

A Kinder, Gentler Glossary for Net Neophytes -- and Others

by Cathy Young

@

"@" means "at," and while it might not be the most important part of an e-mail address, it's definitely the best looking part (certain fonts make it look even better...try typing it in one of the Garamonds, for instance). It separates the user I.D. (the who) from the domain name (the where) sections of an address, giving mail routers the sort of punctuation they need to make sure you receive all those delicious electronic love letters.

alt.

Although not an official part of the Usenet hierarchy, "alt." (pronounced alt-dot) prefixes signify newsgroups that are alternative in nature. Got a craving for stretchy fabrics? You'll find others who share your passion on alt.lycra (say it like this: alt-dot-lycra.) Feeling shy? Alt.support.shyness might help you discover the up-side of being shy. There are hundreds of these groups! You'll be amazed and/or comforted (or disturbed?) to discover how many people share certain peculiarities and interests.

analog

In terms sending and receiving information over phone lines, you should know that most phone lines can only carry information in an analog or "wave" format. So it's your modem's job to translate digital data (the language your computer uses) into analog format so that it can pass through phone lines to reach its destination.

America Online

One of the largest online services in the country, America Online has an easy-to-use interface which appeals to a broad range of people, particularly folks who are new to the online world.

ASCII

Shorthand for American Standard Code for Information Interchange, ASCII is one of the most common ways that text files are encoded and transferred over networks. Sometimes you'll hear people say, "Oh, this document is in plain old, boring ASCII text," which means it will appear on your screen without fancy fonts, formatting, or design. Since most of the text on the Net is in ASCII, folks have developed elaborate ways of infusing humor and personality into their ASCII communications -- emoticons, for instance.

bandwidth

This is the capacity of a network, the "room" it has to carry data signals. Think in terms of male anatomy: it's the size of the pipe (and, as we know, size really does matter). The bigger the pipe, the faster the data moves. Bandwidth becomes a crucial issue when one tries to send and receive high-intensity graphics, video, and sound files over the Net.

baud rate

This is the number of bits that can be transferred per second. For example, a 28.8 speed modem can transfer 28,800 bits per second (bps).

BBS

Short for Bulletin Board Service, a BBS is a small online service, often serving a particular region or community of people. Many BBS's have chat and e-mail functions. Some have files available for downloading, and many (like ECHO and the WELL) have conferences or forums in which people exchange ideas.

bits

Although bits of data are often very small, this term actually is an abbreviation for binary digit. Almost every piece of information in your computer is translated into a 0 or a 1 for quick processing. Even words, colors and images are "seen" by the computer in bit or binary form. 1110111-1101111-1110111! (ummm...that means WOW!)

bookmarks

When you're surfing and find a great Web site , you can save its location in your bookmark file so that you can access it again quickly and directly. Bookmarks are just a way for you to keep track of your favorite spots on the Web -- like a little black book of hot, sexy sites.

browsers

Software used to navigate the World Wide Web , a browser allows you to access hypertext files and/or web pages . Graphical browsers like Netscape or Microsoft's Explorer allow you to view graphical elements that may be embedded on a web page .

chat

When people use this word, most often they are referring to real-time, "textual conversations" that people have on BBS's or online services. It's sort of like talking on the phone, except you're typing your words instead of speaking them.

communications software

In order to access online services or BBS's, you need communications software and a modem. This software helps your computer communicate with the online service -- regulating the transfer of files, text, and commands. It's what keeps computer, modem and service all speaking the same language.

.com

Pronounced "dot-com." In an e-mail address or URL, a .com suffix denotes that the address is part of a commercial entity on the Internet.

comp.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups beginning with this prefix discuss computer-related topics. A couple of the groups included here are comp.laser-printers ("comp-dot-laser-printers") and comp.sys.mac.hardware.

