E-Communication Guidelines

- Be advised that rules for student conduct apply in the on-line environment. Any use of electronic communication on Tri-C’s network (which includes Web-based courses and Blackboard communication features) for flaming or other kinds of harassment may be treated as a student conduct violation.
- It is the responsibility of each user to stop flaming before it escalates.
- Each user in Tri-C’s electronic environment must be committed to “the exercise of considerateness, reason, and restraint.” This affirms Tri-C’s policy that “each member of the College community … will have the responsibility to assist in the protection of the rights and responsibilities of all and to assist in fostering conditions under which the essential teaching and learning processes of the College may be conducted in order and dignity and with fairness to all” (Cuyahoga Community College Student Handbook, Student Conduct and Academic Honor Code).
- The following materials will help explain the nature of communication in on-line environments and provide suggestions for effective academic discussion. The purpose is not to inhibit responses but to make participants aware of the challenges and responsibilities of academic discussion.

Terminology

1. "Participants" refers to all members of an online community, including instructors, students, and teaching assistants, and anyone else who has access to the online environment.
2. Online communication comes in two forms: real-time and asynchronous. For instance, the discussion forums in Web-based courses at Tri-C are asynchronous, meaning there is a delay in communication between communicators. This delay can be minutes, hours, or perhaps days. This delay can lead to misunderstandings.
3. E-mail is in some ways a special case: it is actually asynchronous, but it can be nearly synchronous depending upon network speed and whether or not the recipient is on the other end to read it. Consequently, it may be regarded (for better or worse) as real-time communication by some participants in some instances.
4. "Flaming" is hostile, inflammatory, belittling, or aggressive communications during e-mail correspondence or by message board (forum, bulletin board) postings. "Flaming" is the equivalent of "getting in someone's face."

The Nature of Electronic Communication

- In a virtual environment, participants must understand that their only representation in the class is via words. Therefore, the statement, "You are your words" needs to be understood and appreciated.
- Written words can be imperfect modes of communication when not supplemented with verbalizations and non-verbal gestures. Therefore, participants must be aware of the importance of formal precision when expressing themselves.
- The popularly celebrated aspects of online communication (including immediacy of communication transfer and a semblance of anonymity for message senders) are the selfsame aspects that lead to difficulties (including immediacy of response without forethought and the fact that anonymity does not allow for an "anything goes" model of communication).
- The rapid transfer abilities of electronic communication may lead participants to expect
immediate replies to their messages. While timely response is important, participants must also recognize that a person sits at the other computer, not a machine.

- Information overload may affect a person's mood, stress, or patience in an electronic environment: some examples include a full e-mail inbox, a long contents page in a discussion forum, or a chat session with several users. Taking breaks may be necessary in such situations. Again, the user is a person, not a machine.

- Electronic communication, even when it isn't anonymous, encourages a "leveling effect" between participants, even if their positions are widely separated. Merely having access to anyone on an e-mail system may cause participants to forget customary distinctions between people (staff vs. supervisor, student vs. instructor, etc.).

- Often, participants will express themselves in a virtual environment in a way that they would not in a face-to-face environment. There needs to be an understanding that this is unacceptable.

- Misunderstandings are common in online environments since misreading is so common a problem. Participants often read only the parts of a message that offend them and ignore the positive or affirming parts of a message. Misreading of message tone is a common problem.

Types of Flaming or Abuses of Electronic Communication

1. Flaming is the most common form of electronic abuse; it may take several forms:
   1. Getting in the other person's face: the equivalent of verbal assault
   2. Getting personal, rather than keeping a discussion dispassionate
   3. Writing intended to provoke or get back at someone
   4. Writing intended to have "the last word"

2. Obsessive messaging is another cause of communication breakdown.
   1. Messages may be considered obsessive if they are sent too frequently, are excessive in number, too long, or digressive.
   2. Obsessive messaging bogs down the recipient's ability to assimilate the information and respond; it may interfere with the recipient's workload, causing waste of time and frustration--thereby possibly provoking hostility.

