Netiquette – Communicating your expectations for online participation

Mary Jacob, Lecturer in Learning and Teaching, LTEU, Aberystwyth University

The term ‘Netiquette’ means etiquette for interacting on the internet. In the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, staff often ask us about appropriate guidelines for students when interacting online.

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all' approach to netiquette. Because different teaching scenarios require different guidelines, you will need to decide on the most appropriate rules for your own students. We’ve written this document to help you make those decisions when teaching synchronously (e.g. via Teams) and asynchronously (e.g. discussion boards), using verbal and/or written interactions.

If you can make your expectations clear to your students, it will give them confidence and reduce potential issues. Here are our key tips:

* **Tip 1: Make your expectations clear from the start and reinforce as needed.** What seems obvious to us may not be obvious to our students. Telling them what we expect helps students behave appropriately and learn better.
* **Tip 2: Don’t change the rules mid-stream.** Changing the rules after the module has begun could be confusing. Anticipating potential issues in advance can help us to avoid them.
* **Tip 3: Be fair and inclusive.** The assumptions we make may not address all of the challenges our students face. Considering their diverse backgrounds and needs helps us include everyone.
* **Tip 4:** **Model good online behaviour**. We serve as a powerful role model when we put into practice the same things we want our students to do.

# Common netiquette principles

Some principles are common across all scenarios, such as treating each other with respect. [**Netiquette: good online behaviour at UCL**](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/education-planning-2020-21/online-teaching-guidance-tips-and-platforms/netiquette-good-online) explores this topic thoroughly, providing guidance for both staff and students with examples you can adapt. Online Study Australia’s [**14 Great Tips for Student Netiquette**](https://onlinestudyaustralia.com/netiquette-rules-guidelines-students/) has a useful 10-minute video aimed at students.

I’ve drafted the wording below based on common themes in the literature on netiquette. You are welcome to use it as a starting point and adapt it when writing guidelines for your own students:

1. **Treat others with respect**. We want our online sessions to be a safe and respectful place for everyone. Consider both your tone and your words when making online contributions.
2. **Communicate clearly**. Online communication can be easily misunderstood. Make sure that you have understood others correctly before you respond, and that your own words are clear enough so that others won’t take them the wrong way.
3. **Acknowledge others’ contributions**. We hope to build a learning community in which we validate each other’s contributions and build on them constructively. When interacting online, you can contribute by explicitly thanking others, expressing agreement, etc.
4. **Ask permission**. If you wish to use or quote something that another person has said, ask permission first and credit the source just as you would with books or articles.

# Scenario-specific netiquette decisions

Some aspects of netiquette will vary, depending on your teaching scenario. What potential issues might you and your students face? Making these decisions in advance will help avoid future problems.

| **Decision** | **Reasons to choose NO** | **Reasons to choose YES** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Require students to raise hands before speaking? | **No** – In smaller groups, not requiring them to raise hands can help create an informal, open atmosphere. | **Yes –** Keeps the conversation orderly, especially in larger groups. Helps avoid situations where a few students over-dominate the conversation. |
| **Require** students to turn on their webcams?  | **No –** Students may have valid reasons for keeping their webcams turned off. For example, they may feel more comfortable contributing with webcams off if they are on the autistic spectrum, experience anxiety, or have other disabilities. They may simply not want to show their learning environment. Turning off their webcam can help students who have limited bandwidth.  | **Yes –** As the teacher, you can read their body language more easily. You can see clues to how engaged they are. It can help students to connect with peers more easily.  |
| **Explicitly encourage (but not require)** students to turn on their webcams? | **N/A** – There is no good reason not to encourage them, as long as it isn’t a requirement.  | **Yes** – More students are likely to turn on their webcams if you explicitly encourage it. Not making it a requirement gives them agency and allows them to choose without having to explain their reasons.  |
| Encourage students to use the chat during live sessions? | **No** – Depending on the group size and dynamic, this can result in a parallel conversation that distracts students from the main discussion. If they are too busy in the chat, they may miss key points that are discussed verbally. | **Yes** – Helps quieter students to contribute more. Allows second-language students and dyslexic students to compose responses without time pressure. Can help students who have limited bandwidth.**Useful strategies:** Make clear how you expect them to use the chat. Acknowledge the chat comments verbally in the main discussion. This validates their contributions, builds confidence, and integrates the chat with the verbal discussion.  |
| Record the live session? | **No** – Recording a discussion-based session can create anxiety and inhibit students from participating. Depending on the content, it could be inappropriate to record students’ verbal contributions. Some students may rely on watching the recording instead of attending and thus engage less. | **Not recommended –** We don’t recommend recording discussion-based sessions. See **Guidance on recording seminars and Teams activities**  and **Safeguarding and Remote Delivery** on the LTEU [**Supporting your Teaching**](https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/is/it-services/elearning/continuity/) page.  |
| Require formal academic language in written contributions? | **No** – If you allow things such as informal language, use of emojis, and high tolerance for typos and minor language errors, it can create a positive informal environment and help build group cohesion and a sense of belonging. | **Yes –** Gives you the opportunity to provide formative feedback on non-assessed work to help students improve performance in the summative assessment. Can help students develop good habits in academic writing.**When deciding, consider:** Which is more important for your specific activity – correct formal language use or students’ engagement with the ideas and content? |