Getting started

How to begin using LISTSERV

In this section, we will see how to use LISTSERV to locate a mailing list related to a particular topic, subscribe to it, participate in the discussions, and otherwise "get information out of the system". To show how easy LISTSERV lists are for everyone to use, we will choose a topic that is focused on the interest of an individual user. All the examples in this tutorial are real, and you can duplicate them easily.

How to send mail to LISTSERV

In the following sections, you will see numerous references to "sending commands to LISTSERV". All LISTSERV commands are sent to the server by email. This means that you must create a new mail message using whatever command this requires for your mail client (click on "New message" or its equivalent for most mail clients) addressed to the LISTSERV address. Let’s say for the sake of argument that the list you want to subscribe to (or are currently subscribed to) is running on a server called LISTSERV.MYCORP.COM. So you would create a new message and address it to LISTSERV@LISTSERV.MYCORP.COM if you wanted to send a command to that server.

How to locate interesting lists

Now that you know how to send commands to LISTSERV, the next thing to do is to locate a list with the right kind of experts to answer your question. Your task is to find out:

What are the best selective culture media to grow Lactobacillus?

The simplest way to look for a list is to search the so-called "list of lists" that LISTSERV maintains automatically. Now, it would probably be unrealistic to expect to find a list dedicated to the various kinds of selective culture media used to grow Lactobacillus. Even with nearly 10,000 public lists, that would still leave us with a couple dozen lists on various aspects of lactobacilli, and not very much space left for the computer experts to talk about virtual reality and C++. In fact, a list about general aspects of the study of lactobacilli seems like the most likely place to find the answer. So let's look for that and see what we find.

And the easiest way to do that is to search CataList™, the catalog of LISTSERV lists maintained at L-Soft's web site. Using your favorite forms-capable browser, go to

http://www.lsoft.com/lists/LIST_Q.html

and type a key word in the "Look for:" box.

However, before we type in a keyword, consider this: If we ask for lactobacillus and what it had in its list was lacto-bacillus or bacillus lactis or even just lactid acid, it is liable to say there is no such list and we will have to spend 15 minutes trying all possibilities. The simplest thing to do is to request two searches on the root words, i.e. one on LACT and one on BACILL. This should catch most related lists, even though this kind of search will probably return more lists than wanted. So let's first type BACILL in the "Look for:" box and click on "Start the search!"

Unfortunately, after executing the first search, CataList claimed that no list matched our search string BACILL. But when we did a second search for LACT, CataList did find something:
Bacteria, of course! It would have been a good idea to do a search on that as well (this would have shown LACTACID and another list, about cyanobacterial toxins). Anyway, this LACTACID list looks like it is about lactobacilli, so the most difficult has been done and all we need to do now is join the list and ask our question. To find out how to do that, all we have to do is click on the hyperlink for LACTACID@SEGATE.SUNET.SE, and get:

**LACTACID@SEGATE.SUNET.SE**

Lactic Acid Bacteria Forum

List name:
- LACTACID

Host name:
- SEGATE.SUNET.SE

Host alias:
- SEGATE.BITNET

Features:
- Spam filter
- Archives
- Web archive interface
- Digests
- High Performance version
- LSMTTP™ powered

To subscribe, send mail to LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE with the command (paste it!):

    SUBSCRIBE LACTACID

For more information, you can:

Take a look at the list's configuration

Contact the list owner at LACTACID-request@SEGATE.SUNET.SE

Check the other lists at SEGATE.SUNET.SE

Alternately (for instance, if you don't have a forms-capable web browser), you may choose to e-mail your search to LISTSERV. In this case, you send mail following this example:

To : LISTSERV@LISTSERV.net
Subject : (can be left blank)
----- Message Text -----

search-text can be any keyword to be searched for. In this case, we want to use the keyword "LACT", as we did above. So we create a message as follows:

To : LISTSERV@LISTSERV.net
Subject : lactic acid list search
------- Message Text -------
list global LACT

