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Op-Ed Contributor

The Six Stages of E-Mail

By NORA EPHRON

Stage One: Infatuation

I just got e-mail! I can't believe it! It's so great! Here's my handle. Write me! Who said letter writing was dead? Were they ever wrong! I'm writing letters like crazy for the first time in years. I come home and ignore all my loved ones and go straight to the computer to make contact with total strangers. And how great is AOL? It's so easy. It's so friendly. It's a community. Wheeeee! I've got mail!

Stage Two: Clarification

O.K., I'm starting to understand — e-mail isn't letter-writing at all, it's something else entirely. It was just invented, it was just born and overnight it turns out to have a form and a set of rules and a language all its own. Not since the printing press. Not since television. It's revolutionary. It's life-altering. It's shorthand. Cut to the chase. Get to the point.

And it saves so much time. It takes five seconds to accomplish in an e-mail message something that takes five minutes on the telephone. The phone requires you to converse, to say things like hello and goodbye, to pretend to some semblance of interest in the person on the other end of the line. Worst of all, the phone occasionally forces you to make actual plans with the people you talk to — to suggest lunch or dinner — even if you have no desire whatsoever to see them.

No danger of that with e-mail.

E-mail is a whole new way of being friends with people: intimate but not, chatty but not, communicative but not; in short, friends but not. What a breakthrough. How did we ever live without it? I have more to say on this subject, but I have to answer an Instant Message from someone I almost know.

Stage Three: Confusion

I have done nothing to deserve any of this:

Viagra!!!! Best Web source for Vioxx. Spend a week in Cancún. Have a rich beautiful lawn. Astrid would like to be added as one of your friends. XXXXXXXXVideos. Add three inches to the length of your penis. The Democratic National Committee needs you. Virus Alert. FW: This will make you laugh. FW: This is funny. FW: This is hilarious. FW: Grapes and raisins toxic for dogs. FW: Gabriel García Márquez's Final Farewell. FW: Kurt Vonnegut's Commencement Address. FW: The Neiman Marcus Chocolate Chip Cookie recipe. AOL Member: We value your opinion. A message from Hillary Clinton. Find low mortgage payments, Nora. Nora, it's your time to shine. Need to fight off bills, Nora? Yvette would like to be added as one of your friends. You have failed to establish a full connection to AOL.

Stage Four: Disenchantment

Help! I'm drowning. I have 112 unanswered e-mail messages. I'm a writer — imagine how many unanswered messages I would have if I had a real job. Imagine how much writing I could do if I didn't have to answer all this e-mail. My eyes are dim. I have a mild case of carpal tunnel syndrome. I have a galloping case of attention deficit disorder because every time I start to

write something, the e-mail icon starts bobbing up and down and I'm compelled to check whether anything good or interesting has arrived. It hasn't. Still, it might, any second now. And yes it's true — I can do in a few seconds with e-mail what would take much longer on the phone, but most of my messages are from people who don't have my phone number and would never call me in the first place. In the brief time it took me to write this paragraph, three more messages arrived. Now I have 115 unanswered messages. Strike that: 116.

Stage Five: Accommodation

Yes. No. No :). No :(. Can't. No way. Maybe. Doubtful. Sorry. So Sorry. Thanks. No thanks. Not my thing. You must be kidding. Out of town. O.O.T. Try me in a month. Try me in the fall. Try me in a year. NoraE@aol.com can now be reached at NoraE81082@gmail.com.

Stage Six: Death

Call me.

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