

# My Learning Springboard

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 [mylearningspringboard.com/netiquette/](http://mylearningspringboard.com/netiquette/)

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When the news media reported in 2017 that Harvard rescinded admission to 10 applicants after discovering inappropriate social media posts from those students, everyone realized that netiquette really does make a difference. Netiquette is the set of manners and expectations for writing on the Internet. How you communicate on message boards and social media matters.

Netiquette exists to help everyone interact with respect. Email and online messages offer the chance to communicate quickly from a distance. This immediacy created connections that were never possible before, but it also seems to let people express themselves more forcefully and thoughtlessly. Writing in the spur of the moment is dangerous, especially now when nothing posted online is ever really deleted, since people can share, screenshot, and recover anything. What seems funny in one instant may suddenly appear horrendously insensitive the next.

As you begin to apply for college, internships and your first jobs, your presentation online matters. Many companies now scan applicants' social media presence as a part of the hiring process; 91% of hiring managers review an applicant's social media profile according to Reppler's 2011 survey of 300 Human Resources professionals. Time Magazine reported that 55% of hiring managers reconsidered a potential hire based on what they found online according to the 2014 edition of Jobvite's annual Social Recruiting Survey. That same

Jobvite survey discovered that 66% of hiring managers held poor spelling and grammar against candidates—not errors on their job applications, but on their social media posts! Be careful and thoughtful now to save yourself embarrassment later.

Many classes now use class message boards and social media sites (like Tumblr or Instagram) as a part of the work. Being curt or rude to other students, let alone the faculty member, on any class message board or social media site will hurt your relationships with everyone in the class. Even when frustrated, make sure you use correct grammar, clear sentence structure, and polite language. Proper netiquette helps you succeed.

Following netiquette guidelines ensures that people stop to think. Always ask yourself these three simple questions:

- Is your statement true?
- Does it help the situation?
- Are you being kind?

The following recommendations consider the specific situations of class message boards and school social media activities, but they apply to private and personal interactions too.

- If you are asking a question, always check to make sure the information isn't already available. Look at previous posts, the assignment description, the syllabus and other materials. You don't want to waste people's time.
- Be brief. Write what you need but then edit that to the minimum necessary for clarity.
- Edit your statements by reorganizing information so that your points are clear and clustered together appropriately.
- Thank people for their help by liking their comment or summarizing the helpful advice in one comment that both recognizes the feedback you got and makes it easier for others to review in the future.
- Do not disrespect others. This one is obvious but needs reiterating because it happens far too frequently. Even if responding to someone who is callously disrespecting netiquette guidelines, do so politely. If you don't, you simply reinforce that the loudest, most obnoxious behavior gets the final word.
- Be careful with humor. Taking things out of context is easy to do online. Be careful with what you say so that others don't take your comments in the wrong way.
- Be generous in giving and receiving criticism. Imagine that everyone is trying to be helpful. Do the same.

*Charlotte Kent, PhD is a tutor and executive functions coach for My Learning Springboard. She has a textbook forthcoming for first year college students, Writing for College and Beyond: Life Lessons from the College Composition Classroom*

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## Email Etiquette

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Netiquette is the set of manners and expectations for writing on the Internet, but following specific email etiquette guidelines can help you communicate effectively. Your email messages make a difference; confusing, rude, or grammatically incorrect emails delay the response you need and want. Sometimes student emails are riddled with errors that make it difficult to understand their message; a lack of response may stem from the other person's confusion. If messages lack greetings and signatures or crucial information, such as the name and time of the class, the person may not know how to respond. When messages are abrupt or excessively friendly, they may come across as disrespectful. Each of these formatting and wording choices must be carefully considered with regard to email etiquette.

## Consider Your Emails to Avoid Bias

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Research shows that a lot of students are less formal with female professors or professors of color; a classic on this subject is *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris. Young female professors of color get particularly personal treatment, often called by their first names without inviting students to do so, among other awkward social interactions.

Student bias is sadly present and students need to watch for it, just as professors are required to judge their students independently. Though a 2016 study reported in *Educational Researcher* found that students generally liked faculty of color, their appreciation did not necessarily translate into professional respect according to the authors, Hua-Yu Cherng and Peter F. Halpin. Many studies show student prejudice against the professional acumen of faculty based on perceptions of gender, race, and sexual identity.

These biases are culturally instituted and we all have to work to overcome them. They occur in school and they occur in the workplace. Learning to recognize your own unconscious prejudices is awkward in the beginning. It feels “unnatural.” That’s okay. You are learning new habits of treating any faculty member, or boss, with the respect they deserve for their position and knowledge, rather than for their superficial qualities. It will become “natural” one day, too. Check how you engage with all faculty, treating each one with respect, and you will avoid an awkward encounter with a female colleague or manager of color later when you are working and your behavior can directly impact your career.

Since email is a place where we rush, biased attitudes slip out most easily there. Many faculty enforce email etiquette guidelines in order to help students establish useful lifelong habits; they may require that you rewrite the email before offering a response to your query, for example. Review your emails to ensure you didn’t slip into any language that wasn’t appropriate for the class and the relationship you have with the professor.

You likely know how to write an email, but in the mad rush of college assignments and demands, it becomes very easy to forget email etiquette basics. Don’t.

## Formula for Writing an Email

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**Recipient (“to”).** In school, when you write your professors, you likely have no reason to include anyone else. If you “cc” (copy) people on a message, then you are suggesting they need to know about this communication, but are not expected to reply as it does not directly concern them. Avoid “bcc” (blind copy) unless you have a very good and clear reason for including that person without any one else knowing about it.

**Subject line.** Your subject line tells your reader what to expect. You often need to go back and edit the subject after you've finished the email to update the topic, similar to changing the title of an essay when you are done. No matter what, don't leave the subject line blank.

**Salutation.** Don't skip the greeting. It helps your readers know if the email is meant for them. Avoid being casual if you are starting an email communication; after going back and forth, it becomes acceptable if the person in a position of authority does it first. Even so, be careful not to become more casual than they have.

**Introduction.** Make sure your readers know who you are, how you've met, or how you know them. Administrators work with hundreds, if not thousands of students every day, and some professors teach as many as four or five classes every semester, tracking well over a hundred students, many of whom are in different sections of the same class. Asking readers to figure out who you are, puts your email at the bottom of their to-do pile.

**Message.** Explain your situation as succinctly as possible. If you have a complicated situation, are replying to an email request for information, or are responding to a series of questions, then consider putting the information in a list, separating points in paragraphs, or somehow dividing each element from the rest. Edit your response when you are done to see if you can make it clearer.

**Request.** Make your question, request, or need clear. If you need documentation of some kind, state the names of the documents you need. If you want to know something, ask for it; don't write "I can't find the info," when you could write: "What time is the event?" Be direct but polite.

**Signature.** Always include some form of closing statement followed by a comma and your name on the next line. Avoid closing with demands like, "Please get back to me immediately" because not everyone has access to their email throughout the day and some professors schedule their email replies. A signature can include your email address, phone, Skype or Google ID, any social media handles, titles or positions you might hold on campus, and physical address. Avoid sentimental closings of any kind.

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