This message will return two messages to your mailbox, one simply stating that your command has completed successfully, and one with the results of your search. The latter will look like this:

Excerpt from the LISTSERV lists known to LISTSERV@SEARN.SUNET.SE
---------------------------------------------------------------------
1 Nov 1996 19:05
(search string: LACT)

L-Soft international, Inc. owns the copyright to this compilation of Internet mailing lists (the "Compilation") and hereby grants you the right to copy the enclosed information for the sole purpose of identifying, locating and subscribing to mailing lists of interest. Any other usages of the Compilation, including, without limitation, solicitation, tele-marketing, "spamming", "mail-bombing" and "spoofing" are strictly prohibited.

* To subscribe, send mail to LISTSERV@LISTSERV.NET with the following *
* command in the text (not the subject) of your message:               *
* SUBSCRIBE listname                                                *
* Replace 'listname' with the name in the first column of the table. *
---------------------------------------------------------------------

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network-wide ID</th>
<th>Full address and list description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GALCIV-L</td>
<td><a href="mailto:GALCIV-L@VM3090.EGE.EDU.TR">GALCIV-L@VM3090.EGE.EDU.TR</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Galactic Civilizations Discussion List</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACTACID</td>
<td><a href="mailto:LACTACID@SEGATE.SUNET.SE">LACTACID@SEGATE.SUNET.SE</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lactic Acid Bacteria Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACTNET</td>
<td><a href="mailto:LACTNET@LIBRARY.UMMED.EDU">LACTNET@LIBRARY.UMMED.EDU</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lactation Information and Discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remember that the general rule for searching is to keep your search terms as simple as possible when making your initial searches, and then be more specific to narrow them down.

How to join and leave a mailing list

Given the list name, joining the list is very easy. The command that needs to be sent is:
subscribe lactacid

And as usual, the command can be sent to LISTSERV@LISTSERV.NET or any other LISTSERV server (including the host server, LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE, of course). At this point, you can run into two minor problems if you are unlucky:

- LISTSERV insists on having a "real world" name for everyone on the list, because addresses such as 00038385@XXXMAIL.COM are not very informative to the other users of the list. Normally, LISTSERV will extract both your e-mail address and your real name from the mail headers generated by your computer. But some computer programs do not supply any real name, and LISTSERV may ask you to resend the command with your name, as in:

  subscribe lactacid Anna Galiena

- LISTSERV will then automatically insert the name you supplied in the headers of messages you send out to the list. When other people read the messages you post, they will see your name in addition to your e-mail address, and will not have to strain their memory with meaningless sequences of numbers.

- While you will never have this problem with lists you found by searching the "list of lists", some lists are confidential or otherwise not globally known throughout the LISTSERV network. In such cases, you must send the subscription to the server that is hosting the list, because the other servers (and in particular LISTSERV@LISTSERV.NET) will not know where to forward your request.

When you join a list, you are sent a little pamphlet which looks very boring and does not seem to have anything interesting to say about the list itself. Do not discard it! Treat it like a warranty card — no immediate value, but you never know when you might need it. You should make a new folder in your mail program for these little pamphlets and search it whenever you have an administrative question about a mailing list, instead of contacting the list owner directly. Although they do look the same from a distance, the pamphlets are customised to the individual lists and do not contain the same information. Finally, saving them in a dedicated mail folder makes it very easy for you to know what mailing lists you are subscribed to, and when you joined.

You can leave the list at any time by sending a SIGNOFF command to the host server (in this case, LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE):

  signoff lactacid

LISTSERV does not need your name for a signoff command, so there is no need to type it. Do not hesitate to subscribe to a list to see what it is really about, and then sign off a couple days later if it turns out not to be what you expected. Most list owners are used to that and will not be hurt or angry.

