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Ms. Parry's guide to correct online etiquette (Netiquette)

A Checklist for Cybercommunications:

Before sending that e-mail or posting on that Web site or bulletin board, think before you click "send." Re-read what you were going to send. If it meets any of these factors, don't send it until you fix them. And if you can't fix them, maybe you shouldn't send it at all.

It's so easy for anyone to misunderstand e-mails and cybercommunications. We have to be very very careful to make them clear and help others to understand what we really mean. We also need to be careful not to hurt others and be good netizens.

- Start by making sure you are sending things to the right place, that it arrives and that the right person gets it.

Is it addressed to the right person? Are you sure? Have you checked the spelling and the screen name carefully? Are they in your address book or on your buddy list already? The easiest way to make sure that you have their correct screen name or e-mail address is to save it automatically when they send you something. Parents should input their children's approved correspondents into their buddy lists and address books to make sure that it is done correctly. Also, people (especially kids) change their e-mail addresses and screen names often. Make sure you are using the most up-to-date one.

Also, don't be so sure that your e-mail makes it to the person you sent it to. With so many junk e-mails and viruses being sent these days, most Internet service providers are using spam-blocking technology to block and filter messages they think may be spam. Many innocent messages are caught in the spam-filters and never get delivered anymore. Some people are also using their own anti-spam software that may block your e-mail. Remind your friends to add your e-mail address and screen name to their approved list so that you won't be blocked by accident and warn them in advance before using a new address or screen name. Depending on which e-mail service you use, you may be able to track your message and see if it is ever delivered, and sometimes if it is even read. There are other applications you can use as well. It's good netiquette to ask the person before sending something to track whether they have opened or read the e-mail before using it. But just because you send something, don't get angry if the other person doesn't reply. First make sure they received it. (And make sure that they aren't blocked by your e-mail filters or spam-blockers either.)

Sometimes one family will use the same e-mail address or screen name for everyone. It could be embarrassing if you send a personal and private message to someone and their parents or older brother reads it instead. Check first. Also, many parents read their kids e-mails. Check with your friends and see if their e-mails are reviewed by their parents. You may want to be more careful if they do.

- Is it worth sending? Don't waste peoples' time or bandwidth with junk, chain e-mails and false rumors

Some of your friends and people you know love getting lots of e-mail, IMs and jokes. Others don't. Before you start sending lots of jokes and attachments to someone, find out if it's okay first. And if they tell you they are busy, respect their time. It never hurts to ask first. That way people will look forward

to getting your e-mails and cybercommunications instead of ignoring them. Also, don't send long e-mails to people who only read short ones, or short ones to people who like long ones without explaining why.

Don't send chain e-mails. They clog up e-mail servers, especially at school. And sometimes scare people, especially younger kids. Also, sometimes bad people who are looking to find kids online use them to spy on e-mails and find new kids to contact. (You can read more about chain e-mails at "e-mail netiquette and safety.")

Also, never send anything you haven't confirmed as being true. Many hoaxes and cyber-rumors are sent by people who just blindly forwarded them on, without checking to see if they are true. (You can read more about urban legends, hoaxes and cyber-rumors and how to check and see if they are true or not at our "Truth or Hype" section.)

If you are going to send an e-mail to someone famous you found online, think about what you're going to say. Many of these people answer select e-mails, and you want yours to be answered, not ignored. Also, if you ask them for something that is inappropriate (like helping you write your term paper) or something you should have found on your own (like their biography or information readily found at their Web site) they probably won't bother answering you.

Also, don't just send a "hi!" message without more. The worse that will happen is that it will be caught in the spam-filter or ignored. The best that will happen is that they will say "hi" back. What good is that? Also, never send an attachment to someone you don't know. They will probably automatically delete it. You can almost always include a photo or the document in the e-mail itself, instead of having to attach it. And make sure that you have allowed them to reply, without finding that they are blocked by parental controls or your e-mail filters.

- Proofread and spell-check your e-mails and make sure they know who you are

Many messages are never understood or are misunderstood because people left out words, or said things unclearly, or misspelled words. While your e-mails don't have to be formal works of art, your should make them clear. If they are important enough to send, they are important enough to be understood. The rules for instant messaging are different and more grammar mistakes and spelling errors are accepted there.

Also make sure that you re-read what you are sending to make sure it says what you want it to say. If something could be misunderstood, or understood two different ways, either re-write it or use an emoticon to let them know which meaning you used. Don't use shorthand or acronyms they don't understand. And if you are referring to someone else, make sure they know who you are talking about.

