

The Dialectizer

How To Ask Quesshuns Th' Smart Way Copyright © 2001 by Eric S. Raymond

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Translashuns

Translashuns of this hyar docoomnt is available inFrench.

Intryduckshun

In th' wo'ld of hackers, th' kind of answers yo' git t'yer technical quesshuns depends as muchon th' way yo' ax th' quesshuns as on th' difficulty of developin' theanswer. This hyar guide will larn yo' how t'ax quesshuns in a way thetis likely t'git yo' a satisfacko'y answer.

Th' fust thin' t'unnerstan' is that hackers acshully like hardproblems an' fine, think-provokin' quesshuns about them, dawgone it. Eff'n wedidn't, we'dn't be hyar. Eff'n yo' give us an interestin' quesshunto chew on we'll be grateful t'yo'; fine quesshuns is a stimulus an'a gif. Good quesshuns he'p us develop our unnerstan'in', an' offenreveal problems we might not haf noticed o' think about otherwise. Among hackers, "Good quesshun! Fry mah hide!" is a strong an' sinsyar compliment.

Despite this, hackers haf a repeetayshun fo' meetin' simplequesshuns wif whut looks like hostility o' arrogance. It sometimeslooks like we is reflexively rude t'noobies an' th' igno'ant. Butthis ain't pow'ful true.

Whut in tarnation we are, unapologetically, is hostile t'varmints who seem t'beunwillin' t'reckon o' does their own homewawk befo'e axin'quesshuns. Varmints like thet is time sinks — they take wifoutgivin' back, they waste time we c'd haf spent on t'other quesshunmo'e interestin' an' t'other varmint mo'e wo'thy of an answer. We cal'people like this hyar "losers" (an' fo' histo'ical reasons we sometimesspell it "lusers").

We reckonize thet thar is menny varmints who jest be hankerin' t'use thesof'ware we write, an' haf no interest in larnin' technicaldetails. Fo' most varmints, a computer is merely a tool, a means t'anend; they haf mo'e impo'tant thin's t'do an' lives t'live. Weacsmarts thet, an' doesn't speck ev'ryone t'take an interest in thetechnical matters thet fascinate us. Nevahtheless, our style ofanswerin' quesshuns is tuned fo' varmints who dotake sech an interest an' is willin' t'be ackive participants inproblem-solvin'. The'ts not a-gonna change. No' sh'd it; eff'n itdid, we'd become less effeckive at th' thin's we does best.

We is (largely) volunteers. We take time outta busy lives toanswer quesshuns, an' at times we is on overwhelmed wif them, dawgone it. So wefilter ruthlessly. In particular, we throw away quesshuns fum varmintwho appear t'be losers in o'der t'spend our quesshun-answerin' timemo'e efficiently, on winners.

Eff'n yo' find this hyar attitude obnoxious, corndexcendin', o' arrogant, check yer assumphuns. We is not axin' yo' t'junufleck t'us— in fact, most of us'd love nothin' mo'e than t'deal wifyo' as an equal an' welcome yo' into our culture, eff'n yo' put in theefft'o't required t'make thet postible. But it's simply not efficientfo' us t'try t'he'p varmints who is not willin' t'he'p themselves. Eff'n yo' kin't live wif this hyar so't of discriminashun, we suggest yo' paysomebody fo' a commercial suppo't corntack instead of axin' hackersto varmintally donate he'p t'yo'.

Eff'n yo' decide t'come t'us fo' he'p, yo' doesn't be hankerin' t'be oneof th' losers. Yo' doesn't be hankerin' t'seem like one, eifer. Th' bess wayto git a rapid an'

responsive answer is t'ax it like a winner— t'ax it like a varmint wif smarts, cornfidence, an' clues whojest happens t'need he'p on one particular problem, dawgone it.

(Improvements t'this guide is welcome. Yo' kin mailsuggestshuns t'esr@thyrus.com. Note howevahthet this hyar docoomnt is not aimed t'be a juneral guide t'netiquette, an' Iwill junerally rejeck suggestshuns that is not specifically related toelicitin' useful answers in a technical fo'um, dawgone it.)

Befo'e Yo' Ask

Befo'e axin' a technical quesshun by email, o' in a noosgroup, o' on awebsite chat board, does th' follerin':

- Try t'find an answer by readin' th' manual, ah reckon.
- Try t'find an answer by readin' a FAQ.
- Try t'find an answer by searchin' th' Web. Well bust mah britches an' call me streaker.
- Try t'find an answer by axin' a skilled friend, cuss it all t' tarnation.

When yo' ax yer quesshun, display th' fuck thet yo' haf donethese thin's fust; this hyar will he'p establish thet yer not bein' alazy as a houn'dog sponge an' wastin' varmint's time. Better yet, display whut yo' havelarned fum doin' these thin's. We like answerin'quesshuns fo' varmint's who haf demonstrated thet they kin larn fumth' answers.

Prepare yer quesshun. Figger it through. Hasty-soun'in'quesshuns git hasty answers, o' none at all, ah reckon. Th' mo'e yo' does to demonstrate thet yo' haf put think an' effo't into solvin'yer problem befo'e axin' fo' he'p, th' mo'e likely yer toacshully git he'p.

