wanted.

If your message is of interest to a limited geographic area (apartments, car sales, meetings, concerts, etc...), restrict the distribution of the message to your local area. Some areas have special newsgroups with geographical limitations, and the recent versions of the news software allow you to limit the distribution of material sent to world-wide newsgroups. Check with your system administrator to see what newsgroups are available and how to use them.

If you want to try a test of something, do not use a world-wide newsgroup! Messages in misc.misc that say "This is a test" are likely to cause large numbers of caustic messages to flow into your mailbox. There are newsgroups that are local to your computer or area that should be used. Your system administrator can tell you what they are.

Be familiar with the group you are posting to before you post! You shouldn't post to groups you do not read, or post to groups you've only read a few articles from -- you may not be familiar with the on-going conventions and themes of the group. One normally does not join a conversation by just walking up and talking. Instead, you listen first and then join in if you have something pertinent to contribute.

Remember that the Usenet newsgroup system is designed to allow readers to choose which messages they see, not to allow posters to choose sets of readers to target. When choosing which newsgroup(s) to post in, ask yourself, "Which newsgroups contain readers who would want to read my message" rather than "Which newsgroups have readers to whom I want to send my message?"

Be Careful with Humor and Sarcasm.

Without the voice inflections and body language of personal communications, it is easy for a remark meant to be funny to be misinterpreted. Subtle humor tends to get lost, so take steps to make sure that people realize you are trying to be funny. The net has developed a symbol called

the smiley face. It looks like ":-)" and points out sections of articles with humorous intent. No matter how broad the humor or satire, it is safer to remind people that you are being funny.

But also be aware that quite frequently satire is posted without any explicit indications. If an article outrages you strongly, you should ask yourself if it just may have been unmarked satire. Several self-proclaimed connoisseurs refuse to use smiley faces, so take heed or you may make a temporary fool of yourself.

Only Post a Message Once.

Avoid posting messages to more than one newsgroup unless you are sure it is appropriate. If you do post to multiple newsgroups, do not post to each group separately. Instead, specify all the groups on a single copy of the message. This reduces network overhead and lets people who subscribe to more than one of those groups see the message once instead of having to wade through each copy.

Please Rotate Messages With Questionable Content.

Certain newsgroups (such as rec.humor) have messages in them that may be offensive to some people. To make sure that these messages are not read unless they are explicitly requested, these messages should be encrypted. The standard encryption method is to rotate each letter by thirteen characters so that an "a" becomes an "n". This is known on the network as "rot13" and when you rotate a message the word "rot13" should be in the "Subject:" line. Most of the software used to read Usenet articles have some way of encrypting and decrypting messages. Your system administrator can tell you how the

software on your system works, or you can use the Unix command `tr '[a-m][n-z][A-M][N-Z]' '[n-z][a-m][N-Z][A-M]'` Don't forget the single quotes!

Summarize What You are Following Up.

When you are following up someone's article, please summarize the parts of the article to which you are responding. This allows readers to appreciate your comments rather than trying to remember what the original article said. It is also possible for your response to get to some sites before the original article.

Summarization is best done by including appropriate quotes from the original article. Do not include the entire article since it will irritate the people who have already seen it. Even if you are responding to the entire article, summarize only the major points you are discussing.

When Summarizing, Summarize!

When you request information from the network, it is common courtesy to report your findings so that others can benefit as well. The best way of doing this is to take all the responses that you received and edit them into a single article that is posted to the places where you originally posted your question. Take the time to strip headers, combine duplicate information, and write a short summary. Try to credit the information to the people that sent it to you, where possible.

Use Mail, Don't Post a Follow-up.

One of the biggest problems we have on the network is that when someone asks a question, many people send out identical answers. When this happens, dozens of identical answers pour through the net. Mail your answer to the person and suggest that they summarize to the network. This way the net will only see a single copy of the answers, no matter how many people answer the question.

If you post a question, please remind people to send you the answers by mail and at least offer to summarize them to the network.

Read All Follow-ups and Don't Repeat What Has Already Been Said.

Before you submit a follow-up to a message, read the rest of the messages in the newsgroup to see whether someone has already said what you want to say. If someone has, don't repeat it.

Check your return e-mail address and expect responses.

When you post an article, make sure that the return e-mail address in its From: or Reply-To: headers is correct, since it is considered inappropriate to post an article to which people are unable to respond by e-mail. If you are unable to configure your software to include a valid return address in your article header, you should include your address in a signature at the bottom of your message.

When you post an article, you are engaging in a dialogue, and others may choose to continue that dialogue by responding via e-mail. It is not courteous to post if you are unwilling to receive e-mail in response.

Check the Headers When Following Up.

The news software has provisions to specify that follow-ups to an article should go to a specific set of newsgroups -- possibly different from the newsgroups to which the original article was posted. Sometimes the groups chosen for follow-ups are totally inappropriate, especially as a thread of discussion changes with repeated postings. You should carefully check the groups and distributions given in the header and edit them as appropriate. If you change the groups named in the header, or if you direct follow-ups to a particular group, say so in the body of the message -- not everyone reads the headers of postings.

Be Careful About Copyrights and Licenses.

Before posting to Usenet or reproducing something that has been posted to Usenet, make sure you read the accompanying posting "Copyright Myths FAQ: 10 big myths about copyright explained". At the very least, note that by posting to Usenet, you are requesting that a copy of your document be automatically distributed to computers all over the world and stored on various disks for a long time (forever on some archive media).

