6.1 New forms of communication—new writing styles

Electronic mail (e-mail) is a new form of writing that has appeared in the last twenty years. E-mail has become the preferred form for communications for many of us who would previously have used written memorandums or the telephone. A new form of informal publication, newsgroups, is closely related. We will be using e-mail and the newsgroup ucsd.class.cmpe185 extensively this quarter.

Because it offers easier response and quicker interchanges than traditional hardcopy mail, e-mail tends to be less formal and more spontaneous. Items that are not important enough to justify writing a letter can be quickly sent with e-mail, and quick answers are also possible.

Electronic mail has the advantage over the telephone of not requiring both participants to be available at the same time. Also, with e-mail it is possible to edit one’s replies and present them in a coherent fashion, not getting talked into things simply because one can’t marshal one’s words fast enough.

Because electronic mail is a new medium, there is no consensus on the correct writing style for it. Some people view it as essentially identical to hardcopy mail—only appropriate for fairly formal, well-thought out communications. Others see it as equivalent to chatting in the hall—a quick way to communicate something informally, without the formality imposed by more traditional writing. Still others go even farther, being more blunt than they would be in person, on the phone, or in more formal writing.

Because you will be spending much of your careers reading and responding to e-mail, you should spend some time thinking about which ways of using it are appropriate and which are inappropriate.

6.2 Flaming

One common occurrence in e-mail and newsgroup discussions is flaming—verbal attacks on a person who makes an argument you disagree with. It is very easy to get angry at someone who makes a statement that is stupid or hateful, and that anger often causes people to write rude replies. These attacks are generally counterproductive—they antagonize the person they are directed at and often irritate others who are participating in the same discussion.

When you read a statement you disagree with strongly, feel free to write a reply, but don’t send it immediately. Give yourself a day to cool down, then re-read your reply. You might find that it is rude and unpleasant to read. Re-write it, removing snide comments and ad hominem attacks, adding coherent arguments that bolster your side of the matter. Try to concentrate on what the person wrote, and not on the person. Also decide whether the reply needs to be posted so that everyone can see it, or whether it should be sent privately to the recipient.

Another useful thing to do when editing an e-mail or news posting is to try to cut it in half. Long rambling messages generally get skipped or read very hastily, while messages that are short and to the point get remembered. Don’t forget your paragraph breaks—you can get away with much longer messages if they look well-organized.

Don’t go so far in trimming your writing that your message is incomprehensible out of context. When replying to someone else’s message, remember that the person you are mailing to may not have a copy of the original message. Don’t quote long messages either—just pull out the salient parts that need to be quoted to establish context.
One of the joys of e-mail and newsgroup discussions is that you don’t have to respond immediately—you can
take the time to think up the arguments and examples that make your case stronger. A discussion that would last
minutes face-to-face may take days electronically, but the issues are likely to have been examined more thoroughly,
and there is a better chance of persuading someone to a rational conclusion.

6.3 Humor

Humor, particularly irony, is extremely difficult to convey in writing. In fact, humorous writing is one of the most
difficult kinds of writing—good humor writers are even rarer than good stand-up comedians.

If you make jokes on a newsgroup, or in widely distributed e-mail, nearly always someone reading your joke takes
it seriously, and starts trying to correct you. There are several ways to avoid this problem:

• Never make jokes. This works, but can be boring. Often a humorous way of presenting an argument is more
  memorable, and has more lasting effect than a carefully reasoned one.

• Make all your jokes innocuous. Try not to insult anyone when you make a joke—if no one is offended, then it
  might not matter much if someone interprets your joke as a serious statement.

• Be careful that you don’t joke about anything serious. (Anybody remember Reagan’s gaffe, when he jokingly
  threatened to start bombing Moscow on a microphone that he didn’t realize was live?)

• If you do make a joke, direct it at what has been said, not the person who said it. This means that clever
  puns and wordplay are better than simple abuse of another writer. Wit is also more difficult than insults and
  therefore funnier. Directing an insult at yourself is not sufficient—in many cases you will be inadvertently
  insulting others as well.