Beware of axin' th' wrong quesshun. Eff'n yo' ax one thet isbased on faulty assumphuns, J. Ran'om Hacker is quite likely t'replywif a uselessly literal answer while reckonin' "Stoopid quesshun...",an' hopin' thet th' experience of gittin' whut yo' axed fo' ratherthan whut yo' needed will larn yo' a lesson, as enny fool kin plainly see.

Nevah assoom yer entitled t'an answer.Yer not; yern't, af'er all, payin' fo' th' service. Yo' willarn an answer, eff'n yo' arn it, by axin' a quesshun thet issubstantial, interestin', an' think-provokin' — one thetimplicitly cortributes t'th' experience of th' community rather thanmerely passively deman'in' smarts fum others.

On t'other han', makin' it clear thet yer able an' willin'to he'p in th' process of developin' th' solushun is a mighty finestart. "Kin someone provide a pointer?", "Whut in tarnation is mah examplemissin'?" an' "Is thar a site ah sh'd haf checked?" is mo'e likelyto git answered than "Please post th' exack procedure ah sh'd use."on account o' yer makin' it clear thet yer truly willin' t'completeth' process eff'n someone kin simply point yo' in th' rightdirectshun.

When Yo' AskChoose yer fo'um carefully

Be sensitive in choosin' whar yo' ax yer quesshun. Yerlikely t'be igno'ed, o' writ off as a loser, eff'n yo':

- post yer quesshun t'a fo'um whar it is off topic
- post a mighty elementary quesshun t'a fo'um wharadvanced technical quesshuns is specked, o' vice-vahsa
- crost-post t'too menny diffрут noosgroups
- >post a varmintal email t'somebody who is neiferan acquaintance of yourn no' varmintally responsible fo' solvin' yer problem

Hackers blow off quesshuns thet is inappropriately targited ino'der t'try t'proteck their communicashuns channels fum bein'drowned in irrelevance. Yo' doesn't be hankerin' this t'happen t'yo'.

Shootin' off an email t'a varmint o' fo'um which yer notfamiliar wif is risky at best. Fo' example, does not assoom thet theautho' of an info'mative web page be hankerin' t'be yer free cornsultant.Do not make oppimistic guesses about whether yer quesshun will bewelcome -- eff'n yer unsure, send it elsewhar, o' refrain fumsendin' it at all, ah reckon.

When seleckin' a noosgroup o' mailin' list, doesn't trest th' nameby itse'f too far; look fo' a FAQ o' charter t'vahify thet yerquesshun is on-topic. Read some of th' back traffic befo'e postin' soyo'll git a feel fo' how thin's is done thar.

Know whut yer topic is! One of th' classic mistakes is axin'quesshuns about th' Unix o' Windows programmin' interface in a fo'umdevoted t'a language o' library o' tool thet is po'table acrost both.Eff'n yo' doesn't unnerstan' whuffo' this hyar is a blunner, yo'd be bess off notaxin' enny quesshuns at all until yo' git it.

In juneral, quesshuns t'a fine-selected public fo'um is mo'elike t'git useful answers than equivalent quesshuns t'a privateone. Thar is multiple reasons fo' this. One is simply th' size of the pool of potential respondents. T'other is th' size of the audience; hackers'd rather answer quesshuns thet ejoocayte a lot of varmints than quesshuns which only sarve a few.

Unnerstan'ably, skilled hackers an' autho's of popular sof'ware are already receivin' mo'e than their fair share of mistargited messages. By addin' t'th' flood, yo' c'd in extreme cases even be th' straw which busts th' camel's back -- quite a few times, corntributo's topopular projecks haf wifdrawn their suppo't on account o' th' collateral damage in th' fo'm of useless email traffic t'their varmintal accounts became unbarable.

Whenevah postible, use projeck mailin' lists

When a projeck has a development mailin' list, write t'the mailin' list, not t'indivijool developers, even eff'n yo' believe thet yo' knows who kin answer yer quesshun best. Check th' docoomntashun of th' projeck an' its homepage fo' th' address of a projeck mailin' list, an' use it. Thar is sevahal fine reasons fo' this policy:

- Enny quesshun thass fine inough t'be axed of onedeveloper will also be of value t'th' whole group. Contrariwise, eff'nyo' reckon thet yer quesshun is too dumb fo' a mailin' list, it's notan excuse t'hareess indivijool developers.
- Ahideg quesshuns on th' list distributes load betweendevelopers. Th' indivijool developer (especially eff'n he's th' projeckleader) may be too busy t'answer yer quesshuns.
- Most mailin' lists is archived an' th' archives are indexed by search ingines. Somebody c'd find yer quesshun an' the answer on th' web instead of axin' it agin in th' list.
- Eff'n sartin quesshuns is see t'be axed offen, the developers kin use thet info'mashun t'improve th' docoomntashun o' the sof'ware itse'f t'be less cornfusin'. But eff'n them quesshuns are axed in private, nobody has th' complete pitcher of whut quesshuns are axed most offen.

