How to Use USENET Effectively

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1. Introduction

USENET is a worldwide bulletin board system in which thousands of computers pass articles back and forth. Of necessity, customs have sprung up enabling very diverse people and groups to communicate peaceably and effectively using USENET. These customs are for the most part written, but are scattered over several documents that can be difficult to find; in any case, even if a new user can find all the documents, he most likely will have neither the time nor the inclination to read them all. This document is intended to collect all these conventions into one place, thereby making it easy for new users to learn about the world of USENET. (Old-timers, too, will benefit from reading this.)

You should read this document and understand it thoroughly before you even think about posting anything. If you have questions, please ask your USENET administrator (who can usually be reached by sending mail to *usenet*) or a more knowledgeable USENET user. Believe me, you will save yourself a lot of grief.

The mechanics of posting an article to USENET are explained in Mark Horton's excellent paper *How to Read the Network News*; if you have not read that yet, stop here and do so. A lot of what follows depends on your knowing (at least vaguely) the mechanics of posting news.

Before we discuss these customs, we ought to look at the history of USENET, what it is today, and why we need these conventions.

2. All About USENET

USENET began on a set of computers in North Carolina's Research Triangle. The programs involved (known as ''netnews'' then, and ''A news'' now) exchanged messages; it was a small, multi-computer bulletin board system. As time passed, administrators of other systems began to connect their computers to this bulletin board system. The network grew. Then, at Berkeley, the news programs were rewritten (this version became known as ''B news'') and the format changed to conform to ARPA standards (again, this became the ''B protocol for news''.†) This version of news was very widely distributed, and at this point USENET began to take on its current shape.

USENET is a *logical* network (as opposed to a *physical* network.) It is also a very amorphous network, in that there is no central administration or controlling site. There is not even an official list of members, although there is a very complete unofficial one. A site gets access to USENET by finding some other site already on USENET that it can connect to and exchange news articles. So long as this second site (called a *neighbor* of the first site) remains willing and able to pass articles to and from the first site, the first site is on USENET. A site leaves the USENET only when no one is willing or able to pass articles to, or accept articles from, it.

As a result, USENET has no equivalent of a ''sysop'' or central authority controlling the bulletin board. What little control is exercised is wielded by the person at each site who is responsible for maintaining the USENET

† See *Standard for Interchange of USENET Messages* for a description of the two formats.

connecions (this person is called the ‘‘USENET administrator.’’) Because most USENET administrators are (relatively) new to USENET, and because administering USENET locally involves a great deal of work, most USENET administrators tend to follow the lead of other, more experienced, administrators (often known somewhat irreverently as ‘‘net gurus.’’) This is not an abdication of responsibility, but a means of keeping the amount of work little enough so it can be done without interfering with the local USENET administrator’s job. An example of this is the list of currently active newsgroups circulated every month or so. It is not ‘‘official’’ – no one has that authority – but as the maintainer is doing the work that every other USENET administrator would have to do otherwise, it is accepted as a valid list. If the maintainer changes the list in a way another USENET administrator finds unacceptable, that administrator can simply ignore the list. (Incidentally, the ‘‘net gurus’’ became known as such because of the work they have contributed to USENET. Their experience is a valuable resource for each USENET administrator.)

Because the USENET has grown so wildly, a number of problems have appeared. One of these problems is technical, and a number of the conventions this document describes spring from attempts to keep this problem under control.

The technical problem arises due to the transport mechanism used by most USENET sites. Most computers on USENET do not have access to large-area networks like ARPANET. As a result the only viable transport mechanism these sites can use is a set of programs collectively known as UUCP and which communicate over dial-up telephone lines. Initially, news programs generated one UUCP command per article. With the explosion of the USENET, the number of articles simply swamped many sites; phone lines would be tied up all day transmitting news, and many articles would be processed at the same time, slowing down the computers noticeably.

