

Guidelines on the Use of Email, Web Pages and Discussion Forums

Information Technology Services provided to employees and students in the Faculty of Engineering are to be used in a manner that is consistent with the mission and standards of the Faculty and the University. Hence, while maintaining respect for the core values of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research, the Faculty expects its members to use Information Technology Services, electronic communication in particular, in a professional manner respectful of others. The Faculty does not seek to censor or monitor electronic information, but it will act on allegations about the distribution of unlawful material, about the use of its information technology to direct abusive, threatening or harassing communication at any individual or about any other inappropriate use.

Email

Email can be a very effective communications tool but the sheer volume that most users now face can be problematic. The following guidelines refer particularly to communications regarding University business amongst members of the Faculty of Engineering: students, staff, faculty and staff.

Identify yourself clearly: It is important to identify yourself clearly when sending a message. It is, for example, particularly helpful for a student to include his or her full name and permanent ID when communicating with a University employee to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding, and in the event the employee needs to access the student's file. It is also a good idea to include a telephone number in your message so the recipient can contact you by phone if he or she decides a conversation would be a more effective way to deal with the issue.

Write a meaningful subject line: Always use a subject line. People get lots of email and it is very helpful if the subject line conveys the nature of the message. For example, a message related to a particular course should include the course number. If there is a truly critical deadline for a response, put that in the subject line or at least at the very top of the message.

Keep the message focused: It is helpful if the intent of the message is conveyed in the first couple of sentences. It is generally better for each message to focus on a single issue. If it is appropriate or necessary to cover several issues in a single message, say so up front. Often a long message is not read carefully and important issues, questions or requested actions can be missed if they are buried in a long stream of text. Most important, it is very useful if you give the recipient a clear indication of what action (if any) you are requesting as a result of your email.

Distinguish between formal and informal situations, and proofread: It is common to dash off quick messages using abbreviations, slang, careless grammar and spelling, and short-cuts when writing to someone on personal matters. It usually gets your message across. But, you should not use informal language when your reader expects a more formal approach and when the email is more than a transient exchange. Email communications on University business should adopt a professional tone and care must be taken to avoid confusion or misunderstandings, and to ensure the message accurately conveys your intent. Assess the situation, and write accordingly. Proofread your message before you push send.

Don't use email when another form of communication is more appropriate: Some messages and discussions just don't work well over email. If you are using email to avoid a face-to-face discussion, you probably shouldn't.

The University, the Faculty and the Departments have forms for various student requests and issues such as academic concessions, deferred exam requests, course add and drops, modified program requests, etc. Students should determine if a written form is appropriate to their situation before sending an email request. The forms are generally available at the BEng, BSEng and Department offices and those offices can provide advice on the most appropriate way to address an issue.

Don't assume privacy and use respect and restraint: Email is obviously not private. It can be printed and forwarded beyond your control. Don't send anything you would not say to the person in conversation and that you would not want to see posted in public with your name attached.

Don't send flame emails. They are potentially very hurtful, are usually regretted after the fact, and don't convey a very thoughtful and considered approach to an issue. A recipient can form a lasting impression of you from a flame.

Blind copies: Use blind copies "BCC" only when you have a good reason such as sending a notice to a group where it would not be appropriate to disclose the email addresses to the group, e.g. a conference announcement or a notice to a group of students. It is generally considered inappropriate to send a message to an individual, or individuals, and to blind copy others. It is not really fair to the main recipient(s).

Attachments: Avoid large attachments whenever possible. If they are used, a message may be too large to download in a reasonable time if the mail is being read from outside UVic and the message may cause the recipient's mailbox to exceed its quota. It is much more user-friendly to put the file on-line in a place accessible via a webpage and provide the URL of the file in the e-mail message, or when suitable, to use a file sharing mechanism such as SharePoint. Also, consider the file format when sending an attachment. PDF should be used to distribute informational documents rather than sending Word files, whereas the latter may be appropriate if you are asking the recipient to review and possibly modify a document.

Reply when necessary but not unnecessarily: It is important to gauge when an email needs a response and to be sure you are responding to those you intend. For example, before you use "reply all" consider whether everyone who received the original message needs to receive your response. Send copies to people when they need to be informed and not just as routine.

Patience is a virtue: These days most people receive a tremendous number of emails on a daily basis. If you do not get a reply in a reasonable time, and that does not mean instantly, contact the person politely to seek a response. A flame or a curt message in this situation is unlikely to encourage the person to place you forward in the queue.

Web Pages

Web pages hosted on Departmental, Faculty or University IT resources are subject to applicable policies and should be primarily related to University activity. For example, it is common, and fully acceptable, to include personal information on an individual's web site but that, or activity external to the University, should not be the primary focus of the site. In particular, web pages hosted on Departmental, Faculty or University IT resources are not to be used for commercial purposes or non-University related projects.

Web pages hosted on Departmental, Faculty or University IT resources are by definition associated with the University and should therefore reflect its standards and mission. Images and language that would be reasonably expected to be offensive to the general public are thus not acceptable unless it is justified on bona fide academic grounds which is unlikely in the Faculty of Engineering.

It is recognized that while IT resources are provided primarily for academic and administrative activity, a limited amount of personal web searching will occur. Regardless, it is incumbent on all users that any web sites accessed should not be offensive to a secondary viewer.

The web is an immense and fruitful source of information. It is critical to academic integrity that information taken from the web be properly attributed when it is used and particularly in written reports. Guidelines on citing on-line material can be found at <http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/citnet.html> included in the UVic Hypertext Writer's Guide, <http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/>.

On-line Discussion Forums

On-line discussion forums are an increasingly popular medium for promoting discussion and interaction both in courses and other circumstances related to University activities. Their use is definitely encouraged. A forum can be either moderated or unmoderated. If it is moderated, then no posting should be allowed to be accessible until it has been checked for acceptability according to UVic policies and guidelines. If the forum is unmoderated, then only postings from users with UVic computing ids should be permitted and there must be a mechanism whereby the owner of the forum can determine who made a posting. All forums should be regularly checked by their owners to ensure they contain only postings that are acceptable according to UVic rules. Inappropriate postings should be removed and the poster should be advised of the reason.