

The Internet needs Ms. Manners

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I frequently encounter rudeness on the Internet. When I do, I want to say, “Didn't anyone teach you any manners?” And then I realize that the rules of engagement are all different on the Internet. In fact, we’re kind of making them up as we go along. So, I asked a few friends for advice. I have assembled an expert panel of veritable loveliness to meet our etiquette needs: [Meredith Gould](#), [Mihee Kim-Kort](#), [Christian Piatt](#), [Bruce Reyes-Chow](#), and [Landon Whitsitt](#).

These are people who have been thinking about, writing about, and playing amongst the intricacies of web civility for a long time. **I asked them, specifically, what their pet peeves are.** Since the impertinence and my commentary abounds, for brevity's sake, I decided to break the post up into parts. Today, we will discuss criticism.

Part One: Criticism

If you swim amongst the tubes and wires of the Internet, then you have been the brunt of criticism. You may have even doled out a bit of harsh commentary yourself. I would love to say “if you can’t say something nice, then don’t say anything at all,” but then I’d have to delete sixty-three percent of my blog posts. But there *is* a way to critique. Here is some helpful advice.

Read the article before you criticize. This piece of pertinent decorum comes from [Christian Piatt](#), a prolific blogger and the author of (most recently) [Blood Doctrine](#). Most people go to blog posts from Facebook or Twitter. So a writer needs to post his or her article there. The problem is that people respond to the title on FB or Twitter without actually reading the article, and they typically scorn particular things that we already addressed in the body of our work. Don’t be that guy.

Criticize someone on the Internet the same way you would in person.

Sometimes full-on hatred can be born in the comment section. I scratch my head, because people rarely speak to me face-to-face with incivility. Maybe it's because I'm only five foot tall in person, and I'm bigger on social media. Whatever the case

may be, on the Internet, they let it rip.

Crystal Fallesen, a DCE I served with at Rivermont Presbyterian, frequently called me a “lying liar who lies,” mimicking a particular commenter. It always made us bust out laughing, because 1) well... I’m not really known to be a dishonest person, and 2) a normal human just wouldn’t do that in a regular conversation.

The incongruence between how we behave in the comment section and how we would talk around the dinner table can often be hilarious (if it’s not too painful). We’re not just trying to keep the salad and the entrée fork straight any longer. Many times we’re working to politely deal with that drunk uncle, except that he's some guy with whom we have no family history to speak of.

Remember: It’s not funny if no one can understand what you’re saying.

Mihee Kim-Kort, a [blogger](#) and the author of [Making Paper Cranes](#), gets annoyed when people “insert themselves into a conversation with a meager attempt at snark or irony and it makes no sense.” Then she has to “waste emotional and mental energy trying to decipher it.”

Do not send anonymous hate mail. It should be obvious, but Christian gently reminds us to refrain from sending hate mail without signing it. It’s just rude. And as Christian--full of social grace--said, “If you're going to be a dick, don't also be a coward.”

Coming up... we will hear more from our guests, as we discuss how not to be a platform pirate and the intricacies of social bartering.

Until then, **what are your biggest pet peeves?**