The solution was to batch messages. This way, many articles are sent via UUCP with one command, and the command on the receiving machine would split the file into separate articles, which could then be processed individually. While this increased the size of the files being sent, it cut down on the number of UUCP commands sent, and since sending a command involves quite a bit of overhead, this decreased the duration of phone calls, and to a lesser degree the load on the computer. At some sites, such as Purdue, this was not quite enough, so a simple spooler was implemented to process the individual articles one at a time. This reduced the system load to a very acceptable amount.

However, the problem has not gone away by any means. In one sense it has become worse; as more articles are posted to the network, phone costs and system load averages increase, and system administrators require USENET administrators to cut back or eliminate newsgroups and to transmit news only at night (which means long propagation delays). In short, everyone who has anything to do with administering any USENET site is very concerned about the future of USENET, both in general and at his own site.

Many of the rules you will read address this concern. The fear that USENET may collapse is not a bogeyman, but very real. We hope it will not collapse, and the rules below outline some ways to prevent problems and increase the likelihood that enough sites will remain on USENET to keep it alive. There is no central authority that can force you to follow them, but by doing so you will help keep USENET a valuable resource to the computer community.

3. Deciding to Post

Before you decide to post an article, you should consider a few things.

3.1. Do not repeat postings

This applies even if you did not post the information the first time around. If you know the answer to a question someone asked, first read the followups, and if you have something more to contribute, mail it to the questioner; if you think it should be seen by others, ask the questioner to summarize the answers he receives in a subsequent article. One of the biggest problems on USENET is that many copies of the same answer to a simple question are posted.

If you want to repost something because you believe it did not get to other USENET sites due to transmission problems (this happens sometimes, but a lot less often than commonly believed), do some checking before you repost. If you have a friend at another USENET site, call him and ask if the article made it to his site. Ask your USENET administrator if he knows of any problems in the USENET; there are special newsgroups to which USENET administrators subscribe in which problems are reported, or he can contact his counterparts at other sites for information. Finally, if you decide you must repost it, indicate in the article subject that it is a reposting, and say why you are reposting it (if you don't, you'll undoubtedly get some very nasty mail.)

Reposting announcements of products or services is flatly forbidden. Doing so may convince other sites to turn off your USENET access.

When school starts, hoards of new users descend upon the USENET asking questions. Many of these questions have been asked, and answered, literally thousands of times since USENET began. The most common of these questions, and their answers, have been collected in the hope that the new users will read them and not re-post the same questions. So, if you want to ask a question, check Appendix I (**Answers to Frequently Asked Questions**) to be sure it isn't one that has been asked and answered literally hundreds of times before you started reading the USENET.

3.2. Do not post anything when upset, angry, or intoxicated

Posting an article is a lot like driving a car − you have to be in control of yourself. Postings which begin ''Jane, you ignorant slut, ...'' are very definitely considered in poor taste†. Unfortunately, they are also far too common.

The psychology of this is interesting. One popular belief is that since we interact with USENET via computers, we all often forget that a computer did not do the posting; a human did. A contributing factor is that you don't have to look the target of abuse in the eye when you post an abusive message; eye-to-eye contact has an amazing effect on inhibiting obnoxious behavior. As a result, discussions on the USENET often degenerate into a catfight far more readily than would a face-to-face discussion.

Before you post an article, think a minute; decide whether or not you are upset, angry, or high. If you are, wait until you calm down (or come down) before deciding to post something. Then think about whether or not you really want to post it. You will be amazed what waiting a day or even a few hours can do for your perspective.

Bear in mind that shouting hasn't convinced anyone of anything since the days of Charlemagne, and being abusive makes people hold even more tenaciously to their ideas or opinions. Gentleness, courtesy, and eloquence are far more persuasive; not only do they indicate you have enough confidence in your words to allow them to speak for you, but also they indicate a respect for your audience. This in turn makes it easier for your audience to like or respect you − and people tend to be far more interested in, and receptive to, arguments advanced by those they like or respect than by writers who are abusive. Finally, remember that some discussions or situations simply cannot be resolved. Because people are different, agreed-upon facts often lead to wildly different feelings and conclusions. These differences are what makes life so wonderful; were we all alike, the world would be a very boring place. So, don't get frantic; relax and enjoy the discussion. Who knows, you might even learn something!