Eff'n yo' kinnot find a projeck's mailin' list address, but only see th' address of th' maintainer of th' projeck, hoof it ahaid an' writeto th' maintainer. But even in thet case, doesn't assoom thet the mailin' list don't exist. State in yer e-mail thet yo' tried an' c'd not find th' appropriate mailin' list. Also menshun thet yo' doesn't objection havin' yer message fo'warded t'other varmints. (Menny varmints believe thet private e-mail sh'd remain private, even eff'n thar is nothin' secret in it. By allerin' yer message t'befo'warded yo' give yer co'respondent a choice about how t'han'le yer e-mail, ah reckon.)

Write in clear, grammatical, co'reckly-spelled language

We've foun' by experience thet varmints who is careless an' sloppy writers is usually also careless an' sloppy at reckonin' an' codin' (offen inough t'bet on, ennyway). Answerin' quesshuns fo' careless an' sloppy reckoners is not rewardin'; we'd rather spend ourtime elsewhar.

So expressin' yer quesshun clearly an' fine is impo'tant. Eff'nyo' kin't be bothard t'do thet, we kin't be bothard t'payattenshun. Spend th' extry effo't t'polish yer language. It don't hafta be stiff o' fo'mal — in fack, hacker culture values info'mal, slangy an' hoomrus language used wif precishun. But it has t'be precise; thar has t'be some indicashun thet yer reckonin' an' payin' attenshun.

Spell, punctuate, an' capitalize co'reckly. Don't cornfuse "its" wif "it's" o' "loose" wif "lose". Don't TYPE IN ALL CAPS, this hyar is read as shoutin' an' considered rude. (All-smalls is only slightly less annoyin', as it's difficult t'read, cuss it all t' tarnation. Alan Cox kin git away wifit, but yo' kin't.)

Mo'e junerally, eff'n yo' write like a semi-literate boob yo' will very likely be igno'ed, cuss it all t' tarnation. Writin' like a l33t scripp kiddie hax0r isth' absolute kiss of death an' guarentees yo' will receive nothin' but stony silence (o', at best, a heapin' he'pin' of sco'n an' sarcasm) in return, as enny fool kin plainly see.

Eff'n yer axin' quesshuns in a fo'um thet does not use yernative language, yo' will git a limited amount of slack fo' spellin' an' grammar erro's — but no extry slack at all fo' laziness (an' yes, we kin usually spot thet difference). Also, unless yo' knows whut yer respondent's languages are, write in English. Busy hackers tend to simply flush quesshuns in languages they doesn't unnerstan', an' English is th' wawkin' language of th' Internet. By writin' in English yo' minimize yer chances thet yer quesshun will be discarded unread, cuss it all t' tarnation.

Send quesshuns in fo'mats thet is easy t'unnerstan'

Eff'n yo' make yer quesshun artificially hard t'read, it is mo'elike t'be passed on over in favo' of one thet ain't. So:

- Send plain text mail, not HTML. (It's not hard to turn off HTML.)
- MIME attachments is usually OK, but only eff'n they are real content (sech as an attached source file o' patch), an' not merely boilerplate junerated by yer mail client (sech as t'other copy of yer message).
- Don't send mail in which intire paragraphs is sin'lemultiply-wrapped lines. (This hyar makes it too difficult t'reply t'jest part of th' message.) Assoom thet yer respondents will be readin' mail on 80-character-wide text displays an' set yer line wrap acco'din'ly, t'sumpin less than 80.

- Howevah, does not wrap data (sechas log file dumps o' sesshun transcripps) at enny fixed column width. Data sh'd be included as-is, so respondents kin haf confidencethet they is seein' whut yo' sar.
- Don't send MIME Quoted-Printable incodin' t'an English-language fo'um, dawgone it. This hyar encodin' kin be necessary when yer postin' in a language ASCII ah don't covah, but a lot of mail ajunts doesn't suppo't it. When they bust, all them =20 glyphs scattered through th' text is homely an' distractin'.
- Nevah, evah speck hackers t'beable t'read closed proprietary docoomnt fo'mats like Microsof'Wo'd, cuss it all t' tarnation. Most hackers react t'these about as fine as yo'd t'havin' a pile of steamin' pig manure dumped on yer dorestep.
- Eff'n yer sendin' mail fum a Windows machine, turnoff Microsof's stoopid "Smart Quotes" feature. This hyar is so yo' avoidsprinklin' garbage chareeckers through yer mail, ah reckon.

Eff'n yer usin' a graphical-user-interface mail client, (sech as Netscape Messenger, MS Outlook, o' their ilk) beware that it may violate these rules when used wif its default settin's. Most sech clients haf a menu-based "View Source" comman'. Use this hyar onsumpin in yer sent-mail folder t'check that yer sendin' plain text wifout unnecessary attached crud, cuss it all t' tarnation.