CompuServe

Another of the large online services, CompuServe is popular among professionals -- especially in computer fields -- because many companies hosts product support forums on the service. Forums on a wide range of topics (from Homosexuality to Graphic Design to Right-wing Political Theory) are very active, too.

conferences

On ECHO and on other BBS's, online discussions are broken into different subject categories called "conferences."

cyberspace

Writer William Gibson coined this term. He was talking about the space that exists between people, computers, phone lines and satellite links. For example, when you talk on the phone, where exactly does your conversation reside? Not at one end or the other, but in the space between. If you're having a hot-and-steamy e-mail relationship, all of that lust travels through cyberspace, too -- whether your love object lives around the corner or on the other side of the planet.

cyberpunk

This is a somewhat out-dated word for someone who lives and breathes in cyberspace. These days, though, anyone who calls himself a cyberpunk probably has an attitude problem the size of Texas. You should know, however, that Hollywood hasn't figured out the term is old-fashioned and continues to pedal it to the masses in ridiculous movies about cyberspace.

cypherpunk

Not to be confused with the previous term, a cypherpunk is a vigilant activist for intellectual freedom and privacy, exploring and creating new methods of data encryption .

digital

Your computer processes most information in a digital format. At the most basic level of your computer's "mind," everything is translated into a series of 0's and 1's. See also analog and bits .

domain name

Computers on the Internet are assigned domain names. Think of it like the computer's telephone number or street address. Every domain name has a suffix which signifies what sort of entity it is. For example, most business addresses end with a .com (pronounced "dot-com"), and universities have a .edu suffix.

download

The Internet is full of files (applications, graphics, sound clips, and more) available for you to use, but first you have to move them onto your hard drive. Downloading is the process of moving files from a network into your home computer.

e-mail

E-mail is the best part of being on the Net. It's just like the mail you receive in your box at home (except you won't get as many bills!), but it's quicker -- darn near instantaneous, actually.

e-mail address

Who are you? Where are you? There's no need to have an existential crisis if you have an e-mail address. E-mail addresses have two parts: a user I.D. and a domain name (the who and the where, respectively), and these parts are separated by an "@" sign. So if you go by the name of "luscious" on a BBS called Venus, your e-mail address might be:
luscious@venus.com.

ECHO

Short for East Coast Hang Out, ECHO is a BBS based in New York City. The service is owned by Stacy Horn, one of the editors of this issue of *Women and Performance*.

.edu

In an e-mail address or URL, a .edu ("dot-edu") suffix denotes that the address is part of an educational entity on the Internet.

emoticon

Because it can be difficult to convey humor or emotion in ASCII text, people have developed an elaborate way of using punctuation to suggest mood in their electronic communications. Here's an example: : -) It's a sideways smiley face. If you want to convey a smirk, you can use this one: : - / Be advised, though, that certain systems frown upon the use of emoticons. : - (

encryption

This is the scrambling of text or other data to prevent intruders (hackers, government officials, system administrators, etc.) from reading the messages you send to others. If you are using a strong method to encrypt data, only the intended recipient of your mail will have the proper key (or program) to decode your message.

FAQ

Short for Frequently Asked Questions, FAQs (pronounced, "fax") are available on hundreds of topics -- from "Beverly Hills 90210" to Windows 95. You can find them all over the Web and on Usenet . Need to know if Tori Spelling really had that boob job? Well, read the FAQ. Frankly, the folks in the alt.tv.bh90210 newsgroup are pretty darn tired of answering that question.

finger

Want to know what someone's doing? Then finger them. Oh, it's not as nasty as it sounds. It's an Internet service for finding out if someone is logged in to their particular Internet provider. If you're at a UNIX prompt and want to see if your pal is online, just type: finger pal@cooldomain.com.

flame

As a verb, this means to insult someone in e-mail or in a newsgroup . As a noun, it means the particular insulting or inflammatory thing that was said. As in life, sometimes people on the Net are rude.

forums

This is what discussion groups are called on CompuServe and some other services.

FTP

Short for File Transfer Protocol, this is the Internet service used to move files from one computer to another or from one network to another.

gateways

Gateways help transfer data between two incompatible networks -- sort of like translators for computers that speak different languages.

