

- » Learning some definitions
- » Gauging when etiquette considerations are called for

Chapter **1**

Defining Etiquette in the Digital Age

It's easy enough to define etiquette, isn't it? Just be kind to one another.

That's all, folks — thank for reading!

Of course, you know that's not the whole story or else you wouldn't be reading this book. It's hard enough to know what etiquette is when you're dealing with other people face-to-face. But now communications devices have added many more rules for communicating not only with video cameras, which are ubiquitous on computers and phones, but also in situations where you don't even see the other person (and you may have noticed that makes people seem less considerate, to put it mildly).

Before we can talk about how to apply etiquette to the digital age in which everyone now finds themselves, we need to review some definitions. Once we do that, I'll discuss how you can apply etiquette in different situations, including social, small group, and business environments.

Coming Up with Some Definitions

Let's start with the obvious question: What is digital etiquette, anyway?

You may also have heard digital etiquette referred to by the portmanteau *netiquette* — that scrunching together of the words *Internet* and *etiquette*. No matter which term you've heard, the same definition applies: You should follow these basic rules of behavior whenever you interact with others on the Internet or use electronic devices like smartphones. And by *Internet*, we mean all kinds of online communication, including email, forums, and social networking websites.

Netiquette

Let's start a deeper dive by talking about the term *netiquette*, which may be the most familiar to you. This term predates the modern Internet by quite a few years — 1983, specifically. This was the era when bulletin board systems, or BBSs, were the primary means of communicating online.

The acronym *BBS* doesn't ring a bell, huh? Maybe the national services CompuServe, The Source, and America Online can help you (not so fondly) remember the days when you had to save up for a faster modem — such as 56Kbps or even (gasp!) ISDN.

The two prominent dictionaries have slightly different definitions of *netiquette*, but it's useful to keep both in mind:

- » The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *netiquette* as “the correct or acceptable way of communicating on the Internet.”
- » Merriam-Webster (<http://m-w.com>) defines *netiquette* as “etiquette governing communication on the Internet.”



REMEMBER

Netiquette rules vary, depending on the forum you're in. For example, email rules are different from when you're chatting in a live forum. We go into more detail about those differences later in this chapter.

Etiquette versus online ethics

In trying to wrap your mind around the notion of etiquette, you need to be able to distinguish between *ethics* and *etiquette*. You may have heard both terms used interchangeably when people talk about online behavior. If you think they're the same, lose that thought like you lose the TV remote.

The term *etiquette* is the code, at times unspoken, that indicates the polite way to behave in a society. *Ethics* is a set of moral principles that tells you what's good and what's bad. In a movie, you may have seen a character who you know is a bad guy but who acts politely toward everyone in the film; the perfect manners don't fool you, because you know that the bad guy is still a villain who is naturally immoral.

Some behaviors also fall under the definition of *bad* ethics, which may help explain why people confuse the terms. For example, someone who lies and cheats to get what they want, no matter whether it happens in person or online, displays behavior that belies a deeper problem — we're talking about someone who cannot think ethically.



TIP

If you want to read more about the differences between ethics and etiquette, the Pediaa site has a good overview at <https://pediaa.com/difference-between-ethics-and-etiquette>.

Seeing Which Situations Call for Etiquette

Certain rules of etiquette apply *all* the time, such as sneezing into your arm or elbow. (That's polite behavior no matter whether you're in a pandemic.) Other rules apply to specific situations, such as chatting with others in an online meeting.



REMEMBER

How you behave ethically online can impact your ability to make a living. It's now standard procedure for an employer to examine your social media profiles before deciding whether to accept your application, let alone contact you about an interview. If you want to keep certain information private, change the privacy settings on your profiles to show them only to specific connections, such as people on your friends list.

General rules of etiquette are in effect all the time, and others are specific to each situation. You *must* know the basics of good manners online, and this opening chapter offers the perfect opportunity to give you a 30,000-foot overview of how to apply etiquette online.