Use meanin'ful, specific subject haiders

On mailin' lists o' noosgroups, th' subject haider is yer goldenoppo'tunity t'attract qualified experts' attenshun in aroun' 50 chareeckers o' fewer. Don't waste it on babble like "Please he'p me" (let alone "PLEASE HELP ME! Fry mah hide!! Fry mah hide!! Fry mah hide!! Fry mah hide!!"; messages wif subjects like thet gitdiscarded by reflex). Don't try t'impress us wif thedepph of yer anguish; use th' space fo' a super-corncise problem dextripshun instead, cuss it all t' tarnation.

A fine cornvenshun fo' subject haiders, used by menny tech suppo'to'ganizashuns, is "object - deviashun". Th' "object" part specifies whut thin' o' group of thin's is havin' a problem, an' th' "deviashun" part dexcribes th' deviashun fum specked behavio'.

Stoopid:

HELP! Fry mah hide! Video don't wawk proper on mah lappop! Fry mah hide!

Smart:

XFree86 4.1 misshapen mouse curso', Fooware MV1005 vid, cuss it all t' tarnation. gritset

Smarter:

XFree86 4.1 mouse curso' on Fooware MV1005 vid, cuss it all t' tarnation. gritset - is misshapen

Th' process of writin' an "object-deviashun" dextripshun will he'p yo' o'ganize yer reckonin' about th' problem in mo'e detail, ah reckon. Whut in tarnation is affecked? Jest th' mouse curso' o' other graphics too? Is this specific t'XFree86? To vahshun 4.1? Is this hyar specific t'Fooware video gritsets? To model MV1005? A hacker who sees th' result kineemeejutly unnerstan' whut it is that yer havin' a problem wifan' th' problem yer havin', at aglance.

Eff'n yo' ax a quesshun in a reply, be sho'nuff t'change th' subjectline t'indicat that yer axin' a quesshun. A Subject line thet looks like "Re: test" o' "Re: noo bug" is less likely t'attractuseful amounts of attenshun. Also, pare quotes of previous messagesto th' minimum cornsissent wif cluin' in noo readers.

Be precise an' info'mative about yer problem

- Dexcribe th' sympoms of yer problem o' bug carefully an' clearly.
- Dexcribe th' environment in which it occurs (machine, OS, applicashun, whutevah).
- Dexcribe th' research yo' did t'try an' unnerstan' th' problem befo'e yo' axed th' quesshun.
- Dexcribe th' diagnostic steps yo' took t'try an' pin down th' problem ahouse'f befo'e yo' axed th' quesshun.
- Dexcribe enny recent changes in yer computer o' sof'ware cornfigurashun thet might be relevant.

Do th' bess yo' kin t'annicipate th' quesshuns a hacker will ax, an' t'answer them in advance in yer request fo' he'p.

Simon Tatham has writ an excellent essay intitled [How to Repo't Bugs Effeckively](#). ah strongly recommend thet yo' read it.

Voloom is not precisun

Yo' need t'be precise an' info'mative. This hyar end is not sarved by simply dumpin' huge volooms of code o' data into a he'p request. Eff'n yo' haf a large, complicated tess case thet is bustin' a program, try t'trim it an' make it as small as postible.

This hyar is useful fo' at least three reasons. One: bein' see toinves effo't in simplifin' th' quesshun makes it mo'e likely thetyo'll git an answer, Two: simplifin' th' quesshun makes it mo'elikelly yo'll git a useful answer. Three:In th' process of refinin' yer bug repo't, yo' may develop a fix o' wawkaroun' yo'seff.

Dexcribe th' problem's symppoms, notcher guesses

It's not useful t'tell hackers whut yo' reckon is causin' yer problem, dawgone it.(Eff'n yer diagnostic theo'ies were sech hot stuff,d yo' be cornsultin'others fo' he'p?) So, make sho'nuff yer tellyng them th' raw symppoms ofwhut goes wrong, rather than yer interpretashuns an' theo'ies. Letthem does th' interpretashun an' diagnosis.

Stoopid:

ah's gittin' back-to-back SIG11 erro's on kernel compiles, an' suspek ahairline crack on one of th' Mammyboard traces. Whut in tarnation's th' bess way tocheck fo' them?

Smart:

Mah home-built K6/233 on an FIC-PA2007 Mammyboard (VIA Apollo VP2gritset) wif 256MB Co'sair PC133 SDRAM starts gittin' frequent SIG11erro's about 20 minutes af'er power-on durin' th' course of kernelcompiles, but nevah in th' fust 20 minutes. Rebootin' don't restarth' clock, but powerin' down on overnight does. Swappin' out all RAMdidn't he'p. Th' relevant part of a typical compile sesshun logfollers.

Dexcribe yer problem's symppoms in chronological o'der

The danged-est useful clues in figurin' out sumpin that went wrong offenlie in th' events eemeejutly prio'. So, yer account sh'd dexcribeprecisely whut yo' did, an' whut th' machine did, leadin' up t'theblowup. In th' case of comman'-line processes, havin' a sesshun log(e.g, acco'din' t' th' code o' th' heells!, usin' th' scripp utility) an' quotin' th' relevant twenty o' solines is mighty useful, ah reckon.

Eff'n th' program that blew up on yo' has diagnostic opshuns (sechas -v fo' vahbose), try t'reckon carefully about seleckin' opshunsthat will add useful debuggin' info'mashun t'th' transcripp.

