

# Netiquette: Ground Rules for Online Discussions

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As more and more classes include online discussion components, it becomes more and more important for instructors to understand the rules of etiquette that, when followed, help make the individual postings easy to follow, keep the conversation thread focused, and the overall discussion on-track.

Unregulated, an online discussion can quickly disintegrate into a tangled web of extraneous verbiage, rude language, and inconsiderate behavior guaranteed to derail the conversation.

The basic premise is that the etiquette expected of your students in online discussions is the same as that which you expect in a classroom. There is a problem, though: the absence of visual and auditory clues. In face-to-face discussions these clues contribute a lot of nonverbal nuances of meaning carrying an intangible amount of weight. It's impossible to replicate these in an online environment.

To counteract that shift, to raise general awareness, and to assist you in enhancing the learning experience of your students, here are a dozen online discussion rules to include in your syllabus. Notice that most of them are just as applicable in face-to-face discussions.

## 12 Ground Rules for Online Discussions

**Participate:** This is a shared learning environment. No lurking in the cyberspace background. It is not enough to login and read the discussion thread of others. For the maximum benefit to all, everyone must contribute.

**Report Glitches:** Discussion forums are electronic. They break. If for any reason you experience difficulty participating, please call, email, or otherwise inform me of the issue. Chances are others are having the same problem.

**Help Others:** You may have more experience with online discussion forums than the person next to you. Give them a hand. Show them it's not so hard. They're really going to appreciate it!

**Be Patient:** Read everything in the discussion thread before replying. This will help you avoid repeating something someone else has already contributed. Acknowledge the points made with which you agree and suggest alternatives for those with which you don't.

**Be Brief:** You want to be clear—and to articulate your point—without being preachy or pompous. Be direct. Stay on point. Don't lose yourself, or your readers, in overly wordy sentences or paragraphs.

**Use Proper Writing Style:** This is a must. Write as if you were writing a term paper. Correct spelling, grammatical construction and sentence structure are expected in every other writing activity associated with scholarship and academic engagement. Online discussions are no different.

**Cite Your Sources:** Another big must! If your contribution to the conversation includes the intellectual property (authored material) of others, e.g., books, newspaper, magazine, or journal articles—online or in print—they must be given proper attribution.

**Emoticons and Texting:** Social networking and text messaging has spawned a body of linguistic shortcuts that are not part of the academic dialogue. Please refrain from :- ) faces and **c u l8r's**.

**Respect Diversity:** It's an ethnically rich and diverse, multi-cultural world in which we live. Use no language that is—or that could be construed to be—offensive toward others. Racists, sexist, and heterosexist comments and jokes are unacceptable, as are derogatory and/or sarcastic comments and jokes directed at religious beliefs, disabilities, and age.

**No YELLING!** Step carefully. Beware the electronic footprint you leave behind. Using bold upper-case letters is bad form, like stomping around and yelling at somebody (**NOT TO MENTION BEING HARD ON THE EYE**).

**No Flaming!** Criticism must be constructive, well-meaning, and well-articulated. Please, no tantrums. Rants directed at any other contributor are simply unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The same goes for profanity. The academic environment expects higher-order language.

**Lastly, Remember: You Can't Un-Ring the Bell.** Language is your only tool in an online environment. Be mindful. How others perceive you will be largely—as always—up to you. Once you've hit the send button, you've rung the bell.

Review your written posts and responses to ensure that you've conveyed exactly what you intended. This is an excellent opportunity to practice your proofreading, revision, and rewriting skills—valuable assets in the professional world for which you are now preparing.

**Hint:** Read your post out loud before hitting the send button. This will tell you a lot about whether your grammar and sentence structure are correct, your tone is appropriate, and your contribution clear or not.

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