

INTRODUCTION

Electronic conferencing is being used extensively at The University of Michigan. The Computing Center supports two conferencing programs on MTS: Confer II (tm) from Advertel Communication Systems, Inc., and *FORUM. Both are widely used to support instructional use, program and project planning, staff communication, discussion on current events and issues, and many, many other activities.

Learning the technical aspects of using a conferencing program is only part of what it takes to make conferencing a successful experience. This guide was written to help participants understand the nature of electronic communication and the role they can play in creating an electronic community.

WHY USE ELECTRONIC CONFERENCES?

Electronic conferencing can be a wonderful way to share ideas with your classmates, instructors, and colleagues.

- Through a conference, you can capture the excitement, informality and spontaneity of face-to-face discussions. Yet you have the leisure to reflect, just as you do when you're writing.
- You can bring up topics and questions that interest you and respond thoughtfully to the questions and comments of others. Conferencing helps you learn to express yourself clearly.
- You can join in whenever you like, not just when a class or a meeting has been scheduled.
- You can participate as much as you want (up to the limits of your MTS funding) and you cannot be interrupted.
- You and your fellow participants can discuss many topics at the same time. Separate discussions cannot interfere with each other.
- The conference program keeps a permanent record of the discussions, which you can refer to at any time. You can print a hardcopy of discussions that interest you most, instead of taking notes.
- Shy people and foreign participants often find it much easier to express themselves in a computer conference than in face-to-face interactions. Conferencing offers these people an opportunity to participate fully.

Electronic conferencing is a powerful new tool for communication. As with any powerful tool, you must exercise caution and take the time to learn what it can and cannot do. This guide offers some things to keep in mind while you're conferencing.

GETTING STARTED

- Relax and have fun. Don't worry about "messaging up." The conference program gives lots of online instructions and provides plenty of opportunities to fix mistakes.
- Take the time to get acquainted with Confer II or *FORUM. A little time invested now will help you make the most of your conference and will give you the skills necessary to participate in any conference at The University of Michigan.

Confer II Lecture/Demonstrations. Attend one of the free lecture/demonstrations on Confer II offered by the Computing Center at the beginning of each term. Enter \$COPY NEWS:CONF.LECTURE at the MTS pound (#) prompt or call 763-7630 for information on dates and times or the Confer handout.

- Make sure you understand the goals of the conference and what you need to do to help achieve them. If you don't understand, ask questions.

ELECTRONIC COURTESY

You know how to be courteous and polite in both face-to-face and written communication, but do you know the "rules" for electronic interaction? Of course, common sense and common courtesy will go a long way toward preventing misunderstandings and hurt feelings. However, electronic communication has a unique characteristic which sometimes gives rise to communication problems: participants lose some of the advantages of being able to see and hear each other.

Consider the following points before you dash off your responses:

1. Since you can't see other participants, it's easy to react too strongly to something you think is wrong or stupid. Participants tear down each others' ideas and engage in personal attacks more readily than they would face-to-face. Consequently, feuds can develop, and a lot of time can be wasted trying to calm everyone down. It's important to remember to disagree genially and respectfully.
2. Sometimes an electronic message or response seems much harsher than the sender intended. This is because receivers can't hear the tone of voice or see the facial expressions and other body language which would make the meaning more clear, express irony or sarcasm or soften biting remarks. You might want to think about how you would phrase your comments if you were writing a letter to a friend and wanted to avoid any misunderstandings.

3. Just as you might accidentally offend others before you become accustomed to electronic communication, others might accidentally offend you. It can't hurt to give others the benefit of the doubt or ask for clarification if you see responses or messages that offend or anger you. The offense may not have been intentional!
4. People who are used to electronic communication often use parenthetical comments "(with tongue in cheek)" "(with raised brows)" "(with bulging eyes)" and other symbols to get meaning across. Other ways of expressing meaning rely on "funny faces". Tilt your head to the left for some examples:

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DEVELOP MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT

Successful conferences are those in which participants develop mutual trust and respect. To keep the goodwill of other participants, keep the following points in mind:

1. RESPECT INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES WHILE PROMOTING FREE SPEECH

Conference participants may be men and women of any race, ethnic or religious group, political persuasion, sexual orientation, etc. You and all other participants have a right to a conference in which you feel accepted, respected, and free to express and explore your ideas and beliefs.