WARNING

Before you forge ahead, stop for a moment and remember that what you do can also affect you legally. Have you ever heard anyone say, "What's on the Internet stays on the Internet"? Though it's unclear whether that statement will remain true over time, it is certainly true now. So, with your behavior recorded for others to find, do you doubt that you need online etiquette? (By the way, we delve into the legal issues of online behavior in Chapter 2.)

Social: Chatting with others

Social situations have rules in place that you're probably familiar with, such as not saying things that you know would be hurtful to another person. Without standing physically in front of someone, though, it's easier for us to forget that we're actually talking to a real person, even if they aren't physically present.

So, whenever you're chatting with friends online, take the opportunity to review what you should be doing in social conversations — what passes for good etiquette, in other words. As you read, think about whether and how you're following these rules so that you can train yourself to chat with others more effectively.

Hold a good conversation

Just as in a face-to-face chat, learn how you can hold a back-and-forth dialogue online. If you monopolize a discussion where you're the one saying most everything, don't be surprised if you're called a *troll* — a person who is intentionally harmful to gain attention and/or cause trouble. It won't be long before people start finding ways to avoid you.

Avoid gossip at all costs

It's easy on social media to succumb to the urge to gossip, especially if the person you're gossiping about isn't included in the group of people you're talking with. Don't let yourself believe that private online groups are safe, though, because — just as with in-person gossip — online gossip finds a way to get back to the person you're talking about. Then, like all gossip, it boomerangs on you.

Engage

Social media and other forms of online communication make it easy for you to ignore everything that other people write. After all, no one knows whether you're actually paying attention, right?

If you've posted something, however, you may get some feedback on those posts from your friends and other people who can see your posts. It's good form to respond to people with a personal thank-you message or a clicked Like icon — or both.

Even if you don't want to type anything in response, clicking the Like icon next to the comment lets the commenter know that they've been recognized and that their comment is valuable. And, you may not know it, but you've improved your social standing with as little effort as a click or tap. If you see this person offline, your real-life social standing grows a little, too.

Connect positively

If you find a comment that you want to talk about, don't be afraid to express your opinion by typing your own comment in response. Before you start typing, though, shift into the right mindset and make sure that it's a healthy conversation.

In online discussions, you're likely talking to a real person. So, if you think that the conversation runs the risk of turning into an argument where both you and the other person become angry — and you both look bad to anyone else participating — consider not saying *anything*.



TIP

If you want to connect with others by taking photos of your friends, ask for permission before you tag them in your photos. Facebook, Instagram, and other social network sites allow you to tag photos so that all the friends of your friends can see the photo, too — though your friends may not appreciate it.

Think before you post

There are several good reasons not to post something objectionable or even threatening — including the quite established fact that it can land you in hot water with your friends or even with law enforcement. Have you, or has someone you know, done one of the following?

- » You shared unflattering photos of your friends and then were baffled that they were upset — at least until your friends posted unflattering photos of you and then you started to get the message.
- » You left a comment on a false story without checking with one or more credible sources, like major news organizations and/or fact-checking sites like Snopes that have a database of stories that are shown to be false or true — or a mixture of the two.
- » You posted about doing something illegal because you thought it made you look cool to your friends, but instead you got in trouble with the law. For example, someone contacted law enforcement when they saw that you bragged about drinking, driving home drunk, and arriving home without a scratch — except when you hit a couple of parked cars but managed to drive off with no trouble.
- » You've posted some confidential details that someone later used against you. For example, if you're going through a divorce and you've posted a lot of ugly details, you're shocked that the lawyer for your ex somehow found those details and is using them against you.
- » You had no responses to your complaints that it's too hot in the summer or to your photos showing that you had scrambled eggs for breakfast. That got you to thinking about what others want to see in your social media feeds and you

started making better decisions about what to post — and being more careful has reduced your stress because you feel no pressure to post every little event in your life.



WARNING

When you're impaired in some way, you're more likely to make poor judgments and decisions. That's true even if you're just checking your email and social media. Don't respond to a message if you have a hangover, if you're tired, or even if you've just awakened and you're looking at the content on your smartphone without having that first cup of coffee. The same is true if you're agitated — take some time to think about the situation and shift your mind to a place where it's feeling good and you're ready to respond like an adult. This strategy beats saying something that could damage your reputation or get you into even worse trouble.