The OK Request

Depending on how the list is set up, once you have sent your subscription request you may receive a message like the one below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date: Tue, 7 May 1996 12:09:47 -0400</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From: &quot;L-Soft list server at SEGATE.SUNET.SE (1.8c)&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE">LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To: Your e-mail address</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subject: Command confirmation request (66B5D8)

Your command:

    SUBSCRIBE LACTACID Firstname Lastname

has been received. You must now reply to this message (as explained below) to complete your subscription. The purpose of this confirmation procedure is to check that the address LISTSERV is about to add to the list for your subscription is reachable. This is a typical procedure for high-volume lists and all new subscribers are subjected to it - you are not being singled out. Every effort has been made to make this verification as simple and painless as possible. Thanks in advance for your cooperation.

To confirm the execution of your command, simply reply to the present message and type "ok" (without the quotes) as the text of your message. Just the word "ok" - do not retype the command. This procedure will work with any mail program that fully conforms to the Internet standards for electronic mail. If you receive an error message, try sending a new message to LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE (without using the "reply" function - this is very important) and type "ok 66B5D8" as the text of your message.

Finally, your command will be cancelled automatically if you do not confirm it within 48h. After that time, you must start over and resend the command to get a new confirmation code. If you change your mind and decide that you do NOT want to confirm the command, simply discard the present message and let the command expire on its own.

This request confirms that the e-mail address that you used to subscribe to the list is valid. You should reply without including the original message. So if your mail program automatically quotes the message you are replying to, you should delete the quoted text before sending the "OK". Note also that you must reply from the address from which the original subscription request was sent. If you have trouble with the OK command and have already tried the "ok confirmation#" suggestion above, please contact the list owner for help.

Confirmation of Subscription

Once your subscription request has been successfully processed by LISTSERV you will receive confirmation similar to the message below:

Date: Tue, 7 May 1996 12:10:16 -0400
From: "L-Soft list server at SEGATE.SUNET.SE (1.8c)"
    <LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE>
To: Your e-mail address
Subject: Output of your job
You may also receive confirmation from the list owner that you are subscribed. It will look similar to the one below and reiterates valuable information from this guide, for a quick reference.

Date: Tue, 7 May 1996 12:10:15 -0400
From: "L-Soft list server at SEGATE.SUNET.SE (1.8c)"
<LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE>
Reply-to: LACTACID-request@SEGATE.SUNET.SE
To: <Your e-mail address>
Subject: You are now subscribed to the LACTACID list

Tue, 7 May 1996 12:10:15

Your subscription to the LACTACID list (Lactic Acid Bacteria Forum) has been accepted....

How To Send Mail To A List

Now that you are subscribed to the list, all you need to do is ask your question or participate in the current discussion and wait for someone to answer.

Posting new messages

To post a new message to the list you send mail to the list address using the same procedure as when you send mail to other people. Your mail program does not need to know that you are sending to a list. The list address is the name of the list, followed by the name of the machine where it is hosted, in our example: LACTACID@SEGATE.SUNET.SE. You can also use the CataList if you forgot where the list is located. Depending on how the list is set up, LISTSERV may or may not send you a copy of the messages you post. No matter which behavior the list owner chose to have by default, you can always instruct LISTSERV to behave the way you want it to. This is explained in the “How to set your subscription options” section later in this chapter.

Replying to messages from the list

Once you become familiar with LISTSERV and mailing lists, you will probably want to respond to a posting you have read. Don't be shy! People will not get upset at you for contributing. The best way to respond is by using the “reply” function of your mail program (which is sometimes called “answer”, “respond” or something similar). This way the message subject is preserved and the other subscribers can see that your message is a reply to the original question. You can of course post a new message, but you will then have to retype the subject, and if you enter something slightly different people may not realize it is a reply to a previous post. There is no universally correct place to send your reply. Most of the time, your reply will be useful to at least one other person on the list, but on the other hand that might be only a small fraction of the list membership, and some people might complain that you are wasting their time (some people say that anyway, so don't worry unless several people seem to share this opinion).

