

# Netiquette

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## INTRODUCTION

Forming relationships on the Internet through various means of communication is a growing trend in cyberspace. The Internet is a medium that allows people to converse and express thoughts, feelings, viewpoints, and information posting messages electronically for others to view (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002). Education has been taking advantage of these electronic communication mediums to teach content areas, help teachers and students form relationships, and serve as a vehicle of dialogue between teachers, parents, and students (Forceir & Descy, 2005; Roblyer, 2006). Although electronic communications in education grow and proliferate, the rules of engagement must be maintained to prevent miscommunication and online traffic and noise (Kallos, 2006). This article discusses the importance of upholding netiquette conventions among its users in education because without adhering to certain guidelines and protocols, electronic forms of communication can deter the teaching and learning processes.

## BACKGROUND

The term netiquette is the combination of two separate words—network etiquette (Kallos, 2006; Mallon & Oppenheim, 2002). The term is a word used to denote etiquette or manners that should occur on the Internet by its users when conversing electronically. In other words, netiquette comprises of rules for good behavior that has been adapted for an electronic form of communication (Sullivan, 2002). According to Webopedia (2006), netiquette involves etiquette guidelines for posting messages to online services, and particularly Internet newsgroups. Netiquette covers not only rules to maintain civility in discussions (i.e., avoiding flames), but also special guidelines unique to the electronic nature of forum messages.

Netiquette rules are not considered the same in every online electronic medium, however. Although online

manners are socially expected, the types of netiquette used in different electronic communication mediums vary (Shea, 2004). For instance, some newsgroups accept abrasive “flaming” while in other groups politeness, helpfulness, and tolerance are expected. Thus, venturing into the online environment to assess what has been said before posting any messages to the group is advisable in this situation.

Electronic forms of communication include both older and newer forms of Internet technologies (Mills, 2006). Former technologies include electronic mail (e-mail), bulletin board services (BBS), listservs or discussion/ mailing lists, and newsgroups. Internet relay chat (IRC), instant messaging, message boards, Webcasting, and Web logs are considered contemporary forms of Internet technologies. There is no real advantage between using the older or newer forms of technology. Selecting the type of electronic communication to use rests solely upon the medium that users want to adopt and the availability of the electronic medium at hand.

In terms of interactivity and time variables, these electronic forms of communication are either asynchronous or synchronous (Lever-Duffy, McDonald, & Mizell, 2005). Asynchronous communication is time-shifted in that the sender and receiver do not have to be physically online to proceed with the conversation such as using e-mail, bulletin boards, listservs or mailing lists, newsgroups, message boards, and Web logs. However, synchronous communication is real-time in that both the sender and recipient are expected to be available for instantaneous communication as with chats, instant messaging, and Webcasting, or videoconferencing (Roblyer, 2006).

There are several reasons why netiquette is important in an online environment whereby effective communication is a concern. As with traditional forms of communication, using common courtesy, grace, and socially acceptable behaviors are important for promoting the exchange of ideas. Without the use of these factors, one can easily appear lazy, rude, arrogant, or uneducated (Kallos, 2006). Furthermore, without the nonverbal cues

that one may receive in face-to-face communication, the electronic message itself may appear distant. According to Donald Fuller (2004), e-mail is considered as a “cold” medium in that written messages viewed on a computer screen lacks the warmth of face-to-face discussions. The speed of online communication is another reason why netiquette is necessary. Electronic messages today can be written and sent very quickly and often times sent before thinking much about what is written or how the receiver will view the message’s content (Fuller, 2004; Spinks, Wells, & Meche, 1999). This can lead toward some unpleasant situations when senders do not reflect over the messages. Hence, netiquette can help resolve some of these problems found in today’s online communication.

### **Critical to Learning Success**

In the educational setting, teaching students how to properly use netiquette when communicating online is critical because of the need to maintain a safe and effective learning environment. A primary reason for requiring netiquette is to help ensure the collective benefit of the group. In education, this collective group involves the instructors and students in a particular course/classroom (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002). If educators integrate electronic communications as part of classroom activities, the responsibility falls upon educators in establishing norms, conventions, shared understandings, and group cohesiveness.

One way to avoid a detrimental situation is to teach students proper online conduct and etiquette. Based upon the electronic medium being used, the instructor needs to go over the rules of conduct and address what ramifications can result from noncompliance. The educator can also model appropriate behaviors for students to follow such as not writing long-winded messages and always typing his/her name at the end of messages so that students will know who is catfish@usm.edu (Johnson, 1998).

Just as learning social manners, individuals must be repeatedly taught netiquette conventions. Educators can correct electronic messages or postings made by students that do not follow netiquette guidelines. In addition, constant reminders sent to senders and receivers of online communication messages can ensure that netiquette remains on the minds of students. If computer technology is used regularly in the classroom, posting rules of netiquette around the classroom can

help. Within an online course environment, educators can hold discussions about netiquette and what are the acceptable behaviors for the course. Thus, to embed the rules in the minds of the communicators, practice and prompts are required.

An educator may ask what are the rules of netiquette. Netiquette rules do alter somewhat depending upon the electronic medium being used. The following are some “generic” rules that can be applied to all electronic communications (Newby, Stepich, Lehman, & Russell, 2000; Smaldino, Russell, Heinich, & Molenda, 2005).

- Keeping messages short and simple will prevent confusion and reader fatigue (reading text on the computer screen is different than on paper). Be specific, brief, and to the point. In fact, messages should not be longer than 300 words. If this word limit cannot be helped, then send the message via an attachment.
- Always identify oneself within the message. Some message services do not include names in the senders’ e-mail addresses.
- Including a portion of a message being replied to is appropriate. However, only include portions that are relevant to the response (e.g., do not just hit the reply button and keep everything there).
- Electronic messages are public. For instance, e-mail and listserv administrators can see all the messages being sent. Do not include information that may be detrimental to you as the sender.
- Always check for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and so forth. Nothing is more annoying than reading a message that has so many errors that it takes twice the time to read.
- Use upper and lower cases when writing messages. Do not use all CAPS because this indicates shouting, plus it takes more time to read all CAPS.
- Sensitivity to others is critical when trying to promote a cordial and safe atmosphere. Showing respect and courtesy to others’ backgrounds, experiences, and cultures can help encourage a positive environment.
- Humor should be used with precaution. Without the verbal and nonverbal cues in electronic messages, humor can be taken the wrong way. In addition, different cultures may perceive humor in different ways.
- Consider one as being a guest. Showing cooperation and sharing information with others can aid

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