Meeting: Behaving appropriately in a small group setting

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated online meetings to the *n*th degree, and suddenly the Zoom video chat app was everywhere — even in our dreams, it seemed. But the pandemic also shined a bright light on the need to behave appropriately in small groups online.

Just like in a face-to-face meeting, online meetings require etiquette. There are things you should do and things you definitely shouldn't do. And, when acting as the leader of an online meeting, you definitely should know these rules because you may have to enforce them. Let's break it down.

Do these things

Here are things you should do in an online meeting:

- » Prepare for the meeting ahead of time by eliminating distractions as much as possible and making sure (if at all possible) that you won't be interrupted.
- » Arrive at the meeting a few minutes early. If you're the meeting host, you should do this anyway. And if you're not, you can wait for the host to enter the meeting while you make any last-minute preparations.
- » If you're the leader of the meeting, introduce everyone in the meeting.
- » Take turns and don't interrupt each other.
- » Speak clearly and expect that you may have to repeat yourself because — even if your microphone works well — other participants may not have decent speakers.

- » Be yourself and remember not to focus on the box showing your face in the app window. Focus on others and engage.
- » If you can, look into your camera when you're talking. That helps others realize that you're looking at them. (It's harder to do when the webcam sits on top of a large monitor.) Don't be afraid to look away from the camera from time to time in order to look at the person you're speaking to on the screen, because that's a natural behavior.
- » Many video meeting apps have text chat so that you can type with the entire group or with a particular user. If you need to use text chat to communicate, be sure to tell everyone (or at least the leader) about it before you begin. And, if you chat privately with someone, use it sparingly so as not to distract yourself and others.
- » Dress for the occasion. If you're chatting with friends, dress how you would if you were meeting them in person. And, if you're in a business meeting, dress as you would for an in-person meeting.
- » If you're the leader of the group and the one responsible for closing the meeting, you need to be the one who closes the meeting with any reminders and by thanking everyone, perhaps individually, for attending the meeting.



REMEMBER

Dress well from head to toe for your meeting. If you have to take a bathroom break or tend to someone, such as a child or pet who wanders into your space, you have to stand up — and then participants can see what you're wearing. If you've been sitting there in your underwear, how do you think people will react? (Your eyes probably grew wider just thinking about that scenario.)

Don't do these things

Do *not* do any of these things in an online meeting:

- » **Raise your voice:** Even if you think doing so will help someone with a bad speaker hear you, no one else with good speakers wants to hear it. You or the person leading the group will have to work with the person to fix the problem — probably offline.
- » **Talk over the speakers:** If you do, expect your audio to be muted because Zoom and many other online video chat apps have that capability. Some speakers will just turn off everyone's audio unless someone raises their hand in the app.
- » **Engage in side conversations:** We talk elsewhere in this book about not having too many side conversations in the chat window, not only because it's distracting but also because people will notice that you're not paying attention to the speaker or to anyone else.

- » **Turn off your camera:** Sure, it's physically possible to turn it off if you want to carry on a side conversation, but that doesn't mean you should do it. When someone in a meeting turns off their camera, what's the first thought that pops into your head? You immediately think that person is checking out, right? If you need to turn off the camera and microphone to do something important, like go to the bathroom, let the leader of the group know as soon as possible. If you want to go grab a snack, well, you should have thought of that before the meeting began.
- » **Snack:** Speaking of snacks, it's a good idea to eat before or after the meeting so that people don't have to watch (or even hear) you. We talk about this topic in more detail later in this chapter.
- » **Multitask:** Look at the camera or the screen. If you need to check something in the meeting such as a spreadsheet to confirm some data, you can do that, but don't look on your phone when someone else is talking or you think you can just listen in. Other people can see you and they will notice. That can cost you down the road — and maybe not that far down, either.