3.3. Be sure your posting is appropriate to USENET

Some things are inappropriate to post to USENET. Discussing whether or not some other discussion is appropriate, or if it is in the right newsgroup, is an example. Invariably, the ''meta-discussion'' generates so many articles that the discussion is simply overwhelmed and vanishes; but the meta-discussion lingers on for several weeks, driving most of the readers of that newsgroup out of their collective minds. Help preserve the sanity of your fellow USENET readers by mailing such comments to the people involved, rather than posting them.

Another example of inappropriate postings is the infamous ''spelling flame.'' Every few months someone takes another poster to task for poor spelling or grammar. Soon, everyone jumps on the bandwagon, tearing apart one another's postings for such errors. To put it mildly, this angers almost everyone involved for no real reason. Please remember that we all make mistakes, and there are a lot of people for whom English is a second language. So, try to keep your spelling and grammar comments to yourself – but if you find you simply cannot, mail them to the poster rather than posting them.

Far more insidious are requests similar to ''How can I splice into the local cable TV transmission line?'' Posting to USENET is akin to publishing, so don't ask for or post instructions on how to do something illegal. And please don't quote the First Amendment, or the laws allowing freedom of speech in your country; while the posting

† Unless you are critiquing *Saturday Night Live*.

programs will not stop you, the aftermath could be very unpleasant – lawsuits and court trials usually are, and the USENET would certainly collapse as sites dropped from it to protect themselves from legal liability. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you? Of course not.

Related to this is the next rule.

3.4. Do not post other people's work without permission

Posting something to USENET puts it in the public domain for all practical purposes. So, be careful about posting things like UNIX†-related material (specifically source code) or company documents; consider licensing and nondisclosure agreements first. Some people regard the posting of ''diffs'' based on licensed code to be a suitable compromise, as they are only useful to those who have the base code already.

Copyrighted works are a separate problem. Both United States and international law provide protection for copyrighted works; other than short extracts for purposes of criticism, you cannot copy a copyrighted work in whole or in part without permission of the copyright holder (who may, or may not, be the author.) Without this protection, artists could not make any money and hence would have limited incentive to make the fruits of their art available at all. Posting a copyrighted work without permission is theft, even though the property stolen is not tangible in most cases. Hence, posting movie and book reviews, song lyrics, or anything else which is copyrighted without the permission of the copyright holder, could cause you personally, your company, or the USENET itself to be held liable for damages. Please be very careful that you obey the law when posting such material!

3.5. Don't forget that opinions are those of the poster and not his employer.

Every so often, someone will post a particularly disgusting article, and a number of responses will ask if all employees of the original poster's company share his (revolting) opinion, or suggest that action be taken against that company. Please remember that all opinions or statements in articles are to be attributed to the poster *only*, and in particular, do not necessarily represent the opinions of the poster's employer, the owner of the computer on which the article originated, or anyone involved with any aspect of USENET – and consequently the responsibility for any USENET message rests with the poster and with no one else. The appropriate response is not to attack the company or its other employees; let the poster know what you think of his posting via mail. If the postings continue, take advantage of the news software's presenting you with the author's name and the subject line and then asking if you want to see the article; start looking for the poster's name or the offensive subject in the articles presented to you and skip them. If you really get offended, you can unsubscribe from a newsgroup.

Part of the price of freedom is allowing others to make fools of themselves. You wouldn't like to be censored, so don't advocate censorship of others. No one is forcing you to read the postings.

In some countries, posting or receiving certain types of articles may be a criminal offense. As a result, certain newsgroups which circulate freely within the United States may not be circulated in other nations without risking civil or criminal liabilities. In this case, the appropriate action for sites in that country is neither to accept nor to transmit the newsgroup. No site is *ever* forced to accept or pass on *any* newsgroup.

