
Musings on Electronic Mail Etiquette by David Harris

This document presents some simple guidelines for electronic mail etiquette. It does not try to mandate any particular style or rules: it is instead an attempt to highlight important issues which affect the clarity of the electronic mail we send. After all, electronic mail is about communication, so clarity should be our goal.

I welcome comments or feedback about this document - I can be mailed as:
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This list of topics is in no particular order.

Addresses and personal names

* Always provide a personal name if your mail system can use it - a personal name attached to your address identifies you better than your address does on its own.

* Use a sensible personal name: "Guess who" or other such phrases are annoying as personal names and hinder the recipient's quick identification of your message.

* If your mail system lets you use personal names in the addresses to which you send mail, try to use them. This will often help a postmaster recognize the real recipient of the message if the address is invalid.

Example:

The address '344188@foo.chaos.com' conveys more information if you write it as '344188@foo.chaos.com (Ford Prefect)'

Subject lines

* ALWAYS include a subject line in your message. Almost all mailers present you with the subject line when you browse your mailbox, so it's often the only clue the recipient has when filing and searching for messages.

* Make the subject line meaningful. For example, sending a message to Word Perfect Technical support with the subject "Word Perfect" is practically as unhelpful as having no subject at all.

* If you are replying to a message but are changing the subject of the conversation, change the subject too.

Message Length, Content and Format

* Try to match your message length to the tenor of the conversation: if you are only making a quick query, then keep it short.

* In general, keep to the subject as much as possible. If you need to branch off onto a totally new and different topic then it's often better to send a new message, which allows the recipient the option of filing it separately.

* Don't type your message in all-upercase - it's extremely difficult to read (although a short stretch of uppercase may serve to emphasize a point heavily). Try to break your message into logical paragraphs and keep your sentences to sensible lengths.

* Use correct grammar and spelling. Electronic mail is all about communication - poorly-worded and misspelt messages are hard to read and potentially confusing. Just because electronic mail is fast does not mean that it should be slipshod, yet the worst language-mashing I have ever seen has been done in e-mail messages. If your words are important enough to say, then they're important enough to say properly.

* Avoid public "flames" - messages sent in anger. Messages sent in the heat of the moment generally only inflame the situation and are generally regretted later. Settle down and think about it before starting a flame war.

Replies

* Include enough of the original message to provide a context. Remember that Electronic Mail is not as immediate as a telephone conversation and the recipient may not recall the contents of the original message. Including the relevant section from the original message helps the recipient to place your reply in context.

* Include only the minimum you need from the original message. One of the most annoying things you can encounter in e-mail is to have your original 5-page message quoted back at you in its entirety, with the words "Me too" added at the bottom. Quote back only the smallest amount you need to make your context clear.

* Use some kind of visual indication to distinguish between text quoted from the original message and your new text. This makes the reply much easier to follow. ">" is a traditional marker for quoted text, but you can use anything provided its purpose is clear.

* Pay careful attention to where your reply is going to end up: it can be

embarrassing for you if a personal message ends up on a mailing list, and it's generally annoying for the other list members.

* Ask yourself if your reply is really warranted - a message sent to a list server which only says "I agree" is probably better sent privately to the person who originally sent the message.

Signatures

A "Signature" is a small block of text appended to the end of your messages, which usually contains contact information for you. Many mailers can add a signature to your messages automatically. Signatures are a great idea but are subject to abuse.

* Always use a signature if you can: make sure it identifies who you are and includes alternative means of contacting you (phone and fax are usual).

* Keep your signature short - four to seven lines is a handy rule of thumb for maximum signature length. Unnecessarily long signatures use bandwidth (especially when distributed to lists) and can be annoying.

* Some mailers allow you to add random strings to your signature: this is well and good and can add character if done carefully. You should consider the following basic rules though:

- Keep them short. The length of your quote adds to the length of your signature.

- Definitions of "offensive" vary widely: avoid quotes which might offend people on the grounds of religion, politics or sexuality. (A general rule of thumb is that if you could say it on U.S. television, then it's probably not going to offend anyone).

- Try to avoid topical or local quotes, since they may be meaningless to recipients in other towns, countries or cultures.

"Smiley faces"

Electronic mail has very nearly the immediacy of a conversation, but is totally devoid of "body language". The Internet "counter culture" has had an answer to this problem for years - "smiley faces", or groups of ASCII characters which are meant to look like a face turned on its side. The most common smiley faces are probably these:

- :-) or :) A smiling face seen side-on; generally used to indicate amusement, or that a comment is intended to be funny or ironic ("`<g>`" or "`<grin>`" is also sometimes used).
- :-(or :(An unhappy face seen side on; generally used to express disappointment or sorrow.
- ;-) A winking smiley face; usually indicates that something should be taken "with a grain of salt".
- ;-> A mischievous smiley face; usually indicates that a comment is intended to be provocative or racy.

There are hundreds of others, some more recognizable than others.

Using the common smiley faces carefully can in fact markedly improve the clarity of your message, since they convey nuances which approximate "body language". Like any embellishment, however, overuse of smiley faces destroys their value - use them sparingly.

The Bottom Line

Above all else, remember that electronic mail is about communication with other people. When you compose an e-mail message, read it over before sending it and ask yourself what your reaction would be if you received it. Any time spent on making our e-mail clearer is time well-spent, so let's start taking the time.

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