WARNING

Don't meet while driving. That should be self-evident, but too many people do it — maybe even you.

Corporate: Behaving professionally in the workplace

Okay, you say, all this information about what you should do and what you shouldn't do is helpful stuff. But when you're in the virtual workplace, it seems that those behaviors aren't enough.

And you're right!

Now that your dopamine levels are coming back down to normal, you may naturally wonder what other professional behaviors you may want to use both in online meetings and in written text like online chats and email.

Send a virtual handshake

When you're in an online meeting, be sure to greet everyone in the meeting and tell them that you're happy to see them. If someone connects with your website by using a form that asks your company for information, send a personalized thank-you message from the appropriate person. The owner or CEO qualifies, don't you think?



TIP

If you have no form, consider adding a *chatbot* (a program that simulates and processes human conversation, in other words) to your website so that people can ask basic questions and the chatbot's artificial intelligence, or AI, can provide friendly answers. Plenty of chatbots are available, and you may have heard of some of them, like Netomi (www.netomi.com) and Zendesk (www.zendesk.com).

Put a face to your name

You need to put a face to your name so that people can know that you're a real person. They will not only be more inclined to do business with you but will also know that your business is real.



REMEMBER

Be sure to add a face to your name on social media, too — especially on business social media sites like LinkedIn.

Know your (time) zone

When you make appointments with your business contacts online, be aware of the time zone of the other person. When you're going to meet online with someone in a different part of the world, you need to check with that person and make sure that the agreed-on time works for them. (4 P.M. in the wintertime in New York City is not 4 P.M. in London; it's 9 P.M., and you don't want to be calling then.) Though a good time for you may be the early morning hours, that may be night-time for someone else, so be sure that the other person is a night owl.

This is true even if you're in the same country. If you're in California, which is in the Pacific time zone, and you want to meet with someone in the Eastern time zone (three hours ahead of you), be sure to set a time so that both of you are in the office and not at home, in traffic, or at lunch.



REMEMBER

The same reminder about time zones applies for email messages. If you're expecting a response right away from someone halfway around the world, you may be frustrated until you realize that you sent the message when the other person was fast asleep.

Connect during business hours

To follow up on our suggestions about time zones, be sure to stick to business hours. This has become such an issue in the workplace that Portugal established a law forbidding bosses from contacting employees outside working hours: www.cnn.com/2021/11/15/portugal-bans-bosses-from-contacting-employees-outside-working-hours.html.

Yet there may be times when you need to contact someone outside of working hours because of a genuine emergency. As always, think of these scenarios ahead of time and work with your team to set the ground rules for communicating while you're at home.



TIP

Even if you're not working with a team, speak ahead of time to the person you plan to talk with so that you both can understand when you're going to contact them online by way of either Zoom, web chat, or email.

In sum, set expectations ahead of time. No one likes to have their off time interrupted and have to delay telling their kids bedtime stories because your boss or one of your team members thinks it's okay.

Don't just write — proofread

Online communication is primarily a written medium, and though you may meet using Zoom or another online video app from time to time, you don't want to do that all the time. In a corporate environment, you'll likely chat with each other via text in a collaboration app like Slack or, for better or worse, email messages.

With email, you have the benefit of not having anyone else read your message until you're ready to send it. (We won't visit the horror of accidentally pressing the Reply All icon.) The bad news is that many people — and you may be one of them — believe that they're better writers than they are. So they think they can just bang out a message and send it.

You don't have the benefit of having an editor with you, the way we do with this book, but you do have the ability to take a break, focus on another task for a little while, and then reread your message. We think (heck, we *know*) that you'll be shocked by what you find as you proofread.

Don't be surprised if you delete a lot of unnecessary words and maybe replace some of them with new ones that sound better. And you may be surprised to find that you may not want to send the message, after all — you may want instead to think about what you *really* want to say and then write a different version later. You're allowed to do that, you know.



TIP

Well, what about writing in a live chat or texting? Here's our simple advice: Keep everything short and sweet, but not so short that people may have trouble understanding you — that is, don't write acronyms and abbreviations in place of every other word!