Also make sure that you sign your e-mails and cybercommunications with a name the recipient will recognize, if you aren't using your normal screen name. Don't give away personal information, but telling them that this is a new account or screen name and your old one was [fill in the blank] helps your message get read, instead of trashed. Putting that in the subject line may help.

- Don't attack others online, say anything that could be considered insulting or that is controversial

Until you get to know someone very well, it's always best to stay away from controversial topics, like politics, religion, race, sex, nationalism, war, special physical or mental limitations, money and gender-based issues. Once you get to know each other well-enough to know what is acceptable, you can get into these topics online, but even then, be very careful. Most cyber-problems start when people are talking about these and similar topics.

And be especially careful when dealing with people from other cultures and countries online. What may be perfectly acceptable in the United States may not be acceptable in Japan, or England, or Hong Kong, or New Zealand. Watch what they say and how they say it before jumping in. Be extra polite and respectful and don't be afraid to ask how they do things where they live. It's a great way to learn.

If someone tells you that you hurt their feelings, find out how and apologize. Let them know when you did things without meaning to. If they lash out at you, thinking you did it on purpose, before you attack them back, try explaining that it was accidental.

Don't use all capital letters (considered shouting online) and be careful about using bad language or being provocative. Don't intentionally say anything to hurt someone else's feelings or invade their privacy online or offline. And always scan your system for viruses and malicious code so that you don't send a virus by accident to someone else. (Use a good anti-virus program on anything you receive or download to make sure you don't pick up any viruses.)

- Don't forward other people's e-mails without their permission or share their personal information

Sometimes, without realizing it, we copy someone new on an e-mail thread. It might contain personal information or a personal communication that someone else shared with only you three levels down and you didn't realize that you were now allowing others to read it. Either delete all but the most recent message when forwarding it, or re-read the older threaded messages before forwarding to make sure nothing personal is in those messages. Many private things slip through that way by mistake.

- Are you angry when you are writing this message?

If you are writing the e-mail, instant message or post when you are angry, review it carefully. Also take the time to cool down before sending it and check the tips for avoiding cyberfights, by using the tips we learn in Take 5!

Are you replying to something that is designed to insult you, flame you, cyber-bully you or harass you? If so, think again. These things go away much faster if you don't reply at all. The person sending them is looking for a reaction. They soon get tired and go away if they don't get any. Also, you should let your parents or teachers know if you are receiving hateful or threatening cybercommunications or if you receive something that hurts your feelings or makes you feel bad. You are entitled not to be attacked online and enjoy e-mail and cybercommunications without worrying about nasty people.

- Don't reply to spam, even to ask to be removed from their mailing list

Spammers buy lists of millions of e-mail addresses and instant messaging screen names. Harvesting programs gather up these addresses wherever they can find them online, in chat rooms, on message boards, from chain e-mails and registrations. So, many of these addresses are old and don't work. If you reply, one of two things happens. You either have sent a reply to a fake address they have used to send the e-mails from, or you have now let them know that your address is a good one and you will receive many more messages. They will even sell your address for more money, since they can now promise that you have read the spam messages you receive.

While your e-mail service provider may ask you to forward spam to their TOS (terms of service violations address), you shouldn't bother. Instead, use a good anti-spam program or the dual e-mail trick. [[link to dual e-mail trick](#)]

- How private is the message you are sending? Are you willing to have others read this message or forward it to others without your permission?

E-mails get misdelivered all the time. And sometimes the people we send them to share our communications with others without asking us first. (This includes logs of our chat room discussions and of instant messaging.) The courts allow others to read your e-mails under special circumstances. Don't ever say anything in a cybercommunication you wouldn't be willing to allow someone else to read. We always tell people not to say anything they wouldn't write on a postcard they send through the mail. Sometimes when our friends get angry with us, they intentionally post our e-mails on public Web sites or send them to others. If you are going to share something very private, it's best to use the phone or person-to-person communications (obviously only with people you know in real life).

When students apply for jobs or internships the recruiter will sometimes “Google them” first. We have seen many cases where old messages they posted when they were much younger and didn’t realize would turn up in an online search cost someone an internship position or a job. (It’s always a good idea to “Google yourself” regularly and make sure nothing turns up that you would be embarrassed about or that gives away personal information about you online.)

Also, many parents and schools monitor communications. This means they can read what you have written. Have you written anything they can’t read? And if you are using a family account that one of your parents uses for work e-mail, their boss may be monitoring e-mails too. That could be very embarrassing for everyone and may cost your parent their job.