3. Incoherent, sloppy, or otherwise slop-shod messages can impede communication and damage a writer's image, thus affecting the nature of the response.
   1. In the past, most e-mail programs lacked spell-checking ability. Therefore, the expectations were lowered by most users: spelling errors and other lapses were fine as long as the content of the message was intelligible. These attitudes contributed to an "anything goes" mentality for electronic communication.
   2. These days, most client-side e-mail programs have spell-checking ability; even some Web-based e-mail programs (such as HotMail) have spell-checking available. Moreover, users can always compose in a word processor and copy/paste the text into e-mail.
   3. Having such editing tools available, senders should be considerate of the recipient's time and effort in "de-coding" a message. Particularly if the reply is important, the query should be well-phrased, specific, and concise. Such qualities will promote more useful replies and contribute to effective communication overall.

4. In an academic environment, all should strive to maintain high standards of language usage and communication skills: these qualities promote satisfaction and professionalism; they also model the kind of standards to which all members of the academic environment should aspire.

4. Being vague or over-generalizing, particularly when making a claim that warrants proof
or evidence, may provoke a negative response. Those who make claims or advance an intellectual argument must assume the burden of proof.

5. No response or lack of a timely response from the recipient may provoke the sender. Even if the sender remains calm, communication certainly suffers when participants don't connect in predictable or reasonable ways.

Situations and Suggestions

1. All communication methods fail at some level or in some situations. That fact explains in part why people have developed so many ways to communicate. Thus, participants must be flexible and know when to supplement or re-direct an avenue of communication. In such cases, participants should utilize multiple modes of communication, including telephone and face-to-face contact. If participants choose only to communicate virtually, then difficulties can be intensified.

2. Problems online intensify quickly. It is essential that participants in the online classroom clarify all concerns immediately and not respond until a clarification has been provided.

3. Participants are encouraged not to read “in their own voice” the messages of others. Instead, messages should be read in the voice of the message sender. If that voice is unknown or the tone is in question, it is the participant’s responsibility to make contact with the message sender (either virtually or physically) to clarify the original message’s tone.

4. It is essential that participants maintain standards of decorum, including polite communication and reasonable transmissions of information.

5. If a participant is angry over a message, that person should not send a reply. Or the person might try writing the message, saving it, but not sending it. The person could also try switching to another task / activity and coming back to the problem message after gaining some distance on the subject.

6. All e-mail may be considered part of the public record. If the content of a message is sensitive and the sender would not want it forwarded, read by a superior, or presented during a lawsuit, then the message should not be written.

7. Students are asked to get a copy of the Student Handbook and follow proper procedures in case a problem arises that cannot be solved in a traditional manner.

8. It is essential that participants in a “flaming” situation save all messages to provide a record of the communication.

9. The same standards of interpersonal communication that exist in the physical world exist in the virtual world. Therefore, language used to describe improper communication in the physical world can be used to describe improper communication in the virtual world, within reason and always subject to interpretation. For example, “Shouting” is represented online with text written all IN CAPS, but there are times when quick, aggressive writing is the equivalent of speaking quickly and therefore yelling.

Next: Rules for Online Conduct - Netiquette

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Rules for Online Conduct (netiquette)

You are expected to review the following rules for online conduct and practice proper online behavior.

Email Flames:
Any message or series of messages sent via e-mail to instructors, students, college officials, college staff, and others that meet the legal definition of harassment will be subject to review by the campus Dean of Students. You will be notified by e-mail of the review proceedings.

Discussion and Chat Forums:
Views on the course discussion and chat forums are not censored. However, postings containing foul, obscene or degrading language or material will be removed and a warning will be issued. Repeated incidents will be subject to review by the campus Dean of Students. You will be notified by e-mail of the review proceedings.

Netiquette rule of thumb: Afford to others the same courtesy which you do in an offline environment.

- By participating in the course, I agree to refrain from e-mailing and posting obscene or defamatory material.
- I have read and understand the guidelines of Netiquette and will abide by the rules while communicating on the Internet.
- I understand the consequences of not observing proper netiquette while participating in this course.

On-line Conduct Violation Procedures

Familiarize yourself with the procedures when a rule is violated.

Violations:

E-mail Flames: Any message or series of messages sent via e-mail to instructors, students, college officials, college staff, and others that meet the legal definition of harassment will be subject to review by the campus Dean of Students. A warning will be issued. You will be notified by e-mail of the review proceedings.

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Procedures Upon a Violation of Online Conduct Rules

1. You will receive a warning from your instructor or college official describing your online violation. You must respond to the warning with your acknowledgement of the violation and a statement of future compliance to the rules.
2. If there is a repeat violation, your access to the course will be denied until you meet
with the Dean of Students. You will receive an e-mail notifying you of the violation and the review proceedings.

