

Internet Services: Electronic Communication

Electronic communication (the use of electronic messages to communicate) is changing the way we work, the way we play, and how we share information with colleagues and friends. This quick guide to text-based electronic communication will help you use it more effectively by understanding common practice and the culture of the Internet.

Why is it important to learn about electronic communication? With the Internet's increasing popularity, many people are communicating electronically and are making mistakes that lead to embarrassment, miscommunication, hurt feelings, and worst of all, having email and Internet accounts cancelled for violation of terms of service. Learning about e-communication and its conventions reduces the occurrence of these mistakes.

Types of Electronic Communication

- Email** Electronic mail (or email or e-mail) is simply sending an electronic message to one or more people. It was one of the earliest Internet tools and is still one of the most popular. Email accounts are available through educational institutions (like UT), Internet service providers (like Glasscity.net and America Online), or free on the Web (Hotmail or Gmail). Email is asynchronous (person A sends a message to person B who reads it a later time).
- Mailing Lists** Mailing lists are a way of allowing groups of people to communicate with each other simply. These lists, as the name suggests, are run using email. Every message sent to the list is sent to every subscriber. Mailing lists are maintained by special software such as Listserv, Listproc, Majordomo, and Mailbase. They can also be Web-based, such as Yahoo!Groups and Listbot. Mailing lists are also asynchronous. Consult the Library help sheet *Internet Services: Mailing Lists* for more information.
- Groups** News or discussion groups are another way for groups of individuals to share information. Instead of using email to facilitate this, software programs called newsreaders are used to access the groups. Newsgroups are also asynchronous. The most popular type of groups are the Usenet Newsgroups; consult the Library help sheet *Internet Services: Usenet Newsgroups* for more information.
- Chat rooms** Unlike the above three types, chat rooms rely upon synchronous communication; a group of two or more individuals send short messages back and forth in real-time. Chat usually requires software such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) or ICQ; some Internet service providers provide chat capabilities.



Instant Messaging Instant messaging (IM) allows quick notes to be sent to someone else online. An IM typically pops up on the monitor of the recipient. The recipient can then send an IM back. Both the sender and recipient must be using the same IM software, such as ICQ, Yahoo Pager, or AOL IM. IM software is also referred to as pager software or buddy lists.

Other Tools Other electronic communication tools are not restricted to textual messages. Video and audio conference are other forms of electronic communication. They are not addressed in this help sheet.

Common Terminology

- Article** another name for a single newsgroup message
- Flame** a post that intentionally attacks someone or makes someone angry; also a verb, *to flame someone*, meaning to post a flame. A single flame can degenerate into a *flame war*, a flame in response to a flame, in response to a flame, etc. Flaming is impolite; remember that there is a person behind the post. Don't say something electronically that you wouldn't say in person. The best way to stop a flame war is to ignore it.
- Follow** to post a follow-up message
- Lurk** to read posts without posting or replying; this is a great technique for getting a handle on the ins-and-outs of a new list or group.
- Netiquette** Internet etiquette. For more information see the Netiquette home page (www.albion.com/netiquette/) which includes the full text of Virginia Shea's *Core Rules of Netiquette* and the full text of Shea's book *Netiquette*.
- Newbie** Originally referred to someone new to Usenet newsgroups, a newbie is someone who is new to the Internet.
- Post** a single message to a list/group; also a verb, *to post a message to the newsgroup*, meaning to submit a message
- Spam** to send an unrequested message to an individual, mailing list, or newsgroups. Commonly, spam consists of forwarded chain letters and unrequested advertising, but more broadly, it can be any inappropriate message. Spamming is generally viewed as being very inconsiderate.
- Thread** a group of messages within a newsgroup or mailing list that have a common subject, usually created from a single original post and the replies to that post; *I've been following this thread* means *I've been reading the messages on this topic*.

Commonly Used Shorthand

Electronic communication tends to be more informal than print communication. This informality has led to new shorthand. Typically these conventions should be used in informal communication only. Refer to the *Beginner's Guide to Effective Email* (see web address below) for important information on avoiding electronic misunderstandings.

BTW	By the way
FWIW	For what it's worth
IMO	In my opinion
IMHO	In my humble opinion
LOL	Laughing out loud
OTOH	On the other hand
TIA	Thanks in advance
YMMV	Your mileage may vary (used when describing a situation or providing advice)

When used appropriately, emoticons convey the emotion that is missing from electronic communication. If you can't see the faces, tip your head to the left.

:)	Smiley face
:(Frowny face
;)	Winking face
8)	Smiley face with eyeglasses

Also, some systems allow you to use different face graphics.

Emotions can also be communicated with HTML-like tags. These also help prevent misunderstandings.

```
<soapbox on> Message here <soapbox off>
<rant> Message here </rant>
<grin>
<smile>
```

Remember that these are typically used in information communication, not formal communication.

Helpful Hints for Electronic Communication

Respect Others

- Remember that the Internet is a community of *people*. Be polite in your electronic communications.
- Not everyone remembers the above guideline. Try not to take flames and apparently rude messages personally.

- Not everyone's email system can handle non-ASCII text email. If you do not know if the recipient's email system can handle formatting like bold and italics or graphics, send messages in plain text.

Learn to Communicate Clearly

- Refer to the *Beginner's Guide to Effective Email* (www.webfoot.com/advice/email.top.html) for information on maximizing the clarity of your electronic communications.
- If you reply to a message, quote only the relevant parts of the message to which you are replying.
- Don't use all capital letters. PEOPLE WILL THINK THAT YOU ARE SCREAMING. Save the capitals for things that need emphasizing. (Also, a message of all caps is difficult for some people to read.)

Learn the Standards for your Particular Community

The people who participate in a list or group make up a community, and as such, they have a set of norms and behavioral standards. Learn these standards before you post.

- It is a good idea to lurk on a list/group for a couple of weeks to get an idea of its atmosphere. Lurking will also let you discover what are appropriate discussion topics and what behaviors are appropriate. (In some groups, swearing is acceptable; in others, it is not acceptable.)
- Most lists/groups periodically run one or more messages of frequently asked questions (FAQ; pronounced "fack"). Reading them will give you basic information about the list/group topic.
- Remember your delete key. If someone posts a message that is not of interest to you, delete the message.
- Remember that mailing lists and discussion groups typically have a main topic of interest. Be respectful of this. Don't try to make the list or group into a personal discussion group with a topic other than the established one. There are Web sites where you can create new mailing lists, such as groups.yahoo.com and www.listbot.com