In general, if your reply is short there is little harm in sending it to everyone: it does not...
take much time to discard a message which is not interesting. On the other hand, if your reply is a 2000-line paper you wrote on the subject it might not be a good idea to send it to the list unless you are sure everyone is interested. Some people have to pay for mail by the character, or to download it to a personal computer through a low-speed modem. The best thing to do in that case is to send a short message to the list saying you wrote this paper, and that people who are interested can contact you for a copy. If you find a large number of requests in your mailbox the next morning, contact the list owner and suggest that they make the paper available from LISTSERV, so that subscribers who are interested can order it directly from the server and you are not interrupted every few minutes with a new request.

Most lists are organized as “forums” where public discussion is actively encouraged, and many of them are set so that hitting the “Reply” key or button will automatically direct replies back to the list. Unfortunately, this can sometimes be embarrassing if you end up inadvertently sending a private comment to the whole list. Fortunately, there is a very easy way to avoid this, and the good thing is that it works even for non-LISTSERV mail. It is a simple rule that is easy to remember once you understand its purpose:

| Always think before sending any message! |

Ask yourself a few simple questions

- Who is getting the message? Carefully check who your mail program intends to send the message to, and make sure this is where you wanted it to go. It is easy to click on the wrong icon, press the wrong key, misunderstand the meaning of a help file, or otherwise do something that will make your computer send the message to the wrong people.

- How well do you know these people? Can you trust people you have never met in person not to forward your comments to someone else, or to a list? And if they did, whose reputation would suffer the most - yours for saying these things, or theirs for forwarding without your permission?

- What is the worst thing that can happen to you if this message is used against you? Computers are not perfect and they sometimes do unpredictable things to perfectly valid messages. It may be a rare occurrence, but it happens; any system manager will have a lot of juicy stories to tell you about messages that were forwarded to him because they caused some system problem or other, and whose contents could have made a couple people lose their job if it had been shown to the right person. System managers normally are ethical people, but do you really want to rely on that?

- Have you removed extraneous information not germane to the discussion, such as copies of previous postings included by my mail program or long signature files?

You want to ask yourself these questions anyway, even if the message has nothing to do with LISTSERV, even if the list is set up to reply privately by default. In a non-computer situation, you would probably look around to see if someone can overhear you. Just use that same reflex to look around the list of recipients and decide if you can trust these people with what you said. If you develop this habit, you will never send to a list by mistake.

How To Upset People You Don’t Even Know

You should keep in mind that for any given list, there are at least three slightly different addresses, all of which point to different places and all of which are meant for specific
purposes. Some people who inhabit lists have a tendency to get upset when you send LISTSERV commands to the list address, for instance, or you may wonder why that posting you mailed to LISTSERV keeps coming back with notes like "Unknown command - HELLO". Try HELP." The following information intended to help you sort out these different addresses.

| If you want to send a message to all the PEOPLE on the mailing list, the right address to use is: |
| listname@hostname |
| (example: LACTACID@SEGATE.SUNET.SE) |

| If you want to send a COMMAND for the computer to execute, the right address is: |
| LISTSERV@hostname |
| (example: LISTSERV@SEGATE.SUNET.SE) |

| If you want to contact the person who owns the mailing list, write to: |
| listname-Request@hostname |
| (example: LACTACID-Request@SEGATE.SUNET.SE) |

Please note that if you send a message to the person who manages the mailing list you may receive a confirmation message that begins like this (to remind you that it is not the right address to send commands to):

```
Your message to LACTACID-request@SEGATE.SUNET.SE has been forwarded to the "list owners" (the people who manage the LACTACID list)....
```

**How To See Who Is On The List**

To see who is subscribed to the list, send the REVIEW command to LISTSERV following this example:

```
REVIEW LACTACID
```

If the list owner allows this option, LISTSERV will return a copy of the "list header" and a list of all the subscribers. The list header contains the title of the list, various configuration parameters, and a short description of what the list is about (refer to Chapter 1 for more information about list headers). There are also some statistics about the list, after the name and address of the last subscriber, and there may be a mention of "concealed" subscribers. See the description of the CONCEAL/NOCONCEAL option below.

