

## Tips for online communication – Working online with respect, kindness *and* criticality

Academic knowledge creation needs to be critical. It is built on the idea of challenging ideas and calling for stronger evidence. But being critical does not mean being cruel or careless.

Have you ever noticed how some people are much cruder and meaner on social media than they would ever be in person? It's very possible when working online to forget that the recipient of our message is a person who is just as susceptible to feeling hurt as we are.

Here are a few tips to consider when taking your academic engagements from face-to-face to online.

### 1. Different platforms lead to different styles of writing

- WhatsApp is similar to speaking and includes a mix of translanguaging and slang. Using WhatsApp for learning will probably be the same and this can allow for very generative collaborative conversations. But let's be sure to be respectful of others. WhatsApp learning groups are typically not the place to share memes that could cause offence or to share religious posts which exclude those who do not share your faith. It's important to think about what the purpose of the WhatsApp group is before posting.
- RUConnected forum messages are typically a bit more formal than social media and WhatsApp but you will be guided by what your lecturer expects and how your lecturer engages with you in this space. Do use the RUConnected forums as much as you can. They allow you to stay connected to your learning community and to try out ideas.
- We recommend using RUConnected forums for most class discussions but if email is used, the main netiquette to consider is when to use the 'Reply all' versus the 'Reply' button. Ask yourself: Does the whole class need to see my reply? Ask yourself if it is necessary to say 'Thanks' or 'Noted' when the lecturer sends you an email? On the other hand, if you are unsure of something in the text, maybe a 'Reply all' is useful.
- Assignments need to follow the formalities of academic writing. Academic writing looks different in each discipline. In academic writing we try to convince our readers to follow the position we are taking (this is called 'making an argument'). Assignments are spaces to practice writing in the ways of the discipline and so

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you need to use assignments as the means to figure out how to build an argument in your field. Many times your lecturer will give you clear criteria for writing academically and this will look different to WhatsApp and RUConnected posts and other kinds of writing. But *all forms of writing about our thinking* help us learn how knowledge is made in the field and how we can contribute to knowledge making.

## 2. What happens online stays with you for life

- You can delete a foolish post but people might have taken screenshots. The internet has a long memory. Think of your future self before you post.

## 3. Be kind

- It's easy for there to be misunderstandings when we are communicating online. Try to be clear and don't jump to conclusions.
- Sarcasm rarely works online. It's difficult to see when someone is joking or being serious. Using 😊 emojis can help to indicate your stance but they don't replace being thoughtful. Just like saying 'No offence' is pretty ineffectual in reducing offence.
- Judging someone by their spelling and vocabulary is petty. Engage with ideas, not grammar.
- Criticality is not the same as criticism. Knowledge is built in conversation within a community – so online learning should be a space for engagement and collaboration – not petty point scoring.
- Many frustrations happen online but instead of fuelling others' annoyances and exasperations try to steer the conversations towards productive solutions. Some people take pleasure in flame wars but that is completely at odds with the collaborative nature of knowledge production.

## 4. Respect people's time and bandwidth

- Sharing YouTube videos or turning on your webcam on Zoom if not necessary can add pressure on other students' data.
- Be patient. Studies have shown that across the continent most people connect to the internet via cell phone. This can limit one's ability to navigate an online platform resulting in delays and glitches.
- If possible, find quiet spaces with limited background noise for synchronous sessions.

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- Be on time for synchronous sessions. Log into the site 3 to 5minutes before the session starts to resolve connection problems that you might experience.

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