.gif

Short for Graphics Interchange Format, a .gif is a way to encode color graphics for easy transfer over networks. If anyone ever says, "Hey, baby, send me your gif," it means that they want you to send them a picture.

gopher

No, it's not a rodent! This is a menu-driven way to browse through files on a network.

.gov

In an e-mail address or URL, a .gov ("dot-gov") suffix denotes that the address is part of a government entity on the Internet.

groupware

This is software designed to help individuals collaborate on projects via their computers.

grrl

Rowdy women on the Net sometimes call themselves "grrls." It's fun to say, and it's not demeaning at all. The double-r in there creates a cool sort of growl!

GUI

First of all, you say it like this: gooey -- just like the best chocolate brownie you've ever tasted. And second, all it means is Graphical User Interface -- the pretty point-and-click ways of getting around certain online services.

hacker

Hackers are programming wizards. They can navigate through a network or computer system in the dark, with their eyes closed and their hands tied behind their backs. They often stay up late and eat poorly. When they attend a rare social gathering, they seem to speak a strange language full of words like "man pages," "grep," "pipes," "tastee cakes," and "shells." The media tries to fool us into thinking that hackers are criminals. Not so. Although some indulge in illegal activities, other hackers just try to write code and help other people navigate through the Net.

handle

This is your nickname on a BBS or online service. It may also be your user I.D., too -- depending on the system and your preferences. For instance, if your user I.D. on the Venus BBS is "luscious," you might decide that you want your handle to be LusciousFruitCup. On many services, you can change your handle whenever you want, to whatever strikes your fancy at the time.

hotlist

See bookmarks . Both terms are used interchangeably.

HTML

Short for HyperText Markup Language, this is the language or marking system people use to create hypertext documents like web pages .

hyperlink

When browsing through a hypertext document, you may find that certain words appear in a different color or are underlined. By clicking on these words, you'll be taken in a new direction -- to a different part of the document that explains or expands on the term, or to a destination elsewhere on the Net. Images can be hyperlinked, too.

hypertext

This is an information space which can be explored in a nonlinear way. Users navigate through the space by clicking on hyperlinks . Web pages are hypertext documents, and they are created with HTML.

Information Superhighway

This phrase is Al Gore's wet dream, and truthfully, it's more fantasy than reality. This "superhighway" would merge the Internet with all telephone, cable, financial, and other computer networks. It's sort of like cyberspace exploded into the biggest mall you've ever seen. Be careful when using this word; it's full of fluff. Never use it to describe the current state of the Net. Frankly, overusing this term may cloud your ability to imagine what the Net might or should become.

Internet

This is the global network of networks. It really isn't a single entity at all, but each of its many parts uses the same TCP/IP protocol to make sure that information flows easily between the parts.

IRC

Short for Internet Relay Chat, IRC is an Internet service that allows users from all over the world to chat in real time. Users can join existing "channels" (or conversations) or they can create their own.

.jpeg

This is a compression standard for graphic files developed by the Joint Photographic Experts Group.

k12.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups starting with this prefix discuss issues of interest to elementary through high-school students and their teachers.

LISTSERV

This is a program that maintains a list of e-mail addresses in order to send out bulk e-mailings on different subjects.

log in

This is the term for entering your account on a computer system. You usually need a password and a user I.D. to do this successfully.

lurking

Cat got your tongue? Feeling too shy to say anything online? Would you rather just read about the crazy exploits of others than reveal your own? Just want to hang back and get the feel for a place online? We call this lurking.

misc.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups that begin with this prefix cover miscellaneous topics. For example, one group in this category is misc.news.bosnia.

MIME capabilities

This is short for Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions. If your e-mail program has MIME capabilities, it will allow you to send and receive messages which contain non-ASCII files like video or sound clips.

modem

Your modem is your friend. A master translator, it sits between your computer and your phone jack -- spinning digital data into analog gold (so that data can move through your phone line) and vice versa.