3. You will be given the option to drop the course or agree to comply with the rules of conduct.

4. You will not be readmitted into the class until the instructor receives a written statement of re-admittance from the Dean of Students.

5. Continued violations and disturbances will result in your dismissal from the course.

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**What is Netiquette?**

**What is Netiquette?** Simply stated, it's network etiquette -- that is, the etiquette of cyberspace. And "etiquette" means "the forms required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be required in social or official life." In other words, Netiquette is a set of rules for behaving properly online.

**Rule 1: Remember the human**

When you're holding a conversation online -- whether it's an e-mail exchange or a response to a discussion group posting -- it's easy to misinterpret your correspondent's meaning. A useful test for anything you're about to post or mail: Ask yourself, "Would I say this to the person's face?" If the answer is no, rewrite and reread.

Also, when you communicate through e-mail or discussion groups your words are written. Chances are they're stored somewhere where you have no control over them. In other words, there's a good chance they can come back to haunt you.

**Rule 2: Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life**

Netiquette mandates that you do your best to act within the laws of society and cyberspace. If you're tempted to do something that's illegal in cyberspace, chances are it's also bad Netiquette. If you use shareware, pay for it.

**Rule 3: Know where you are in cyberspace**

Netiquette varies from domain to domain. What's perfectly acceptable in one area may be dreadfully rude in another. Because Netiquette is different in different places, it is important to know where you are; therefore, lurk before you leap. When you enter a domain of cyberspace that's new to you, take a look around. Spend a while listening to the chat or reading the archives. Get a sense of how the people who are already there act, then go ahead and participate.

**Rule 4: Respect other people's time and bandwith**

When you send e-mail or post to a discussion group, you're taking up other people's time. It's your responsibility to ensure that the time they spend reading your posting isn't wasted. So don't expect instant responses to all your questions, and don't assume that all readers will agree with -- or care about -- your passionate arguments. Many news-reading programs are slow, so just opening a posted note or article can take a while. Then the reader has to wade through all the header information to get to the meat of the message. No one is pleased when it turns out not to be worth the trouble. Before you copy people on your messages, ask yourself whether they really need to know. If the answer is no, don't waste their time. If the answer is maybe, think twice before you hit the send key.

**Rule 5: Make yourself look good online**

You will be judged by the quality of your writing. For most people who choose to communicate online, this is an advantage; if they didn't enjoy using the written word, they wouldn't be there. So spelling and grammar do count; so use a spell checker before sending that email or post. Pay attention to the content of your writing; be sure you know what you're talking about. Be pleasant and polite. Don't use offensive language and don't be confrontational for the sake of
confrontation. Swearing is not acceptable.

Rule 6: Share expert knowledge
The Internet itself was founded and grew because scientists wanted to share information. Gradually, the rest of us got in on the act. So do your part. Don't be afraid to share what you know. Sharing your knowledge is fun. It's a long-time net tradition. And it makes the world a better place.

Rule 7: Help keep flame wars under control
"Flaming" is what people do when they express a strongly held opinion without holding back any emotion. Tact is not its objective. Netiquette forbids the perpetuation of flame wars -- a series of angry letters, most of them from two or three people directed toward each other, that can dominate the tone and destroy the camaraderie of a discussion group. It's unfair to the other members of the group. And while flame wars can initially be amusing, they get boring very quickly to people who aren't involved in them. They're an unfair monopolization of bandwidth.

Rule 8: Respect other people's privacy
Of course, you'd never dream of going through your colleagues' desk drawers. So naturally you wouldn't read their e-mail, copy their assignments or log onto a computer with their identity. Failing to respect other people's privacy is not just bad Netiquette -- it could also cost you your job, your career and your education.

Rule 9: Don't abuse your power
Some people in cyberspace have more power than others. Knowing more than others, or having more power than they do, does not give you the right to take advantage of them. For example, a system administrator should never read private e-mail.

Rule 10: Be forgiving of other people's mistakes
Everyone was a network newbie once. So when someone makes a mistake -- whether it's a spelling error or a spelling flame, a stupid question or an unnecessarily long answer -- be kind about it. If you do decide to inform someone of a mistake, point it out politely, and preferably by private e-mail rather than in public. Give people the benefit of the doubt; assume they just don't know any better. And never be arrogant or self-righteous about it. No notes pointing out Netiquette violations are often examples of poor Netiquette.