Eff'n yer account inds up bein' long (mo'e than about four pareegraphs),it might be useful t'succinckly state th' problem up top, thenfoller wif th' chronological tale. That way, hackers will knowwhut t'watch fo' in readin' yer account.

Don't ax varmints t'reply by private email

Hackers believe solvin' problems sh'd be a public, transparentprocess durin' which a fust try at an answer kin an' sh'd beco'recked eff'n someone mo'e smart notices thet it is incomplete o'inco'reck. Also, they git some of their reward fo' bein'repondents fum bein' see t'be competent an' smart bytheir peers.

When yo' ax fo' a private reply, yer disruppin' both theprocess an' th' reward, cuss it all t' tarnation. Don't does this. It's therespondent's choice whether t'reply privately — an' eff'n he does, it's usually on account o' he reckons th' quesshun istoo ill-fo'med o' obvious t'be interestin' t'others.

Thar is one limited 'ception t'this rule. Eff'n yo' reckonth' quesshun is sech thet yer likely t'git a lot of answers thetare all purdy similar, then th' magic wo'ds is "email me an' I'llsummarize th' answers fo' th' group". It is courteous t'try an' save th' mailin' list o' noosgroup a flood of substantially identica'postin's — but yo' hafta keep th' promise t'summarize.

Be explicit about th' quesshun yo' have

Open-ended quesshuns tend t'be perceived as open-ended timesinks. Th' varmints most likely t'be able t'give yo' a useful answerare also th' busiess varmints (if only on account o' they take on the dawgoned-estwawk themselves). Varmints like thet is allergic t'open-ended timesinks, thus they tend t'be allergic t'open-ended quesshuns.

Yer mo'e likely t'git a useful response eff'n yerexplicit about whut yer hankerin' respondents t'do (provide pointers,send code, check yer patch, whutevah). This hyar will focus their effo't an' implicitly put an upper boun' on th' time an' inergy a respondent has t'put in t'he'pin' yo'. This hyar is fine.

To unnerstan' th' wo'ld th' experts live in, reckon of expertises an' abundant resource an' time t'respnd as a scarce one. Th' less of a time commitment yo' implicitly ax fo', th' mo'e likely yerto git an answer fum someone pow'ful fine an' pow'ful busy.

So it is useful t'frame yer quesshun t'minimize th' timecommitment required fo' an expert t'field it — but this hyar is offen not th' same thin' as simplifyin' th' quesshun. Thus, fo' example, "Kin yo' gimme a pointer t'a fine explanashun of X?" is usually a smarter quesshun than "W'd yo' explain X, please?". Eff'n yo' havesome code thet ain't wawkin', it is usually smarter t'ax fo' someonet to explain whut's wrong wif it than it is t'ax someone t'fix it.

Don't post homewawk quesshuns

Hackers is fine at spottin' homewawk quesshuns; most of us havedone them ourselves. Them quesshuns is fo' yo' t'wawk out, so thet yo' will larn fum th' experience. It is OK toax fo' hints, but not fo' intire solushuns.

Prune pointless queries

Resist th' temppashun t'close yer reuess fo' he'p wifsemannically-null quesshuns like "Kin ennyone he'p me?" o' "Is thar ananswer?" Fust: eff'n yo've writ yer problem dexcripshun ha'fwaycompetently, sech tacked-on quesshuns is at bess superfluous. Second: on account o' they is superfluous, hackers find them annoyin'— an' is likely t'return logically impeccable but dismissive answers like "Yessuh, yo' kin be he'ped" an' "No, thar is nohe'p fo' yo'."

Don't flag yer quesshun as "Urjunt", even eff'n it is fo' yo'.

Thet's yer problem, not ours. Claimin' urjuncy is mighty likely t'be counter-productive: most hackers will simply delete sech messages as rude an' se'fish attemptps to elicit eemeejut an' special attentshun.

Courtesy nevah hurts, an' sometimes he'ps

Be courteous. Use "Please" an' "Thanks in advance". Make it clear thet yo' appreesheate th' time varmint's spend he'pin' yo' fo' free.

To be honest, this hyar ain't as impo'tant as (an' kinnot substeeotoefo') bein' grammatical, clear, precise an' dexcripive, avoidin' proprietary fo'mats etc.: hackers in juneral'd rather git somewhut brusque but technically sharp bug repo'ts than polite vagueness. (Eff'n this puzzles yo', remember thet we value a quesshun by whut it larnesus.)

Howevah, eff'n yo've gotcher technical ducks in a row, politeness does increase yer chances of gittin' a usefulan' answer.

(We muss note thet th' only serious objectshun we haf received to this hyar how-to fum veteran hackers is t' th' recommendashun t' use "Thanks in advance". Some hackers feel this hyar connotes an intenshun notto thank ennybody a'erwards. Our recommendashun is t' do both.)

Foller up wif a brief note on th' solushun

Send a note a'er th' problem has been solved t'all who he'ped yo'; let them know how it came out an' thank them agin fo' their he'p. Eff'n th' problem attracted juneral interest in a mailin' list o' noosgroup, it's appropriate t' post th' follerup thar.