TMI

If you grew up during the 1990s and beyond, you know what the acronym *TMI* means: too much information. Yet a lot of advice floats around the web saying that you have to be authentic because that's what people like — especially younger people.

What's the balance? Here, too, we have some simple advice. Just ask yourself one question: Does what I'm about to explain about myself further the conversation and help make my point to my co-workers and/or customers?

If you talk about how you grew frustrated by your computer's slow speed and so you developed a design for your app that solved the problem, that's a great way to make a connection. But if you talk about how terrible your life is with no purpose to it, it comes across as unprofessional and can cost you customers, your job, and maybe your business.

Business: Conducting yourself properly among colleagues

Tips about proofreading, conducting meetings, and refraining from telling your life story are all well and good, you might say, but how about day-to-day conduct? We're glad you asked, because we have four ideas for dealing with that subject. Read on.

See how other people use online communication tools

If you're using online communication tools, you have to follow some rules of the road. For example, on a social media platform, you shouldn't engage in behavior that another person finds harassing, because it will be reported to the platform's help staff and you might find yourself banned.

You should familiarize yourself with these rules, but you may want additional guidance and motivation. Try these three strategies:

» **Look at how others communicate before you start communicating yourself, if you can.** For example, see how different people communicate in a Slack chat before you chime in so that you can get a feel for the environment and how the discussion is going. If the discussion is more formal, use more formal language. If it's more easygoing, you can switch up your communication accordingly.

- » **Look on the web to understand how other people communicated effectively in Zoom meetings or email messages or whatever other medium you're interested in.** If you're a fan of Tom Hanks, let's say, you'll have no trouble finding examples of how he communicated on the web. The same goes for how to find examples of businesspeople who communicate effectively with their customers.
- » **Talk to peers.** These people may be other business owners. They may be coworkers. They may even be managers. Whoever they are, talk with them one-on-one to find out how they connect with others in different situations.

Consider your audience

The “feel” of a conversation between you and someone else, or between a group of people, is something you should pay attention to before you engage. But there's no substitute for actually thinking ahead about the audience who will be in the discussion with you.

When you're in a professional situation, you may be speaking with a customer, with your boss, or with different coworkers online (or with *all* of them). That knowledge should give you an idea of how you should communicate from the get-go. For example, if you're with a customer, you'll be as helpful as you can be and answer every question, no matter how boring you think it is.

In a situation where you're meeting with the CEO of your company, it's a good bet that your communication should be formal and professional. If you're in a Zoom meeting, that can also mean formal business dress.



WARNING

There's no reason to talk badly about someone or a group of people in any environment, online or not. If you happen to be male and think that being online with a group of coworkers who are all men gives you the freedom to denigrate women, you may be updating your résumé sooner than you ever expected.

Remain neutral

The first popular television police show was *Dragnet*, and the protagonist, Sergeant Joe Friday, had the slogan “Just the facts, ma'am” when interviewing witnesses. (Don't believe us? Search for the term *Dragnet* on Facebook. Think we're old? No comment.)

When you're talking online in a professional setting, stick to the facts and be as clear as possible. Don't make any jokes or try to start an argument. No one can read someone's tone or facial expressions, though emojis online do help with that

task and provide some context. Yet without other nonverbal cues, like body language, people translate messages in their own way. Some of that translation comes from how they're feeling.

You've likely encountered the end result: The other person misinterprets or becomes angry about what you said, and suddenly you're defending yourself against accusations that have come out of proverbial left field. And, of course, you *never* start sniping back, right?

Switch when you have to

You may need to switch your communication method when you find that you can't get your point across in the current medium. For example, you've probably had a long email conversation with quotes from previous messages stretching endlessly in the email window. Or maybe a conversation has devolved into an argument because neither of you understands what the other is saying. In that case, it's time to set up either a phone conversation or an online chat via an app so that you can talk with each other in person.



TIP

An online chat app may be the best way to gain some clarity because you both can see each other's faces (as well as some helpful nonverbal cues) on your webcams. These cues can help both of you understand what the other is feeling and help you create a solution.

