Mailing List Basics

by Peter Christian

E-mail address for mailing lists

Remember that automated mailing lists will have a least TWO e-mail addresses:

- The address of the **list server**, the computer which manages the list — this is the address to mail to when you want to join or leave a list. Messages posted to this address are not circulated, and usually contain only simple standard commands such as "subscribe" or "help". On an automated list (most are) there's no point in sending a message saying "Hello, I would like to join the Norfolk list, please".

- The address of **the list itself** — this is the address for messages which are to be distributed to all the list members.

- For most lists there is also a third address for a **list owner**, the human being who is responsible for the running of the list. You would normally e-mail this person, only if there is some problem with the list server (it won't respond to your messages) or something the automated server can't deal with (e.g. abusive messages)

A common beginner's mistake is to send message meant for the list server to the list, and hundreds or even thousand of people receive your "unsubscribe" message. Many list servers actually manage many different lists, so often the e-mail address of the server *does not* include the name of the list, but you include the list name in the command you are sending. Alternatively there may be a special e-mail address with the word "request" in it for the list server

Different types of list server require different command. Any list of mailing lists should tell you what commands to use to subscribe.

```
To:      GenBrit-D-request@rootsweb.com

From:    cig@gold.ac.uk <Computers in Genealogy>

Subject:
----------------------------------------------------

subscribe
```

Message to a list server —asking to join the list

```
To:       GENBRIT-L@rootsweb.com

From:     peter@gold.ac.uk <Peter Christian>

Subject: What's a Scrope Factor?

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In the 1851 census the occupation of one of my ancestors
is given as Scrope Factor. Does anyone know what this
occupation is? Or have I misread it?
```

Message to a list — asking for assistance

Types of Mailing List

There are a number of different types and format of mailing list. One distinction is between **moderated** and **unmoderated** lists. In a moderated list, all messages are screened by an editor before they are circulated, usually to screen out unwanted messages (e.g. advertising, or off-topic messages); in an unmoderated list, *all* messages received are automatically circulated without intervention.

There are also **open** and **closed** lists. In an open list, anyone can join by sending an appropriate message to the list server. In a closed list, you normally have to ask the human list owner. Some closed lists allow outsiders to post messages, for example the GENUKIWWW list is a closed list restricted to individuals who maintain GENUKI pages — outsiders can send messages to this list, e.g. to report problems or to offer data, but cannot join it and receive messages.

Some lists offer different ways for members to receive messages. The usual way is for every message to be circulated individually, but large lists, particularly, often have a **digest** option, in which several messages, perhaps a day's worth are bundled into a single large message before being circulated.

Mailing list etiquette

If there is one great problem for mailing list users it's unwanted messages. Obviously, not everyone will be interested in every topic relevant to a list, but there are some basic guidelines (part of what is called "netiquette"), which make life easier for everyone on a list.

1. **Put something helpful in the subject line**, so that people can tell whether they want to read your message or not. Putting "genealogy" in

the subject line for a genealogy mailing list is not exactly helpful. If you've got several queries, post each one as a separate message with a clear Subject line.

2. **Keep to the point**. You don't need to include your entire family tree just to explain which marriage you're stuck at. A genealogy mailing list is also not the place to ask if anyone wants to buy your second-hand car.

3. **Don't respond to the list when an individual reply is more appropriate:** if someone looks up a source for you, the whole list doesn't need to read about your gratitude.

Finding mailing lists

The best way to find mailing lists is on the World Wide Web. There are many "lists of list", including **Liszt** a searchable directory of e-mail discussion groups at *http:// www.liszt.com/,* which claims to be "the world's largest directory of mailing lists."

For genealogy mailing lists, look at the UK section of John Fuller's Mailing Lists Web page at *http://users.aol.com/johnf14246/gen_mail_geo-nonusa.html#UK*

The main general genealogy list for those with British interests is GENBRIT — subscription information is given on John Fullers page or on Rootsweb at *http://www.rootsweb.com/~ maillist/.* The Rootsweb page lists many regional or local lists like those discussed in the foregoing articles.

For a general (non-genealogical) introduction to mailing lists, look at Duncan Branley's *Introduction to Mailing Lists* on the Web at *http://www.gold.ac.uk/guides/c701.htm* (which includes a summary of the main commands for the most popular types of list server). For information on setting up a mailing list, look at the Rootsweb site or at Margaret Olsen's article in the May '97 issue of the *Journal of Online Genealogy* (*http://www.onlinegenealogy.com/may97/news.htm*).