• Mark all your humor explicitly. One common punctuation device that has been adopted by many e-mail users
  is the smiley face. You make it with three keystrokes “:-)” and put it at the end of any sentence or phrase that
  you do not want people to take seriously. Some people have gone overboard, and proposed dozens of different
  variants on the smiley face for different purposes—so far, none of the others has become as widespread. The
  smiley face may seem stupid (and it is never used in normal writing), but it has become such a standard
  convention for e-mail and newsgroups that many readers assume that any statement not marked with a smiley
  is intended seriously.

6.4 Assignment—newsgroup discussion

We have set up an electronic conference in the form of a UNIX newsgroup local to the campus (ucsc.class.cmpe185).
The newsgroup can be read with nn ucsc.class.cmpe185 (or xrn on an X-windows display). Please read the manual
pages (man nn) for more information. Other newsreaders (rn, trn, and so on) also exist, and you may read the news
with whichever you prefer.

We got the idea for the quarter-long conference from some instructors at Michigan Tech [CS90]. They thought it
worked well enough to be worth a 23-page journal article.

Good e-mail and newsgroup style requires practice, preferably in an environment where it won’t matter much
if you make mistakes. A major purpose of this conference is to provide that environment. We will not be grading
your writing in the newsgroup! Feel free to be yourself, and don’t worry too much about what we’ll think of your
newsgroup writing.

Another purpose of the newsgroup conference is to have the discussions that are difficult to have face-to-face in a
large classroom. As teachers, we are well aware that there are a lot of things not mentioned in class. Even when we
stress that we don’t mind students having different opinions, and would enjoy having a good discussion, there are
still many good reasons why students don’t argue.

Using one’s authority as a teacher to get students to disagree is a challenge that verges on the paradoxical. We
will be reading the newsgroup and participating in the discussions, but as colleagues, not as teachers. Unless remarks
are directed specifically at us (like requests for clarifications of assignments), we’ll try to keep quiet and listen, so
that the newsgroup discussion is truly a student discussion. If the discussions get really interesting, we may not be
able to refrain from tossing in our opinions as well.
In a newsgroup discussion, you get a chance to see what several people have said, think carefully about their arguments, and then present your own ideas without fear of interruption. This means that even those students who rarely get a chance to speak in class will be able to participate fully.

Anything we talk about in class is fair game for the conference. If you disagree with something we say, or don’t get a chance to make a coherent argument in class, bring it up at the conference! This is also a good forum for complaints about the readings, the assignments, the tutors, the instructors, or anything else related to the class. Cooper and Selfe compare this sort of communication to the whispered remarks between audience members at conference presentations and lectures [CS90, p. 848]. A better comparison might be to the conversations that occur in the coffee breaks between the presentations—the criticisms may be just as harsh, but are often more politely phrased, and more fully supported.

It is perfectly acceptable to use the newsgroup for requests (like asking for someone to read and comment on a draft, or trying to find out who borrowed one of the reserve materials), but personal messages should be sent by e-mail, not to the whole class.

The topic of discussion will vary from time to time, and we may inject new topics when it looks like the class hasn’t had anything to talk about for awhile. For example, we never seem to have enough time to talk about practical ethics—what to do when a supervisor asks you to do something sleazy or illegal, how to avoid situations where you’ll be asked to compromise your principles, and so forth. We may, for example, quote one of the ethics problems presented in IEEE Spectrum, or one that has come up for a former student, and ask your opinions about how to handle it.

Everyone in the class is expected to participate in the conference on a regular basis. Even if you have just been listening in, and don’t have much to say, you should post a line or two to let us know you are there. This is not an onerous task—we’re looking for short (one- or two-paragraph) messages that make it clear that you have been reading and thinking about the topics under discussion. The goal is to learn to argue persuasively in the electronic mail and newsgroup format.

E-mail does not require the same standards of polish as a final draft of a paper, but it is still a good idea to re-read your replies and run them through a spelling checker before sending them—people give little weight to arguments that are badly written or mis-spelled.