4. Where to Post

The various newsgroups and distributions have various rules associated with their use. This section will describe these rules and offer suggestions on which newsgroups to post your message.

4.1. Keep the distribution as limited as possible

A basic principle of posting is to keep the distribution of your article as limited as possible. Like our modern society, USENET is suffering from both an information glut and information pollution. It is widely believed that the USENET will cease to function unless we are able to cut down the quantity of articles. One step in this direction is not to post something to places where it will be worthless. For example, if you live in Hackensack, New Jersey, the probability of anyone in Korea wanting to buy your 1972 Toyota is about as close to zero as you can get. So confine your posting to the New Jersey area.

†UNIX is a trademark of AT&T Bell Laboratories.

To do this, you can either post to a local group, or post to a net-wide group and use the *distribution* feature to limit how widely your article will go. When you give your posting program (usually *postnews*(1)) a distribution, you are (in essence) saying that machines which do not recognize that distribution should not get the article. (Think of it as a subgroup based on locality and you'll get the idea.) For example, if you are posting in the San Francisco Bay Area, and you post your article to **net.auto** but give **ba** as the distribution, the article will not be sent beyond the San Francisco Bay Area (to which the **ba** distribution is local) even though you put it in a net-wide newsgroup. Had you given the distribution as **ca** (the California distribution), your article would have been sent to all Californian sites on USENET. Had you given the distribution as **net**, your article would have been sent to all sites on USENET.

4.2. Do not post the same article twice to different groups

If you have an article that you want to post to more than one group, post to both at the same time. Newer versions of the news software will show an article only once regardless of how many newsgroups it appears in. But if you post it once to each different group, all versions of news software will show it once for each newsgroup. This angers a lot of people and wastes everybody's time.

4.3. Do not post to ''mod.'' or ''net.announce'' newsgroups

You may not post directly to certain newsgroups; you cannot post to some at all. Newer versions of the news software will inform you when either of these restrictions apply, but older versions of news software will not.

The **mod.** newsgroups are *bona fide* moderated newsgroups. If you want to have the appropriate moderator post something, mail it to him. (If you do not know his address, ask your USENET administrator. In some cases, the software will automatically mail, rather than post, your article to the moderator.)

The newsgroup **net.announce** and its subgroups are moderated newsgroups designed for important announcements. It is used to post important announcements that everyone on USENET can read. (**Net.general** was meant to provide such a place, but so many inappropriate messages have been posted there that a lot of people began to unsubscribe; hence, this moderated newsgroup was set up. Very few messages are posted to it, so don't be afraid to subscribe; you will not be overwhelmed.) To post to this group, mail your announcement to the moderator, and he will either post it or suggest an alternative (such as a more appropriate newsgroup.) Messages for **net.announce** should be short, important enough so that everyone on USENET should see the headers, not cross-posted to any other newsgroup, and signed; messages which are political, commercial, or religious in nature will be rejected.

4.4. Do not post to ''net.general''

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, but almost all articles posted to **net.general** do not belong there. Only articles of general interest and importance to *everyone* on USENET should be posted there. ''Everyone'' includes the USENET readers in Europe, Asia, Australia, Canada, the United States, and possibly other places.

This means that announcements of services or products, test messages, seminar announcements, program sources and bug reports, requests for addresses, and so forth do *not* go to **net.general**. If you wish to post a followup to an article you saw in **net.general**, put the followup posting in **net.followup**. (Again, newer versions of news software will do this automatically, but do not rely on this feature as your software may be old.)

Similarly, never post to **net.general** and another newsgroup. If your article belongs in any other newsgroup, put it there, and not in **net.general**. (There is one exception to this rule − articles may be cross-posted to **net.general** and **net.announce**. Since **net.announce** is moderated, though, the exception does not matter to you.)

4.5. Ask someone if you can't figure out where to post your article

If you cannot figure out where to post something, look in **net.announce.newusers** for the list of active newsgroups. (This is posted biweekly. If you can't find it, look at the list in *How to Read the Network News*; but be aware that list is undoubtedly out of date already.) If your article does not seem to fit in any of the listed groups, post it to **net.misc** or don't post it.