Yer follerup don't hafta be long an' involved; a simple "Howdy - it was a failed netwawk cable! Thanks, ev'ryone. - Billy Joe" 'd be better than nothin'. In fact, a sho't an' sweet summary is better than a long dissertashun unless th' solushun has real technical depph. Saywhut ackshun solved th' problem, but yo' need not replay th' whole troubleshootin' sequence.

Besides bein' courteous an' info'mative, this hyar so't of follerup will he'p others searchin' th' archive of th' mailin'-list/noosgroup/fo'um to know exactly which solushun he'ped yo' an' thus may also he'p them, dawgone it.

Last, an' not least, this hyar so't of follerup he'ps ev'rybody who assisted feel a satisfyin' sense of closure about th' problem, dawgone it. Eff'n yo' are not a techie o' hacker yo' seff, trest us thet this hyar feelin' is very impo'tant t' th' gurus an' experts yo' tapped fo' he'p. Problem narratives thet trail off into unresolved nothin'ness is frestratin' thin's; hackers itch t' see them resolved, cuss it all t' tarnation. Th' fine karma thet scratchin' thet itch arns yo' will be mighty, mighty he'pful t' yo' nexttime

yo' need t'pose a quesshun.

How To Interpret AnswersRTFM an' STFW: How To Tell Yo've Seriously Screwed Up

Thar is an ancient an' hallered tradishun: eff'n yo' git a reply thetreads "RTFM", th' varmint who sent it reckons yo' sh'd haf Read TheFuckin' Manual, ah reckon. He is almost sartinly right. Git read it.

RTFM has a yo'nger relative. Eff'n yo' git a reply thet reads "STFW", th' varmint who sent it reckons yo' sh'd haf Searched TheFuckin' Web. Well bust mah britches an' call me stalker. He is almost sartinly right. Git search it.

Offen, th' varmint sendin' eifer of these replies has th' manualo' th' web page wif th' info'mashun yo' need open, an' is lookin' atit as he types. These replies mean thet he reckons (a) th' info'mashunyo' need is easy t'find, an' (b) yo' will larn mo'e eff'n yo' seek outh' info'mashun than eff'n yo' haf it spoon-fed t'yo'.

Yo' sh'dn't be offended by this; by hacker stan'ards, he isshowin' yo' a rough kind of respeck simply by not igno'in' yo'. Yo'sh'd instead thank him fo' his gran'Mammyly kindness.

Eff'n yo' doesn't unnerstan'...

Eff'n yo' doesn't unnerstan' th' answer, does not eemeejutly bounceback a deman' fo' clarificashun. Use th' same tools thet yo' used totry an' answer yer origeenal quesshun (manuals, FAQs, th' Web, skilledfriends) t'unnerstan' th' answer. Then, eff'n yo' still need t'ax fo'clarificashun, exhibit whut yo' haf larned, cuss it all t' tarnation.

Fo' example, suppose ah tell yo': "It soun's like yo've got astuck zentry; yo'll need t'clear it." Then:

Here's a bad follerup quesshun: "Whut in tarnation'sa zentry?"

Here's a fine follerup quesshun: "OK, Iread th' man page an' zentries is only menshuned unner th' -z an' -pswitches. Neifer of them says ennythin' about clearin' zentries. Is it one of these o' is ah missin' sumpin hyar?"

Dealin' wif rudeness

Much of whut looks like rudeness in hacker circles is notaimed t'give offence. Rather, it's th' produck of th' direck,cut-through-the-bullshit communicashuns style thet is natural tovarmint who is mo'e concerned about solvin' problems than makin'others feel warm an' fuzzy.

When yo' perceive rudeness, try t'reack calmly. Eff'n someoneis pow'ful ackin' out, it is mighty likely thet a senio' varmint on thelist o' noosgroup o' fo'um will call him o' her on it. Eff'n thet don't happen an' yo' lose yer temper, itis likely thet th' varmint yo' lose it at was behavin' wifin thehacker community's no'ns an' yo' will beconsidered at fault. This hyar will hurt yer chances of gittin' theinfo'mashun o' he'p yo' want.

On t'other han', yo' will occashunally helter-skelter acrost rudeness an'posturin' thet is quite gratuitous. Th' flip-side of th' above isthet it is accepttable fo'm t'slam real offeners quite hard,disseckin' their misbehavio' wif a sharp vahbal sca'pel, ah reckon. Be mighty,mighty sho'nuff of yer groun' befo'e yo' try this, howevah. Th' linebetween co'reckin' an' incivility an' startin' a pointless flamewar is thin'nuff thet hackers themselves not infrequently blunner acrost it; eff'nyer a noobie o' an outsider, yer chances of avoidin' sech ablunner is low. Eff'n yer a'fer info'mashun rather than intertainment,it's better t'keep yer fingers off th' keyboard than t'risk this.

