

# Netiquette

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As a new form of communication, the Internet is filled with obstacles to trip even the most well-intentioned navigator. With an extraordinary number of new subscribers every day, mistakes that sometimes irritate or inconvenience other members of the Net occur frequently. Netiquette is the name given to the rules of proper communication on the net. Just as with any etiquette, it is based on common sense and a working knowledge of the surroundings.

Netiquette is particularly useful in public settings such as electronic discussion lists (aka listservs). One example is the SWINE-L listserv, which is sponsored by *Swine Health and Production*. As of September 12, the SWINE-L listserv had 264 members from many countries around the world. Though some receive their email for free, many pay base fees and connect charges for the opportunity to belong to the group. Of course, all pay in the time it takes to participate in the group. Thus, though we often write our messages in the private comfort of our offices, we should design our messages as if they are being given in the midst of a large meeting. Otherwise, popular discussion groups are often killed by unrelated “chatter”.

The guidelines to netiquette are numerous but there are a few major *faux pas* that can be avoided with a better understanding of some basic rules:

## Send commands to the listserv address

For SWINE-L, the listname is SWINE-L@VM1.SPCS.UMN.EDU. Mail sent to this address is broadcast to all members. Commands to join the list or get information are sent to LISTSERV@VM1.SPCS.UMN.EDU. Automatic responses are given to messages such as REVIEW or UNSUBSCRIBE. You would send the listserv the command REVIEW SWINE-L to get a background of the group, including members and files of old messages. It is sent in the message body, with no other text in the body or the subject line. If your signature file is added automatically to messages, this should be disabled. Likewise, the UNSUBSCRIBE SWINE-L message must be sent to the listserv address. A useful command to send to the listserv address is SET DIGEST SWINE-L. This combines the messages sent to the discussion group and sends it to your mailbox as one message each day.

## Send messages to the correct address

Often mail is sent to the wrong address, and a major nuisance is when personal mail is sent to a discussion list such as SWINE-L. This error most commonly occurs when someone REPLIES to a message sent out by the discussion group. Check the address of your message before it is sent. Often the REPLY function will send

the message back to the discussion list unless the address is changed.

## Use the subject line

Subject lines allow messages to be easily sorted and prioritized. There are very few reasons to leave it empty, except when communicating with a listserv. Subject lines are also useful when examining archives of messages so that a string of messages can be followed on a particular discussion.

## Keep messages short

Though it is useful to include the message to which you are responding, only include the pertinent parts. If there is a reference article or other longer piece that may be of interest to particular members, offer to send it to those who request it. Remember that many members pay for their service based on volume. There is actually a lexicon for email that has gained a foothold. It includes things such as the wink ;) and short forms such as IMHO for “in my honest opinion”, and the ever-popular ROTFL for “rolling on the floor laughing.”

## “Sign” your messages

Most mail programs do this for you, but be sure that you as the sender can be identified by something else than your email address. Most people set up a “signature file” to accomplish this task, and tell their email software to automatically append it to all their outgoing messages.

## Respect the privacy of messages

This is a subjective area, but forwarding messages from one list to another (usually called cross-posting) is not automatically allowed. Private messages should not be published on a list without permission of the author. When in doubt always get the permission of the originator when copying or forwarding a message.

## Respect the time of others

When requesting information in a discussion group, be sure the information is not available elsewhere. For instance, email addresses of participants are available from the listserv. Many technical guidelines are available on other parts of the net (see last issue's column). If you particularly want the opinion of one member of the discussion group, it is usually best to address that person individually.

Always remember that email is designed as a quick, easy, and cheap method to communicate with others. Netiquette helps make more effective communication possible.