If you still are not sure which newsgroup to post your article to, ask an old-timer. If your site doesn't have any old-timers (or none of the old-timers will admit to being old-timers), contact any of the following people:

Gene Spafford (spaf@gatech.CSNET, spaf@gatech.UUCP)
Mark Horton (mark@cbosgd.UUCP)
Rick Adams (rick@seismo.CSS.GOV, rick@seismo.UUCP)
Chuq Von Rospach (chuq@sun.UUCP)
Matt Bishop (mab@riacs.ARPA, mab@riacs.UUCP)

We will be happy to help you. But, please, do not post the article to the net before you ask us!

4.6. Be sure there is a consensus before creating a new newsgroup

Creating a new newsgroup is, in general, a very bad idea. Currently, there are so many articles being posted that the USENET is in dange of collapse as site after site decides to cease to accept and retransmit certain newsgroups. Moreover, there is no established procedure for deleting a newsgroup, so once created, newsgroups tend to stay around. They also tend to encourage people to think up new newsgroups, and the cycle repeats. Try to avoid thinking up new newsgroups.

If, however, you believe a new group should be created, be sure you have a consensus that the group is needed (either a mailing list has enough traffic and readers to justify turning it into a newsgroup, or a discussion in a current newsgroup becomes so large for a period of time long enough to warrant splitting it into a newsgroup.) Then post an article to **net.news.group** as well as any other groups related to your proposed new group, and discuss the topics you are proposing be covered in your new group, what it should be called, whether it is *really* needed, and so forth. Try to resolve all objections, and take into account all suggestions and comments; finally, have everyone mail you a ‘‘yes’’ or ‘‘no’’ vote on whether the group should be created. Try to get at least 40 or 50 ‘‘yes’’ votes before creating the group; if you want to be safe, get around 100.

4.7. Watch out for newsgroups which have special rules about posting

Some newsgroups have special rules. This section summarizes them.

net.books	Do not post anything revealing a plot or a plot twist without putting the word ‘‘spoiler’’ somewhere in the ‘‘Subject’’ field. This will let those who do not wish to have a surprise spoiled skip the article.
net.followup	This group is for followups to articles posted in **net.general** or for results of surveys. No discussions are allowed.
net.jokes	If you want to post an offensive joke (this includes racial, religious, sexual, and scatalogical humor, among other kinds) rotate it. (If you do not know what this means, look in the section **Writing Your Posting**.)
net.movies	Do not post anything revealing a plot or a plot twist without putting the word ‘‘spoiler’’ in the ‘‘Subject’’ field. This will let those who do not wish to have a surprise spoiled skip the article.
net.news.group	Discussions about whether or not to create new groups, and what to name them, go here. Please mail your votes to the proposer; don’t post them.
net.sources	Source code postings go here. Discussions are not allowed. Do not post bug fixes here.
net.sources.bugs	Bug reports and bug fixes to sources posted in **net.sources** go here.
net.test	Use the smallest distribution possible. In the body of the message, say what you are testing.
net.wanted	Requests for things other than source code go here. Please use the smallest distribution possible. Post offers here, too.
net.wanted.sources	Requests for sources go here.

5. Writing the Article

Here are some suggestions to help you communicate effectively with others on the USENET. Perhaps the best advice is not to be afraid to consult a book on writing style; two of the best are *How to Write for the World of Work* by Cunningham and Pearsall, and *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White.

5.1. Write for your audience

USENET is an international network, and any article you post will be *very* widely read. Even more importantly, your future employers may be among the readers! So, try to make a good impression.

A basic principle of all writing is to write at your readers' reading level. It is better to go below than above. Aiming where ''their heads ought to be'' may be fine if you are a college professor (and a lot of us would dispute even that), but it is guaranteed to cause people to ignore your article. Studies have shown that the average American reads at the fifth grade level and the average professional reads at the twelfth grade level.