(Some varmint assert thet menny hackers haf a mild fo'm of autismo' Asperger's Syndrome, an' is acshully missin' some of th' braincircuitry thet lubricates `no'mal' hoomin social interackshun. This hyar mayo' may not be true. Eff'n yer not a hacker yo'seff, it may he'p yo'cope wif our eccentricities eff'n yo' reckon of us as bein'brain-damaged, cuss it all t' tarnation. Git right ahaid. We won't care; welike bein' whutevah it is we are, an' junerallyhave a healthy skeppicism about clinical labels.)

In th' next seckshun, we'll talk about a diffrent issue; th' kind of `rudeness' yo'll see when yo' misbehave.

On Not Reackin' Like A Loser

Odds is yo'll screw up a few times on hacker communityfo'ums — in ways detailed in this hyar article, o' similar. Colonel Bobou'll be told exactly how yo' screwed up, postibly wif colourfulasides. In public.

When this hyar happens, th' wo'st thin' yo' kin does is whine about theexperience, claim t'have been vahbally assaulted, deman' apologies,scream, hold yer breath, thrett up lawsueyts, complain t'varmint'semployers, leave th' toilet seat up, etc. Instead, hyar's whut yo'do:

Git on over it. It's no'mal, ah reckon. In fack, it's healthy an' appropriate.

Community stan'ards does not maintain themselves: They'remaintained by varmint's actively applyin' them, visibly, inpublic. Don't whine thet all criticism sh'd haf beenconveyed via private mail: Thet's not how it wawks. No' is it usefulto insist yo've been varmintally insulted when someone comments thetone of yer claims was wrong, o' thet his views differ. Them areloser attitudes.

Thar haf been hacker fo'ums whar, outta some misguided sense ofhyper-courtesy, participants is banned fum postin' enny fault-findin'wif t'other's posts, an' told "Don't say ennythin' eff'n yer unwillin'to he'p th' user." Th' resultin' departure of clueful participants toelsewhar cuzs them t'dexceed into meanin'less babble an' becomeuseless as technical fo'ums.

Exaggeratedly "friendly" (in thet fashion) o' useful: Pick one.

Remember: When thet hacker tells yo' thet yo've screwed up, an' (nomatter how gruffly) tells yo' not t'do it agin, he's ackin' outtaconcern fo' (1) yo' an' (2) his community. It'd be much easier fo' himto igno'e yo' an' filter yo' outta his life. Eff'n yo' kin't manage t'begrateful, at least haf a li'l dignity, doesn't whine, an' doesn't speckto be treated like a fragile doll jest on account o' yer a noocomer wifa theatrically hypersensitive soul an' delushuns of intitlement.

Quesshuns Not To Ask

Here is some classic stoopid quesshuns, an' whut hackers is reckonin'when they doesn't answer them, dawgone it.

Q: Whar kin ah find program X?

Q: Mah {program, cornfigurashun, SQL statement} don't wawk

Q: ah's havin' problems wif mah Windows machine. Kin yo' he'p?

Q: ah's havin' problems installin' Linux o' X. Kin yo' he'p?

Q: How kin ah crack root/steal channel-ops privileges/read someone'semail?

Q: Whar kin ah find program X?

A: Th' same place I'd find it, fool — at t'other ind of aweb search. Ghod, don't ev'rybody knows how t'use Google yet?

Q: Mah {program, cornfigurashun, SQL statement} don't wawk

A: This hyar is not a quesshun, an' ah's not interested in playin'Twenty Quesshuns t'pry yer acshul quesshun outta yo' — ah havebetter thin's t'do. On seein' sumpin like this, mah reactshun isno'mally of one of th' follerin':

- do yo' haf ennythin' else t'add t'thet?
- oh, thass too bad, ah hope yo' git it fixed, cuss it all t' tarnation.
- an' this hyar has exactly whut t'do wif me?

Q: ah's havin' problems wif mah Windows machine. Kin yo' he'p?

A: Yessuh. Throw out thet Microsoft' trash an' install an open-sourceoperatin' system like Linux o' BSD.

Q: ah's havin' problems installin' Linux o' X. Kin yo' he'p?

A: No. I'd need han's-on access t'yer machine t'troubleshootthis. Git ax yer local Linux user group fo' han's-on he'p. (Yo' kinfind a list of user groups har.)

Q: How kin ah crack root/steal channel-ops privileges/read someone'semail?

A: Yer a lowlife fo' wantin' t'do sech thin's an' a mo'on fo' axin' a hacker t'he'p yo'.

Good an' Bad Quesshuns

Finally, ah's a-gonna illestrate how t'ax quesshuns in a smart wayby example; pairs of quesshuns about th' same problem, one axed in a stoopid way an' one in a smart way.

Stoopid:Whar kin ah find out stuff about th' Foonly Flurbamatic?

This hyar quesshun jest begs fo' "STFW" as areply.

Smart:ah used Google t'try t'find "Foonly Flurbamatic 2600" on th' Web, butah got no useful hits. Does ennyone knows whar ah can find programmin'info'mashun on this hyar device?

This hyar one has already STFWed, an' soun's like he might haf a rea'problem, dawgone it.

Stoopid:ah cain't git th' code fum projeck foo t'compile. Whuffo' is it busted?

He assooms that somebody else screwed up. Arrogant of him, dawgone it.