Further, some people will quote parts of your article without permission or forward it to other people or use it in other ways that you might not know about. If this bothers you, put an explicit copyright notice on your posting. On the flip side, even if you are sure of the legality of

reproducing something from or on Usenet, it would be courteous to ask for permission before doing so.

Cite Appropriate References.

If you are using facts to support a cause, state where they came from. Don't take someone else's ideas and use them as your own. You don't want someone pretending that your ideas are theirs; show them the same respect.

Mark or Rotate Answers and Spoilers.

When you post something (like a movie review that discusses a detail of the plot) which might spoil a surprise for other people, please mark your message with a warning so that they can skip the message. Another alternative would be to use the "rot13" protocol to encrypt the message so it cannot be read accidentally. When you post a message with a spoiler in it make sure the word "spoiler" is part of the "Subject:" line.

Spelling Flames Considered Harmful.

Every few months a plague descends on Usenet called the spelling flame. It starts out when someone posts an article correcting the spelling or grammar in some article. The immediate result seems to be for everyone on the net to turn into a 6th grade English teacher and pick apart each other's postings for a few weeks. This is not productive and tends to cause people who used to be friends to get angry with each other.

It is important to remember that we all make mistakes, and that there are many users on the net who use English as a second language. There are also a number of people who suffer from dyslexia and who have difficulty noticing their spelling mistakes. If you feel that you must make a comment on the quality of a posting, please do so by mail, not on the network.

Don't Overdo Signatures.

Signatures are nice, and many people can have a signature added to their postings automatically by placing it in a file called "\$HOME/.signature". Don't overdo it. Signatures can tell the world something about you, but keep them short. A signature that is longer than the message itself is considered to be in bad taste. The main purpose of a signature is to help people locate you, not to tell your life story. Every signature should include at least your return address relative to a major, known site on the network and a proper domain-format address. Your system administrator can give this to you. Some news posters attempt to enforce a 4 line limit on signature files -- an amount that should be more than sufficient to provide a return address and attribution.

Limit Line Length and Avoid Control Characters.

Try to keep your text in a generic format. Many (if not most) of the people reading Usenet do so from 80 column terminals or from workstations with 80 column terminal windows. Try to keep your lines of text to less than 80 characters for optimal readability. If people quote part of your article in a followup, short lines will probably show up better, too.

Also realize that there are many, many different forms of terminals in use. If you enter special control characters in your message, it may result in your message being unreadable on some terminal types; a character sequence that causes reverse video on your screen may result in a keyboard lock and graphics mode on someone else's terminal. You should also try to avoid the use of tabs, too, since they may also be interpreted differently on terminals other than your own.

Do not use Usenet as a resource for homework assignments.

Usenet is not a resource for homework or class assignments. A common new user reaction to learning of all these people out there holding discussions is to view them as a great resource for gathering information for reports and papers. Trouble is, after seeing a few hundred such requests, most people get tired of them, and won't reply anyway. Certainly not in the expected or hoped-for numbers. Posting student questionnaires automatically brands you a "newbie" and does not usually garner much more than a tiny number of replies. Further, some of those replies are likely to be incorrect.

Instead, read the group of interest for a while, and find out what the main "threads" are - what are people discussing? Are there any themes you can discover? Are there different schools of thought?

Only post something after you've followed the group for a few weeks, after you have read the Frequently Asked Questions posting if the group has one, and if you still have a question or opinion that others will probably find interesting. If you have something interesting to contribute, you'll find that you gain almost instant acceptance, and your posting will generate a large number of follow-up postings. Use these in your research; it is a far more efficient (and accepted) way to learn about the group than to follow that first instinct and post a simple questionnaire.

Do not use Usenet as an advertising medium.

Advertisements on Usenet are rarely appreciated. In general, the louder or more inappropriate the ad is, the more antagonism it will stir up. The accompanying postings "Rules for posting to Usenet" and "Advertising on Usenet: How To Do It, How Not To Do It" have more information on this subject. Try the biz.* hierarchies instead.

Avoid posting to multiple newsgroups.

Few things annoy Usenet readers as much as multiple copies of a posting appearing in multiple newsgroups. (called 'spamming' for historical reasons) A posting that is cross-posted (i.e lists multiple newsgroups on the Newsgroups: header line) to a few appropriate newsgroups is fine, but even with cross-posts, restraint is advised. For a cross-post, you may want to set the Followup-To: header line to the most suitable group for the rest of the discussion.

Summary of Things to Remember

Never forget that the person on the other side is human.
Don't blame system admins for their users' behavior.
Never assume that a person is speaking for their organization.
Be careful what you say about others.
Be brief.
Your postings reflect upon you; be proud of them.
Use descriptive titles
Think about your audience.
Be careful with humor and sarcasm.
Only post a message once.
Please rotate material with questionable content.
Summarize what you are following up.
Use mail, don't post a follow-up.
Read all follow-ups and don't repeat what has already been said.
Check your return e-mail address and expect responses.
Double-check follow-up newsgroups and distributions.
Be careful about copyrights and licenses.
Cite appropriate references.
When summarizing, summarize.
Mark or rotate answers or spoilers.
Spelling flames considered harmful.
Don't overdo signatures.
Limit line length and avoid control characters.
Do not use Usenet as a resource for homework assignments.
Do not use Usenet as an advertising medium.
Avoid posting to multiple newsgroups.

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Archive-name: usenet/primer/part1
Original-author: chuq@apple.COM (Chuq Von Rospach)
Comment: enhanced & edited until 5/93 by spaf@cs.purdue.edu (Gene Spafford)
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