5.2. Be clear and concise

Remember that you are writing for a very busy audience; your readers will not puzzle over your article. So be very clear and very concise. Be precise as well; choose the least ambiguous word you can, taking into account the context in which you are using the word. Split your posting into sections and paragraphs as appropriate. Use a descriptive title in the ''Subject'' field, and be sure that the title is related to the body of the article. If the title is not related, feel free to change it to a title that is.

5.3. Proofread your article

This is a matter of courtesy; since you want others to read your article, the least you can do is check that it says what you mean in a clear, concise manner. Check for typographical errors, silly grammar errors, and misspellings; if you have a spelling checking program, use it. Also be sure the article is easy to read. Use white space – blanks, tabs, and newlines – and both upper and lower case letters. Do not omit the definite and indefinite articles, either; not only do ''a'', ''an'', and ''the'' make a posting much easier to read, their omission can make a posting ambiguous.

5.4. Be extra careful with announcements of products or services

When writing a product or service announcement, bear in mind that others will be paying most of the telephone bills. So, if you are announcing several things, combine all the announcements into one article. Mark the posting as a product or service announcement in the title in the ''Subject'' field. Advertising hyperbole is not appropriate here; remember that your audience is to a large degree technically literate, and your product will stand or fall on its technical merits. Be aware that posting obnoxious or inappropriate advertisements is very serious and if you do it, you may find your neighbors yanking your USENET access.

5.5. Indicate sarcasm and humor

Remember that people cannot see you when they read your posting; hence, all the subtle nuances of body and facial motion are hidden. It can be quite difficult to tell when you are being sarcastic or humorous. To deal with this problem, the USENET readers and posters have developed a special sign. Mark passages you intend to be taken as humorous with the ''smiley face'', while looks like this: '':–)''. (Think of a head facing you lying on its right side and look again if you don't understand why that symbol was chosen.) As for sarcasm, there is no universal symbol for that (unless the sarcasm is meant humorously, in which case use the smiley face again.) But mark your passage so everyone will realize you are being sarcastic.

5.6. Mark postings which spoil surprises

High on the list of obnoxious messages are those that spoil the plot of a book or movie by giving away an unexpected detail. If you post such an article, please put the word ''spoiler'' in the ''Subject'' field of your posting, so people who do not wish to have a surprise ruined can skip the article.

5.7. Rotate offensive postings

If you feel you must post a message that may offend people, you can do one of two things. You can post it to the newsgroup **net.flame** or you can take steps to be sure the message will only be read by those who explicitly ask for it to be shown to them. In the latter case, the USENET convention is to encrypt these messages by shifting each letter 13 characters, so that (for example) ''a'' becomes ''n''. (In more precise terms, this is a Caesar cipher of shift 13; on the USENET, it is called *rot13*.) When you do this, put the word ''rot13'' in the ''Subject'' field. The news reader you are using almost certainly has a command to encrypt and decrypt such messages; if not, use the UNIX command

tr a–zA–Z n–za–mN–ZA–M

5.8. The shorter your signature, the better

Keep signatures concise; 2 or 3 lines are usually plenty. Include your name and addresses on any major networks (such as ARPANET, BITNET, or CSNET). This helps people contact you quickly and easily, usually more so than by following the return path of the article. Do not include pictures, graphics or clever quotations that make the signature longer; this is not the appropriate place for them, and many sites resent paying the phone bills for such signatures.

6. Conclusion and Summary

Here is a list of the rules given above:

⇒ Deciding to post

- Do not repeat postings
- Do not post anything when upset, angry, or intoxicated
- Be sure your posting is appropriate to USENET
- Do not post other people's work without permission
- Don't forget that opinions are those of the poster and not his company

⇒ Where to Post

- Keep the distribution as limited as possible
- Do not post the same article twice to different groups
- Do not post to **mod.**, or **net.announce** newsgroups
- Do not post to **net.general**
- Ask someone if you can't figure out where to post your article
- Be sure there is a consensus before creating a new newsgroup
- Watch out for newsgroups which have special rules about posting

⇒ Writing the Article

- Write for your audience
- Be clear and concise
- Proofread your article
- Be extra careful with announcements of products or services
- Indicate sarcasm and humor
- Mark postings which spoil surprises
- Rotate offensive postings
- The shorter your signature, the better

The USENET can be a great place for us all. Sadly, not enough people are following the customs that have been established to keep the USENET civilized. This document was written to educate all users of the USENET on their responsibilities. Let's clean up the USENET, and turn it into a friendly, helpful community again!

