Reply Posting Guidelines in One to Many Communications

1. Abstract

This document describes the proper methods to use when replying to messages in a One to Many communication environment such as USENET, mailing lists, or bulletin boards. It is recommended that top-posting in a summary reply be used primarily, or if desired and appropriate that inline-posting or conversational-posting be used in a point-by-point reply.

2. Introduction

This proposal is an attempt to provide a definitive standard for posting guidelines in internet communications. Specifically, this document will settle one aspect of particular contention in internet communications. This area is the format of replies to internet postings, and whether the text of those replies should go to the top, bottom, or middle of the message. Specifically this proposal states that conversational replies (those the respond to messages on a point-by-point basis) should contain response text in the middle of the message. Secondly, responses which are not conversational, should post the response text at the top of the message. This message supersedes the relevant guidelines in RFC 1855.

3. Conventions used in this document
Top-posting is the practice of replying to a message with the reply text at the top of the message, with the original message quoted beneath.

Bottom-posting is the practice of replying to a message with the reply text at the bottom of the message, with the original message quoted above.

Middle-posting or inline-posting is the practice of placing reply text inside the quoted message following specific points in which the response deals with. This is also called, for the purposes of this document, Conversational-posting.

A "point-by-point reply" is a reply which responds to specific sentences, paragraphs, or points in the original message.

A "summary" reply is a reply that responds to a message as a whole.

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in RFC-2119.


In replies that specifically respond to individual sentences, paragraphs, or points to the original message at least (3) three times, Point-by-Point replies may be used. All other forms of replies must be in the format of summary replies.

The purpose of the Summary reply is to give proper emphasis on the reply. The reply is the focal point of the message, and as such, that's what the readers are reading the message for, the reply. Context is important, but as in written communication, it is secondary in nature. In written communication, footnotes are used, or appendices. While electronic communication is not as formal, leaving a trimmed copy of the original message for reference is appropriate and should be done where relevant. A combination of Point-by-Point and Summary shall never be used.

In a nutshell, the purpose of a reply is the reply, not to provide a transcript of an entire conversation. A trimmed quotes original message is always recommended to include with a reply as a reference as relevant. However, with the advent of a great variety of message archiving services, referring to messages by URL greatly reduces the need for quoting.

5. Guidelines for Point-by-Point Replies

In a point-by-point reply, response text is placed in the middle of the message. An examples would be as follows:

> A blue ball should be the preferred ball in all schoolyard activities.
Well, I disagree, the red ball is the obvious choice.

> This is to make the ball visible...

As in the above example, there should be (1) one blank line separating the response text with the quoted text. The response text should immediately follow the specific point that is being responded to in the quoted message. If necessary, quoted paragraphs should be broken to accommodate this. If relevant, a short summary of the response can be placed at the bottom of the message and should not exceed (1) one paragraph per (10) ten paragraphs quotes. However, it should be noted that if you are replying to a message that is longer than (2) two or (3) three typed pages, you may choose to not quote the message at all, or include it only as an attachment. Point-by-Point replies are not to be used as an attempt to justify bottom posting. If there are not (3) three points to reply to, then a Summary Reply must be used.

Point-by-Point replies should only contain the most immediate message for quoting. Rarely it is necessary to quote the message before that. It is really never necessary to quote three or more messages in the same reply.

6. Guidelines for Summary Replies

Summary replies are the preferred method to replying to electronic communication. It gives the most flexibility to replies as well as gives the best emphasis to the reply. In a reply, the response is the primary focus of the message, not the original message. As such the reply should be able to stand on its own, namely, that one could read the entire reply and understand what the point is without having to refer to quoted text. Thoughts and points should be fully developed and any reference to the quote should be used in order to provide for a clear meaning. It should be written as if it were an answer to an essay question on a test, or a term paper, that it is self-sufficient for its purpose.

An example of a summary reply is as follows:

I like what you have to say, though I think a red ball should be used instead of a blue ball.

"Original Message from Somebody <somebody@somebox.com>:

> A blue ball should be the preferred ball in all schoolyard activities. This is to make the ball visible..."
therefore Summary replies provide the best method of putting the emphasis on the reply, and not on the original message. This is true for even lengthy replies, where generally, people reply to a message as a whole and reference specific pieces of the original message.

7. Attribution Considerations

When quoting messages, the original author should be cited. The particular format of the attribution is flexible, however it should contain the date (and time if applicable) of the original message, the name and e-mail of the original author, and the forum the message was posted in (only if there was a single forum, this is not necessary for messages posted across several media or newsgroups).

As a superior method of attribution, references should be contained in the text of the message. Namely, several sources of information can be referenced by number at the bottom of a message, and then cited by number in the text. The format of a list of references is also flexible, but should contain at the very least, the author, the URL (or location to find the information), and date. An example is below:


Referencing messages in this matter is preferred over direct quoting in all forms of responses except point-by-point.

8. Quoting and Trimming Considerations

In replies that do quote original messages, the poster should take particular care to use the following conventions to clarify what is quoted text, and whom is being quoted.

All messages should include a line that indicates the source of the quote. Most newsreaders do this automatically by using the content of the "From:" line in the headers. The particular word choice is the decision of the replier, but should be of the form of:

"In <newsgroup> John Q. Smith <smith@somebox.com> wrote:

A replier may choose to include the date of the post, and must include the e-mail address of the originator. The necessary content is the name (as indicated in the "From:" line in the headers) and, if applicable, the newsgroup the message was posted in. If a message was posted to multiple groups, including the newsgroup is not necessary.

Furthermore, lines of quoted text should always begin with "> " so that it is clear what content is quoted and what is not. Quotes of quotes should follow the convention of "> > " though quoting quoted text should be, as a practice, discouraged unless necessary. It generally isn’t advised to use footnotes inside footnotes, as such,
it isn’t advised to quote quoted text.

Quoted messages should always be trimmed to the relevant content is being responded to. Repliers should consciously remove all but the relevant material that they are quoting. This can be accomplished by simply removing the text. No other conventions need be followed. It is, however, optional to indicate where the snipped text was removed by placing "SNIPPED" or "[SNIPPED]" where text has been removed using whatever form of "> " depending on the level of quoted text being used.

If, for some reason, the quoted text is modified by the replier, those lines should be preceded with a "| " to indicate this. While this may be relevant in some threats, by and large this practice should be avoided as the quoted text "belongs" to the original poster, and they should be the only one to make modifications, unless the discussion specifically calls for "community" editing.

9. Entreaty on Reply Content

It seems almost every topic of conversation of the internet that has even a marginal level of participation has many replies that don’t add an substantial content to the discussion except to interject things like "Me too." or "You suck." While flamine may or may not be appropriate, replies that don’t add any substantial content should be avoided. The purpose of replying to a message is to respond. If the reply is only a few words, and doesn’t have any content of note, the message should not be sent as it only serves to tie up resources for no real benefit to the discussion. If one is going to take the time to reply, one should at least have the courtesy to actually respond to the message.

10. Security Considerations

This draft does not have any security considerations as it deals strictly with message and reply formats in electronic communications.

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11. References


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