MUD

Short for Multi-User Dungeon (or Domain), a MUD is a virtual environment, often completely text-based, in which people interact and explore in real time. MOO's (MUD Object-Oriented) are similar but tend to focus more on interaction between members. Users can program new features into the environment with an object-oriented language. LambdaMoo is a very large and popular MOO.

nerd

Times have changed. The world is a much better place now, and geeks and nerds are sexy and fun. So if someone calls you a nerd, say, "Thank you!" and consider it a compliment.

.net

In an e-mail address or URL, a .net suffix denotes that the address is part of a company or agency that provides network resources to the Internet.

Net

See Internet. Although both words are used interchangeably, "Net" is more of a slang term.

netiquette

You have to watch your P's and Q's -- even on the Net. Before you waltz into an online environment or an important e-mail relationship, you better brush up on your online etiquette. Simple rules: don't flame, read the FAQ before you bombard a newsgroup with questions, use frequent paragraph breaks because it's hard to read large blocks of text on a screen...you get the picture.

nethead

Love the Net? Spend an ungodly number of hours online each day? Then you're probably a nethead. It's a much better term to use than cyberpunk .

newbie

Think adolescent: awkward, clueless, even annoying. That's what you feel like when you're new to the Net. It can be quite overwhelming at first. Certain online environments are more tolerant of newbies -- like America Online, for example. If you're a newbie, be patient with yourself. Even the most notorious hacker and the most eloquent nethead were newbies once!

news.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups starting with this prefix discuss network news -- not current events.

newsgroups

These are bulletin boards focusing on a particular subject. People add messages to these boards, contributing to a particular thread of conversation or starting a new one. Usenet is an elaborate system of hundreds of newsgroups.

Object-Oriented Language

Used to program functionality into MOO's and MUD's, this computer language allows programmers to isolate objects (a tree, a pencil, a person, etc.) in an environment and endow them with functions or traits that are then able to interact with the environment or with other objects. For instance, a programmer could create a dominatrix's whip, which is long and black and made out of goat hide. The dominatrix could use the whip to inflict pain or pleasure on other members of the environment. The whip would be the object, ascribed with those particular qualities. In fact, the dominatrix would also be an "object" in terms of this sort of programming language. Object-oriented languages are powerful and flexible, allowing programmers to adapt an object over time.

.org

In an e-mail address or URL, a .net suffix denotes that the address is part of a non-profit organization on the Internet.

online

This is what you are when you are jacked in, wired up, plugged in, or any of the other wonderful ways of being connected to the Internet.

online service

America Online , Compuserve , and Prodigy are examples of large, national online services. Online services generally offer subscribers e-mail, chat, discussion forums, and some offer varying degrees of Internet access.

password

In order to log in to a computer system, you generally need a password -- for security reasons, of course. When you create a password of your own, it's a good idea to use mixed cases and to include numbers or punctuation symbols. This will make it even more difficult for someone to guess.

PPP

Short for Point-to-Point Protocol, PPP is one of the programs available to make your humble little computer a full-fledged, direct participant of the Internet community. This software, a high-speed modem and a standard phone line is all you need. In general, you need this sort of connection (or a SLIP connection) to be able to access the Web with a graphical browser. Ask your Internet provider (a BBS, online service or whatever you are using to connect to the Net) if they have these sorts of accounts available.

posting

Just as if you were pinning up a message on a cork board, the messages you send to a newsgroup or contribute to a forum are called postings.

Prodigy

This is another of the large, national online services.

protocols

Because the Internet is not one entity but a intersection of many different networks, the only way all these different networks can function together is by adopting protocols for transferring and processing data. Protocols are sort of like languages and sort of like laws. One of the most important protocols is TCP/IP.

rec.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups starting with this prefix discuss topics associated with the arts and recreational activities.

router

This is a system that transfers data between networks.

sci.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups starting with this prefix discuss topics about engineering and science.

search engine

This is a program that helps a user find information on a service or on the Net. Certain engines are more powerful than others, of course, and some are so powerful that they may bury you in data. With practice, you can make searches easier by knowing which engine to choose for a particular search and how to narrow your query.

signature/.sig file

Certain e-mail programs and news readers allow people to attach a standard closure to all messages sent. These closures are called signatures or .sig files, and they often contain contact information (an e-mail address, phone number, company, title, etc.) and perhaps a favorite quote. Some .sig files contain elaborate ASCII art. The degree of formality or whimsy expressed in a signature is completely up to the user. However, you'll get extra brownie points if you come up with a cool .sig file.