Acknowledgements: The writing of this document was inspired by Chuq von Rospach's posting on USENET etiquette, and it draws on previous work by Mark Horton, A. Jeff Offutt, Gene Spafford, and Chuq von Rospach.

Appendix I. Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

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This document discusses some items that occur repeatedly on USENET. They frequently are submitted by new users, and result in many followups, sometimes swamping groups for weeks. The purpose of this note is to head off these annoying events by answering some questions and warning about the inevitable consequence of asking others. If you don't like my answers, let me know and I may include revisions in future versions of this note.

1. What does UNIX stand for?

   It is not an acronym, but is a pun on ''MULTICS.'' MULTICS is a large operating system that was being developed shortly before UNIX was created.

2. What is the derivation of ''foo'' as a filler word?

   The favorite story is that it comes from ''fubar'' which is an acronym for ''fouled up beyond all recognition,'' which is supposed to be a military term. (Various forms of this exist, ''fouled'' usually being replaced by a stronger word.) ''Foo'' and ''Bar'' have the same derivation.

3. Is a machine at ''foo'' on the net?

   These questions belong in **net.news.config** if anywhere, but in fact your best bet is usually to phone somebody at ''foo'' to find out. If you don't know anybody at ''foo'' you can always try calling and asking for the ''computer center.'' Also, see the newsgroup **mod.map**, where maps of USENET and the UUCP network are posted regularly.

4. What does ''rc'' at the end of files like *.newsrc* mean?

   According to Dennis Ritchie, ''The name *rc* comes from RUNCOM, which was the rough equivalent on the MIT CTSS system of what UNIX calls shell scripts. Of course RUNCOM derives from *run commands.*''

5. What do ''- (nf)'' and ''Orphaned Response'' in an item's title mean?

   It means that the item was created by ''notefiles,'' an alternative news handling interface that many people prefer. If you want to find out more you can read the ''*Notesfile* System Reference Manual'' or contact *uiucdcs!essick*.

6. What does '':–)'' mean?

   This is the net convention for a ''smiley face.'' It means that something is being said in jest. If it doesn't look like a smiley face to you, flop your head over to the left and look again.

7. How do I decrypt jokes in **net.jokes**?

   The standard cipher used in **net.jokes** in called ''rot13.'' Each letter is replaced by the letter 13 further along in the alphabet (cycling around at the end). Most systems have a built in command to decrypt such articles; *readnews*(1) and *vnews*(1) have the **D** command, *rn*(1) (another popular public-domain full screen news reader) has the **X** or **<CONTROL-X>** commands, *notes*(1) has **%** or **R**. If your system doesn't have a program to encrypt and decrypt these, you can quickly create a shell script using *tr*(1):

   tr A–Za–z N–ZA–Mn–za–m

   On some versions of UNIX, the *tr* command should be written as:

   tr ''[a–m][n–z][A–M][N–Z]'' ''[n–z][a–m][N–Z][A–M]''

8. **net.general**: Is John Doe out there anywhere?

   I suspect that these items are people looking for freshman roommates that they haven't seen in ten years. If you have some idea where the person is you are usually better off calling the organization. For example, if you call any Bell Labs location and request John Doe's number. They can give it to you even if he works at a different location. If you must try the net, use newsgroup **net.net-people**, *not* **net.general**.

9. **net.math**: Proofs that 1 = 0.

Almost everyone has seen one or more of these in high school. They are almost always based on either division by 0 or taking the square root of a negative number.