Eating: Shielding meeting participants from your eating habits

Do you like to hear other people gobbling their food during an online meeting? (Hearing yourself eat may be bad enough.) Then consider that other people on your Microsoft Teams call may not like hearing your slurps and smacks.

Even if you turn off your microphone, they have to watch you, and we'll bet you dollars to (ahem) doughnuts that you dislike watching other people eat as much as they dislike watching you. And if you're eating and a bunch of lettuce falls out of your burger, that means you have to leave the meeting and clean up. Not very professional, don't you think?

So, if you're setting up an online meeting with Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or a similar app and everyone can see each other on their webcams, set expectations about food or drink ahead of time. Don't assume (and we know the saying about the word *assume*) that everyone will adhere to the rules. Make it clear that there will be no eating of snacks, doughnuts, or any other meal during the meeting.



Should you ban drinks during online meetings, too? That's harder to do because, in an in-person meeting, people usually bring drinks so that they avoid feeling parched, and they will push back against any directive not to have drinks. You still run the same risk of having drinks in a virtual meeting as in an in-person meeting, so be consistent — if you allow beverages in an in-person meeting, allow them in your virtual meeting, too.

Telephone: Paying attention to the conversation and your behavior

You remember the telephone, don't you? You still use it on your smartphone to *speak* with people. Many companies still rely on voice calls to interact with their customers, and even people in office settings have phones with receivers you pick up.

When you talk on the phone, you need to be aware of not only the conversation but also your behavior. This section details what we mean.

Follow this general guidance

In any call, here are some good rules to follow:

- » Answer the call within three rings.
- » If you can't answer the call within three rings, it means you're busy and letting the call go to your voicemail so that you can refer to it later.
- » Speaking of voicemail, record your greeting in your own voice that's reasonably cheerful. Be sure to tell people that you can't pick up the phone right now and ask them for any information you need, such as their name, a brief description, and/or their phone number.
- » Check your voicemail when you can, perhaps on a schedule. For example, you may want to check it once in the morning and once in the afternoon.
- » Use your speakerphone only when it's absolutely necessary — and only if you're in a quiet place.
- » When you call someone to talk, tell them the purpose of the call. If the other person doesn't agree with the purpose, you need to come to an agreement before you can start the call.
- » Speak clearly. This advice should be obvious, but it's easy to become lazy and start talking like you're in the same room with the other person — at least until they jolt you back to reality when they loudly ask, "*What?*"

- » Use proper language. This advice should also be self-evident, but you need to pay attention to it before you start using language you would use only with your friends and not in a professional setting.
- » Actively listen and take notes. By *actively listen*, we mean that you may want to repeat what someone says to ensure that you understand them. And you can type as you talk to make sure you're taking notes, though that's harder to do with a speakerphone than a headset, because the speakerphone may be close to your keyboard.

Help your customers

For customer service calls, we have more tips to share with you:

- » Immediately introduce yourself when you pick up the call. Also ask who you're speaking with.
- » Be friendly, but if you can't do that, at least be neutral — unless you want to rile your customer enough that they decide to complain and your life becomes more difficult than it already is.
- » Listen to your volume level. If you're starting to talk more loudly because the environment around you is growing louder, your customer may start to complain that you're yelling at them. So you may need to move the call to another location.
- » Before you move your call to another location, ask the other person for permission to put them on hold or to transfer a call. The reason might be the noise of your environment or the need to find more information to be able to give the customer the right answer (or to forward them to the person who has it).



REMEMBER

You may find people who have problems speaking on the phone. Maybe they detest talking by phone or they have medical issues that prevent them from talking or listening for any length of time (if at all). There may be times when you *have* to speak by phone, but in that case, respect the other person by being brief — and perhaps by sending any follow-up questions by email or text message. Or, if a person doesn't want to chat with you using a webcam on Zoom or another online chat app, many of those apps have live text chats so that you can still speak without video. Being flexible can help you gain brownie points with both customers and coworkers.