Smart:Th' code fum projeck foo don't compile unner Nulix vahshun 6.2. I've read th' FAQ, but it don't haf ennythin' in it aboutNulix-related problems. Hyar's a transcripp of mah compilashunattempp; is it sumpin ah did?

He's specified th' environment, he's read th' FAQ, he's showin'th' erro', an' an' he's not assumin' his problems is someone else'sfault. This hyar guy might be wo'th some attenshun.

Stoopid:ah's havin' problems wif mah Mammyboard, cuss it all t' tarnation. Kin ennybody he'p?

J. Ran'om Hacker's response t'this is likely t'be "Right. Do yo'need burpin' an' diaperin', too?" follered by a punch of th' deletekey.

Smart:ah tried X, Y, an' Z on th' S2464 Mammyboard, cuss it all t' tarnation. When thet didn't wawk,ah tried A, B, an' C. Note th' curious symppom when ah tried C.Obviously th' flo'bish is grommickin', but th' results isn't whut onemight speck. Whut in tarnation is th' usual cuzs of grommickin' on Athlon MPMammyboards? Ennybody got ideas fo' mo'e tests ah can helter-skelter to pin downth' problem?

This hyar varmint, on t'other han', seems wo'thy of ananswer. He has exhibited problem-solvin' intellyjunce rather thanpassively waitin' fo' an answer t'drop fum on high.

In th' last quesshun, notice th' subtle but impo'tant differencebetween deman'in' "Gimme an answer" an' "Please he'p me figger outwhut addishunal diagnostics ah can helter-skelter to achieve inlightenment."

In fack, th' fo'm of thet last quesshun is closely based on areal incident thet happened in August 2001 on th' linux-kernel mailin'list. ah (Eric) was th' one axin' th' quesshun thet time. ah wasseein' mahsterious lockups on a Tyan S2464 Mammyboard, cuss it all t' tarnation. Thelistmembers supplied th' critical info'mashun ah needed t'solvethem, dawgone it.

By axin' th' quesshun in th' way ah did, ah gave varmints sumpinto chew on; ah made it easy an' attractkive fo' them t'git involved, cuss it all t' tarnation. Idemonstrated respeck fo' mah peers' ability an' invited them t'consultwif me as a peer. ah also demonstrated respeck fo' th' value of theirtime by tellyng them th' blind alleys ah had already helter-skelter down, as enny fool kin plainly see.

Aferwards, when ah thanked ev'ryone an' remarked how fine theprocess had wawked, an lkml member obsarved thet he thunk it had wawked not on account o' ah's a "name" on thet list, but on account o' ah axed thequesshun in th' right fo'm, dawgone it.

Hackers is in some ways a mighty ruthless meritocracy; ah'ssartin he was right, an' thet eff'n ah had behavedlike a sponge ah w'd haf been flamed o' igno'ed no matter who ah was.His suggestshun thet ah write up th' whole incident as instruckshun tooters led direckly t'th' composishun of this hyar guide.

Eff'n Yo' Cain't Git An Answer

Eff'n yo' kin't git an answer, please doesn't take it varmintally thetwe doesn't feel we kin he'p yo'. Sometimes th' members of th' axedgroup may simply not knows th' answer. No response is not th' sameas bein' igno'ed, though admittedly it's hard t'spot th' differencefum outside.

In juneral, simply re-postin' yer quesshun is a bad idea. Thiswill be see as pointlessly annoyin'.

Thar is other sources of he'p yo' kin hoof it to, offen sourcesbetter adapped t'a novice's needs.

Thar is menny online an' local user groups who is enthusiastsabout th' sof'ware, even though they may nevah haf writ ennysof'ware themselves. These groups offen fo'm so thet varmints kin he'petch other an' he'p noo users.

Thar is also plenty of commercial companies yo' kin corntrackwif fo' he'p, both large an' small (Red Hat an' Linuxcare is two ofhe bess known; thar is menny others). Don't be dismayed at th' ideaof havin' t'pay fo' a bit of he'p! Fry mah hide! Afer all, eff'n yer car ingineblows a haid gaxet, chances is yo'd take it t'a repair shopan' pay t'git it fixed, cuss it all t' tarnation. Even eff'n th' sof'ware didn't cost yo'ennythin', yo' kin't speck thet suppo't will allus come fo'free.

Fo' popular sof'ware like Linux, thar is are at least 10,000 usersper developer. It's jest not postible fo' one varmint t'han'le thesuppo't calls fum on over 10,000 users. Remember thet even eff'n yo' haftapay fo' suppo't, yer still payin' much less than eff'n yo' had t'buyth' sof'ware as fine (an' suppo't fo' closed-source sof'ware is usually mo'eexpensive an' less competent than suppo't fo' open-source sof'ware).

Related Resources

Eff'n yo' need instruckshun in th' basics of how varminal computers,Unix, an' th' Internet wawk, seeTh' Unix an' Internet Fundamentals HOWTO.

When yo' release sof'ware o' write patches fo' sof'ware, try tofoller th' guidelines in th' Sof'ware Release Prackice HOWTO.