Communicating online

1. Introduction

It's easy to feel isolated and lonely when you're studying. Social media, forums, email can go some way to helping us stay in touch. Whether you want to share some news, discuss an idea, or brighten someone's day with a nice picture, these networks are a quick way to share information.

Learning outcome

This activity will help you to understand the basics of good online communication.

2. Making the most of a message

When we meet our friends face-to-face, their expression and tone of voice can indicate if they're feeling happy, downhearted, annoyed, confused, frustrated...

While emoticons and emojis provide some clues in online conversation, we can sometimes misinterpret someone's mood in a message. Particularly if the writer prepared it in a hurry without thinking about how it might read to someone else.

So what makes for a successful online conversation?

3. Some good practice tips

Here are a few tips to help you to prepare and respond to messages:

Remember the reader

Try to be concise. Short sentences can help to make information easier to read on a screen. If you're preparing a long message, arrange it in short, manageable paragraphs. A summary will help to highlight key points.

Keep calm and consider your response

Try not to immediately respond to a message that upsets or annoys you. A hasty, ill-considered reply can turn a mistake or misunderstanding into an argument.

Do not shout

A message will appear rude and aggressive if you type in capital letters and use lots of exclamation marks to emphasize words and sentences. Treat people as you'd like them to treat you.

Indicate your mood

Humour, irony and sarcasm isn't always obvious, even in face-to-face conversation. Emoticons or emojis can help to indicate your mood and clarify meaning in more informal messages.

Constructive criticism

Not everyone will share your point of view. Try to be tolerant of ideas, opinions, methods you do not agree with. Considerate and constructive criticism will help you to get the most from academic debate.

Ask for clarification

Don't be afraid to ask for clarification, guidance or help if a message is unclear or appears to be incomplete. For example, a writer might use unfamiliar acronyms and jargon. Or, they might assume their readers are already familiar with a topic, debate or event, and omit a key piece of information.

4. Summary

Guidance for good online communication is called 'netiquette'. The context of your message will help you to decide how to write it.

Ask yourself:
- **Who** you are contacting? Is it a formal or informal message?
- **What** do you want to say? Are you asking a question? Expressing a point-of-view? Or communicating an initiative, guidance, encouragement or criticism?
- **How** do you want to present your message?

For example, a message to an organisation or colleague in your workplace is likely to be more formal than anything you might share with a friend. Whether you're presenting an idea, requesting information, challenging data, or making a complaint, you're more likely to receive a response if your writing is clear, readable, and courteous.

Please remember:
- To treat others as you'd want them to treat you
- That a message can increase isolation and anxiety if it appears to be unkind, unclear or incomplete.

Next steps

If you're an Open University student and have not yet actively participated in an online forum, do have a go at taking part.