By default, the list of subscribers will be sorted by host name, *i.e.* people whose account is on the same machine will be next to each other. This is mostly for historical reasons (some list owners have programs that require the list to be in that order). You can also ask LISTSERV to sort the list by surname:

```
REVIEW LACTACID BY NAME
```

Sometimes, it may be more interesting to have the subscribers grouped by country:

```
REVIEW LACTACID BY COUNTRY
```
LISTSERV has no way of knowing in what country a person is actually living. All it can do is check the country in which his computer is located. Note that this means that if you are (for instance) a German CompuServe user, you will be counted as a USA user because your address ends with COMPUUSERVE.COM. This is not meant to be insulting or to belittle other countries. It is simply a case where LISTSERV can't tell from your address that you don't live in the USA.

For your convenience, country codes are listed in Appendix A.

**How To Set Your Subscription Options**

First, you may want to review your subscriber options. To do this you use the query command. Send this command to LISTSERV@hostname (where hostname is the name of the server where the list is hosted):

```
Query listname
```

**Options that may be set**

**Mail/NOMail**

Setting this option to Mail indicates that you will receive mail from the list. NOMail is the complementary command that stops mail but leaves you subscribed to the list. (NOMail is often a good compromise for users who are leaving the office for vacation or on extended business trips, and who don't want a full mailbox on their return.) The format of the messages received is controlled by the DIGEST/INDEX/NODIGEST/NOINDEX options (see below).

Please note, if you use an auto-responder while on vacation without setting your subscription options to NOMail, your “vacation” messages may bounce back to LISTSERV and you may be “served off” from LISTSERV when you return. This is because LISTSERV will be unable to process the message from your auto-responder and will consider it an error. Being “served off” simply means that any commands you send to LISTSERV will be ignored until someone else sends a SERVE command on your behalf. See Appendix E for more information about the SERVE command.

**DIGest/NODIGest**

Causes the subscriber to receive one posting per digest cycle (typically daily) rather than individual messages as they are processed by LISTSERV. The MAIL/NOMAIL option controls whether messages should be delivered, and the DIGEST/INDEX/NODIGEST/NOINDEX option controls the format in which messages should be delivered. Thus, switching to NOMAIL and back to MAIL does not destroy the digest/index/normal delivery setting; it simply determines whether or not LISTSERV should send any list mail to you. To provide as much compatibility with older syntax as possible, the four options operate as follows:

- **DIGest**: enable digest delivery mode (which negates INDEX), enable mail delivery.
- **INDEX**: enable index delivery mode (which negates DIGEST), enable mail delivery
- **NOMAIL**: disable mail delivery.
- **Mail**: restore mail delivery, without altering the digest/index/normal delivery setting
Please note that in extreme cases, subscribers using the DIGEST option may receive more than one digest per cycle if the digest limit is reached before the end of the cycle.

INDEX/NOINDEX
Causes the you to receive one posting per digest cycle containing only an index of subject topics for all messages during that cycle. Instructions on how to retrieve the individual postings are included with the index. See the section on DIGEST (above) for further information.

Note that non-mainframe LISTSERV servers prior to version 1.8c do not support the INDEX option. To find out which version of LISTSERV a specific list is running on, send the command

RELEASE

to LISTSERV@hostname, where hostname is the name of the server where the list is hosted. If the response indicates that the server is running LISTSERV version 1.8b for VM, INDEX will work. If the response indicates that the server is running LISTSERV version 1.8b for any other platform (VMS, Unix, or Windows), then INDEX is not available. You can find out for sure whether or not INDEX is supported for your list by simply sending the SET listname INDEX command and reading the response.

ACK/NOACK/MSGack
These three command words control the level of acknowledgment you receive when posting to the list. ACK causes LISTSERV to send a short confirmation message to the sender of the postings when the post has been received and distributed. NOACK disables the confirmation feature for the sender. MSGack is essentially obsolete; if you do not have BITNET/NJE connectivity to the LISTSERV host in question, setting a list to MSGack is equivalent to NOACK.