SLIP

Short for Serial Line Internet Protocol, this is one of the programs that can help your desktop computer become a live entity on the Internet. See PPP.

snert

Alas! The Net's full of weirdos, too. Unfortunately, there are a lot of men who harass women online -- who scope them out, insult them, suggest inappropriate things...the usual. We call these guys "snerts." It can be a verb, too (e.g., "I got snerted last night").

soc.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups starting with this prefix discuss topics about society and culture -- national and global.

spam

You know how mad you get when a telemarketer calls you up early Saturday morning, disturbing your sleep? Well, spam is just as annoying, and we're not talking pink luncheon meat here. To "spam" is to bombard e-mail channels or newsgroups with unwanted messages, advertisements, or other junk mail. It's rude, rude, rude.

talk.

Part of the Usenet naming hierarchy, newsgroups starting with this prefix feature those sorts of discussions that never seem to end -- religion, abortion, thorny political issues, etc.

TCP/IP

Short for Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, TCP/IP is one of the main protocols that determines how data is transferred over the Internet.

TELNET

This program allows you to log in to one computer system from another system. If you have several Internet accounts, you might dial into one of them and then use that first account as a jumping off point to TELNET to the rest of your accounts. There are also many public databases (e.g., libraries) that require a TELNET program to access them.

threads

If you're reading a certain newsgroup, you'll see many different subtopics. These are called threads. For example, on the alt.tv.bh90210 newsgroup, you may find threads about boob jobs, Brenda and Dylan, and spoilers for upcoming episodes. If you've got anything to say about all of this, then be sure to add a response to the thread.

trolling

This is something snerts, among others, do in cyberspace. They go hunting around for people to disturb with unwelcome attention. When someone goes trolling, s/he generally leaves suggestive or inflammatory posts in forums or targets people with a barrage of e-mail.

UNIX

Developed by AT&T labs, this is a very popular computer operating system that has been instrumental in the development of the Internet.

upload

If you create a file on your home computer and want to send it to others on your BBS, you need to upload it first. See download , which is just the reverse.

URL

This is an abbreviation for Uniform Resource Locator. Documents on the Web all have their own URL or address. As the popularity of the Web explodes, you'll find URL's everywhere -- in commercials, on billboards, on business cards, and even in .sig files. Here's an example of a URL: <http://www.echonyc.com/> . The "http" is a common prefix in these addresses and stands for HyperText Transfer Protocol.

Usenet

This is the name for the network of computers that exchanges news or newsgroups .

user I.D.

This is your name or the name of your account on a computer system. It's also part of your e-mail address. Be careful not to confuse this with your handle. Sometimes your handle and user I.D. are the same, but not always.

veronica

This is a search mechanism to help you find specific information or text strings in gopher space.

wannabes

Just as in any cultural space, the Net is full of poseurs and wannabes -- people who are trying too hard to fit in.

Web

This is slang for the World Wide Web , which is certainly a mouthful to say.

web page

This is what we call a hypertext document on the Web . Each web page has its own URL .

web site

This is either a single web page or a collection of them. Multiple pages in a site are linked together with hyperlinks .

WELL

Short for Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, the WELL is a very popular and pioneering BBS, based in Northern California.

World Wide Web

This is the whole universe of hypertext documents, and it spans the globe. When you're on the Web, you can access information (graphics and sound, too) about almost anything under the sun, from body piercing to home schooling. You can find product information, travel tips, love advice, and the latest issues of your favorite magazines -- all online. Along the way,

you'll also run across terrific web sites put together by plain old janes and joes -- people who publish pictures of their poodles and girlfriends, people who share their favorite recipes for clam sauce, people who write about their hopes and dreams and strange hobbies for all the world to see. The Web will knock your socks off.