It's very important for all conference participants to be sensitive to special needs and characteristics of others that arise from differences in gender, race, ethnic or religious background, or sexual orientation. It's vital that all participants avoid discrimination or harassment of others on the basis of such differences.

One way to promote a non-discriminatory atmosphere in your conference is to avoid entering items that may make anyone feel threatened, demeaned or uncomfortable, and to actively object to such items if you see them.

While it is important to avoid discrimination against participants, it is also important to protect their rights to free speech. Sometimes it seems that there is a conflict between a guarantee of freedom from discrimination and a guarantee of free speech, but there doesn't have to be. Recognizing the difference between speech that expresses attitudes and opinions in a way in which they can be discussed, and speech that harasses, attacks or disrupts can help resolve apparent conflicts.

CONDITIONS OF USE POLICY-

Most conferences do not have problems involving infringement of rights to freedom from discrimination or free speech. However, if there are problems that cannot be handled informally, participants and organizers can invoke official University and Computing Center policies to solve disputes.

The University now has codes for students, faculty, and staff that define discriminatory actions and limits on free speech in various University environments. The Computing Center's Conditions of Use Policy condemns discriminatory behavior and stipulates that violators may lose access to use of University computing privileges.

2. CONFIDENTIALITY

You and your fellow participants deserve to have your communications treated with confidentiality. This will allow you to express yourselves freely, to take risks or even to play devil's advocate. It will also prevent misinterpretation of items taken out of context.

If you enter an item in the conference with the intent to distribute the item and responses outside of the conference, state your intention in the item. Always ask permission of participants involved before showing a copy of conference interactions to non-members.

3. USING PSEUDONYMS

Confer II makes it possible to enter items, responses, and messages under a pseudonym. Using pseudonyms can be beneficial, but can also destroy an atmosphere of mutual trust if done inappropriately.

Advantages of Pseudonym Use:

- They allow simulation of group interactions, such as legislative, judicial or corporate activities.
- They allow any kind of role-playing.
- They allow shy participants to express themselves more easily.
- They can allow more comfortable discussion of sensitive topics.
- They can be used to inject some humor into the conference.

Avoiding Misuse:

If you use pseudonyms only when you would not be ashamed to use your own name, you'll probably avoid usages which could be seen as misleading, harassing or discriminatory. Using your own name on most of your entries will help establish your credibility and will contribute to an atmosphere of trust and community spirit.

Problems with pseudonym use are rare. However, if a problem should develop, conference organizers can discover the pseudonym user's identity. Confer II will add an exclamation mark (!) to all pseudonyms entered so that it's clear a pseudonym is being used rather than a real person's name. If you have questions about the appropriateness of using pseudonyms in your conference, ask for clarification.

REMEMBER COMMON GOALS

Conferences may fulfill many different purposes depending on the activity they are supporting. Since all conferences serve the purpose of group interaction, keep the following points in mind:

1. APPROPRIATE ENTRIES

Remember that what you enter in a conference is for consumption by everyone participating. In public conferences, this is potentially anyone on campus.

Enter only statements that you're comfortable revealing to the entire conference.

Use electronic mail for conversations you don't expect or want everyone to participate in.

Follow the conference guidelines about entering items that are not within the scope of the conference goals. If you want to discuss other topics, there are public conferences, such as MEET:STUDENTS on UB or USER:OPENFORUM on UM.

2. TIME COMMITMENT

Making the conference a worthwhile learning experience for yourself and others requires a time investment on your part. Take the time to keep up, to enter thoughtful items and responses. Pull your own weight!

CONCLUSION

The University of Michigan is currently one of the few educational institutions that offers its students, faculty, and staff the opportunity to participate in electronic conferences.

An electronic conference can help you participate in group interactions more freely, spontaneously, and conveniently. To make your conference a success, remember to

- communicate courteously and effectively,
- develop mutual trust and respect,
- and work toward common goals.

HAPPY CONFERENCING!