CONCEAL/NOCONCEAL
Occasionally, a subscriber may not want his presence to be known to someone else making a casual REVIEW of the list. You may choose to “hide” your subscription from the REVIEW command by using the CONCEAL command. Conversely, a subscriber may choose to remove this restriction by issuing the NOCONCEAL command. Note that the list owner can always obtain a list of all subscribers.

REPro/NOREPro
This option controls whether or not you will get a copy of your posts back from the list after they are processed. Generally, if your mail program is configured to file copies of your outgoing mail, or if you have one of the acknowledgment options (ACK/MSGack) enabled, this option should be set to NOREPro. If, on the other hand, you are set to NOACK and doesn’t keep a copy of outgoing mail, this option should probably be set to REPro.

MIME/NOMIME
Toggles MIME functions on and off. Currently this is only useful if the user has a mail client that supports MIME digests. Note that users who send their SUBSCRIBE command using a MIME-compliant agent will have this option set automatically unless "Default-Options= NOMIME" is specified for the list.

In future versions, this toggle may control other MIME functions.
Options for mail headers of incoming postings

By specifying one of the following command words, the subscriber can control the amount of mail header information in the header of list mail. The syntax is `SET listname headertype`, where `headertype` is one of the following:

- **FULLHdr** “Full” mail headers (default)
- **SHORTdr** Short headers
- **DUALhdr** Dual headers, useful with PC or Mac mail programs
- **SUBJecthdr** Tells LISTSERV to add the list's default subject tag to the subject line of mail coming from the list. To turn this off, simply set another mail header option. (This setting is generally additive to the other header options; however, note that if you have SHORT headers set, setting your option to SUBJecthdr will automatically change you to FULLHdr, as subject tags require at least full headers.)

Quite a few non-technical users are relying on non-RFC822 user interfaces for reading their mail. Quite often these user interfaces are user-friendly, quality implementations of a proprietary mail protocol which the users are proficient with, but which happens not to lend itself to bi-directional mapping to RFC822. The users may have a good reason for using this particular program, and they complain that it is not always clear what list the postings come from, or who posted them. Other users have very primitive mail programs which do not preserve the original RFC822 header and may not even have a “message subject” concept. The user knows which list the message came from, but not who posted it, making private replies impossible.

The DUALhdr (minimum abbreviation: DUAL) is provided to help solve this problem. Dual headers are regular short (SHORTHdr) headers followed by a second header inside the message body. This second header shows what list the message is coming from (‘Sender:’), the name and address of the person who posted it (‘Poster:’), the poster’s organization, if present, and the message subject. The date is not shown because even the most primitive mail programs appear to supply a usable message date. Generally, users will be well-served by the FULL header option, which is the default.

The new SUBJECTHDR (minimum abbreviation: SUBJ) header option is provided for users who want to see a “tag” in the subject line of their incoming list mail that indicates where the mail is coming from (e.g., to activate a filter in their mail program to drop the message into a specified notebook). SUBJECTHDR is slightly different from the other header options, as it simply adds to the existing header definition—for instance, if the user is already set to DUALHDR, a `SET listname SUBJ` command leaves DUALHDR in effect and just adds the tag to the subject line. To turn off the subject tags, the user simply sets another header option, which automatically turns the SUBJECTHDR option off.

As noted above, if you have SHORT headers set, setting your option to SUBJecthdr will automatically change you to FULLHdr, as subject tags require at least full headers.

Generally, you will be well-served by the FULL header option, which is the default.

**TOPICS**

List topics provide powerful “sub-list” capabilities to a list. Not all list owners use them, but when properly set up and used, topics give subscribers the ability to receive list postings in a selective manner, based on the beginning of the “Subject:” line of the mail header. If list topics are enabled, this option allows you to specify which topics you will receive. The
syntax of a SET TOPICS statement is significantly different from that of the other options. It is:

\[
\text{SET listname TOPICS: xxx yyy zzz}
\]

where \(xxx\), \(yyy\), and \(zzz\) can is list of all the topics the subscriber wishes to receive. In that case these topics replace any other topics the subscriber may have subscribed to before. For instance, after ‘SET XYZ-L TOPICS: NEWS BENCH’, the subscriber will receive only postings on the topics of news and benchmarks, and nothing else.