10. **net.games**: Where can I get the source for *empire*(6) or *rogue*(6)?

    You can't. The authors of these games, as is their right, have chosen not to make the sources available.

11. **net.unix-wizards**: How do I remove files with non-ASCII characters in their names?

    You can try to find a pattern that uniquely identifies the file. This sometimes fails because a peculiarity of some shells is that they strip off the high-order bit of characters in command lines. Next, you can try an ''rm –i'', or ''rm –r'' (see *rm*(1).) Finally, you can mess around with i-node numbers and *find*(1).

12. **net.unix-wizards**: There is a bug in the way UNIX handles protection for programs that run setuid.

    There are indeed problems with the treatment of protection in setuid programs. When this is brought up, suggestions for changes range from implementing a full capability list arrangement to new kernel calls for allowing more control over when the effective id is used and when the real id is used to control accesses. Sooner or later you can expect this to be improved. For now you just have to live with it.

13. **net.women**: What do you think about abortion?

    Although abortion might appear to be an appropriate topic for **net.women**, more heat than light is generated when it is brought up. Since the newsgroup **net.abortion** has been created, all abortion-related discussion should take place there.

14. **net.singles**: What do ''MOTOS,'' ''MOTSS,'', ''MOTAS'', and ''SO'' stand for?

    Member of the opposite sex, member of the same sex, member of the appropriate sex, and significant other, respectively.

15 **net.columbia**: Shouldn't this name be changed?

    The name was devised to honor the first space shuttle. It was realized at the time the group began that the name would quickly become out of date. The intent was to create a bit of instant nostalgia.

16. **net.columbia**: Shouldn't this group be merged with **net.space**? No. **Net.columbia** is for timely news bulletins. **Net.space** is for discussions.

17. How do I use the ''Distribution'' feature?

    When *postnews*(1) prompts you for a distribution, it's asking how widely distributed you want your article. The set of possible replies is different, depending on where you are, but at Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey, possibilities include:

mh3bc1	local to this machine
mh	Bell Labs, Murray Hill Branch
nj	all sites in New Jersey
btl	All Bell Labs machines
att	All AT&T machines
usa	Everywhere in the USA
na	Everywhere in North America
net	Everywhere on USENET in the world (same as "world")

    If you hit **<RETURN>**, you'll get the default, which is the first part of the newsgroup name. This default is often not appropriate – *please* take a moment to think about how far away people are likely to be interested in what you have to say. Used car ads, housing wanted ads, and things for sale other than specialized equipment like computers certainly shouldn't be distributed to Europe and Korea, or even to the next state.

    The newsgroup **na.forsale** exists for postings of sale announcements. Its distribution is limited to North America; posters should restrict this distribution even further, if possible and appropriate.

18. Why do some people put funny lines (''bug killers'') at the beginning of their articles?

    Some earlier versions of news had a bug which would drop the first 512 or 1024 bytes of text of certain articles. The bug was triggered whenever the article started with whitespace (a blank or a tab). A fix many people adopted was to begin their articles with a line containing a character other than white space. This gradually evolved into the habit of including amusing first lines.

The original bug has since been fixed in newer version of news, and sites running older versions of news have applied a patch to prevent articles from losing text. The ‘‘bug-killer’’ lines are therefore probably no longer needed, but they linger on.

19. What is the address or phone number of the ‘‘foo’’ company?

Try the white and yellow pages of your phone directory, first; a sales representative will surely know, and if you’re a potential customer they will be who you’re looking for. Phone books for other cities are usually available in libraries of any size. Whoever buys or recommends things for your company will probably have some buyer’s guides or national company directories. Call or visit the reference desk of your library; they have several company and organization directories and many will answer questions like this over the phone. Remember if you only know the city where the company is, you can telephone to find out their full address or a dealer. The network is *not* a free resource, although it may look like that to some people. It is far better to spend a few minutes of your own time researching an answer rather than broadcast your laziness and/or ineptitude to the net.