The colon after the keyword TOPICS: is optional, and TOPICS= is also accepted. You should not forget to include the special OTHER topic if you want to receive general discussions which were not labeled properly. On the other hand, if you only wants to receive properly labeled messages it should not be included. ALL does include OTHER. Finally, it is important to note that topics are active only when your subscription is set to MAIL. Digests always contain all the postings that were made, because the same digest is prepared and sent to all the subscribers.

**How To Deal With Rude People**

The Internet, just like the real world, has its share of rude people. While there isn’t much one can do about it, it would be silly to avoid using the Internet simply for fear that someone might insult you in public one day. Sooner or later, it will happen, and the best you can do is to be prepared for this. When it does happen, the only thing you absolutely must not do is whack the “reply” button and send off a stream of insults at your offender - or if you absolutely must, at least make sure that you do so in private. All you would achieve with a stream of insults is what is called a “flame war” in network jargon - dozens of people casting insults at each other, and a very swollen mailbox. Insulting someone on a public list is very much like punching someone in the face in a crowded bar near closing time; don’t do it unless you want to get into a fight that could be painful for everyone.

Now, of course, you have been insulted and some factually incorrect statements may have been made about you, or your words may have been twisted around to make them sound like you meant exactly the opposite of what you said. A public reply may be appropriate, in much the same way that one would write to the editor of a newspaper and request the publication of a formal reply to “straighten out the facts”. The important thing is to avoid content-free messages where no misinformation is corrected, no point is made and all that is ever exchanged is insults.

But before you do that, you will want to consider why these people have been rude to you. First of all, make sure the poster did intend to be rude. The Internet connects people from over 50 countries, and many of them are not native English speakers. They may have translated an idiomatic expression literally, and insulted you without meaning to. Similarly, native English speakers may have used a correct idiomatic expression which, when translated literally, sounds very mean in your language.

The next thing to consider is where the poster comes from. No matter what your personal opinion on the question may be, there are cultures with a very different definition of what is or is not socially acceptable, and in particular there are cultures where personal attacks are no big deal. While you may think that they should not do anything that hurts your feelings, you probably don’t want to get into a cultural flame war, because you are probably hurting other people’s feelings as well on a regular basis. For instance, do you always address people by their full name and title, or do you just say “As Peter said yesterday...”? In some countries, it is a grave insult to call people by their first name if you don’t know them personally, while in others using the full title can sound sarcastic. There are dozens of similar examples, and the only way to successful cross-cultural
communication is to tolerate other people’s cultural habits in return for their tolerance of yours.

Another point to consider is that, sometimes, people are having meaningful discussions in a tone that appears inappropriate to you, but that may seem perfectly normal to them. As long as their messages contain useful information, there is no point in trying to police the list, both because it is the list owner’s job, not yours, and because adults are unlikely to change their behavior in any significant way, especially if the people complaining are new to the list. If you want the list owners to take action, it is better to write to them directly, so that you do not end up being labelled as “one of the people running the flame war”. If you just want to publicly express your indignation, it is best to type the message and pause, just before sending it, to consider whether you are doing this in the general interest or for your personal, selfish satisfaction. Most mail programs let you cancel a message.

Lastly, if you are new to the Internet please take the time to look through existing resources on netiquette (the rules of etiquette governing on-line communication.).

Note that among Internet users, a kind of “shorthand” exists which may be confusing at first. One example of this is the term “IMHO”, which means “in my humble/honest opinion”. Some other examples can be found in Appendix C.

You may also encounter symbols called “emoticons”, which are used to help define the emotions of the poster while he is writing. Some of the more popular emoticons are found in Appendix B.