How to get best results from the FreeBSD-questions mailing list

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Abstract

This document provides useful information for people looking to prepare an e-mail to the FreeBSD-questions mailing list. Advice and hints are given that will maximize the chance that the reader will receive useful replies.

This document is regularly posted to the FreeBSD-questions mailing list.

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1. Introduction

FreeBSD-questions is a mailing list maintained by the FreeBSD project to help people who have questions about the normal use of FreeBSD. Another group, FreeBSD-hackers, discusses more advanced questions such as future development work.

Note

The term “hacker” has nothing to do with breaking into other people's computers. The correct term for the latter activity is “cracker”, but the popular press has not found out yet. The FreeBSD hackers disapprove strongly of cracking security, and have nothing to do with it. For a longer description of hackers, see Eric Raymond's How To Become A Hacker

This is a regular posting aimed to help both those seeking advice from FreeBSD-questions (the “newcomers”), and also those who answer the questions (the “hackers”).

Inevitably there is some friction, which stems from the different viewpoints of the two groups. The newcomers accuse the hackers of being arrogant, stuck-up, and unhelpful, while the hackers accuse the newcomers of being stupid, unable to read plain English, and expecting everything to be handed to them on a silver platter. Of course, there is an element of truth in both these claims, but for the most part these viewpoints come from a sense of frustration.

In this document, I would like to do something to relieve this frustration and help everybody get better results from FreeBSD-questions. In the following section, I recommend how to submit a question; after that, we will look at how to answer one.

2. How to subscribe to FreeBSD-questions

FreeBSD-questions is a mailing list, so you need mail access. Point your WWW browser to the information page of the FreeBSD-questions mailing list. In the section titled “Subscribing to freebsd-questions” fill in the “Your email address” field; the other fields are optional.

Note

The password fields in the subscription form provide only mild security, but should prevent others from messing with your subscription. *Do not use a valuable password* as it will occasionally be emailed back to you in cleartext.

You will receive a confirmation message from mailman; follow the included instructions to complete your subscription.

Finally, when you get the "Welcome" message from mailman telling you the details of the list and subscription area password, *please save it*. If you ever should want to leave the list, you will need the information there. See the next section for more details.

3. How to unsubscribe from FreeBSD-questions

When you subscribed to FreeBSD-questions, you got a welcome message from mailman. In this message, amongst other things, it told you how to unsubscribe. Here is a typical message:

```
Welcome to the freebsd-questions@freebsd.org mailing list!

To post to this list, send your email to:

  freebsd-questions@freebsd.org

General information about the mailing list is at:

  http://lists.freebsd.org/mailman/listinfo/freebsd-questions

If you ever want to unsubscribe or change your options (e.g., switch
 to
or from digest mode, change your password, etc.), visit your
subscription page at:

http://lists.freebsd.org/mailman/options/freebsd-questions/grog
%40lemsi.de

You can also make such adjustments via email by sending a message to:

  freebsd-questions-request@freebsd.org

with the word `help' in the subject or body (don't include the
quotes), and you will get back a message with instructions.
```

```
You must know your password to change your options (including
 changing
the password, itself) or to unsubscribe.  It is:

  12345

Normally, Mailman will remind you of your freebsd.org mailing list
passwords once every month, although you can disable this if you
prefer.  This reminder will also include instructions on how to
unsubscribe or change your account options.  There is also a button
 on
your options page that will email your current password to you.
```

From the URL specified in your "Welcome" message you may visit the "Account management page" and enter a request to "Unsubscribe" you from FreeBSD-questions mailing list.

A confirmation message will be sent to you from mailman; follow the included instructions to finish unsubscribing.

If you have done this, and you still can not figure out what is going on, send a message to <freebsd-questions-request@FreeBSD.org >, and they will sort things out for you. *Do not* send a message to FreeBSD-questions: they can not help you.

4. Should I ask -questions or -hackers?

Two mailing lists handle general questions about FreeBSD, FreeBSD-questions and FreeBSD-hackers. In some cases, it is not really clear which group you should ask. The following criteria should help for 99% of all questions, however:

1. If the question is of a general nature, ask FreeBSD-questions. Examples might be questions about installing FreeBSD or the use of a particular UNIX® utility.

2. If you think the question relates to a bug, but you are not sure, or you do not know how to look for it, send the message to FreeBSD-questions.

3. If the question relates to a bug, and you are *sure* that it is a bug (for example, you can pinpoint the place in the code where it happens, and you maybe have a fix), then send the message to FreeBSD-hackers.

4. If the question relates to enhancements to FreeBSD, and you can make suggestions about how to implement them, then send the message to FreeBSD-hackers.

There are also a number of other specialized mailing lists, for example FreeBSD-isp, which caters to the interests of ISPs (Internet Service Providers) who run FreeBSD. If you happen to be an ISP, this does not mean you should automatically send your questions to FreeBSD-isp. The criteria above still apply, and it is in your interest to stick to them, since you are more likely to get good results that way.

5. Before submitting a question

You can (and should) do some things yourself before asking a question on one of the mailing lists:

- Try solving the problem on your own. If you post a question which shows that you have tried to solve the problem, your question will generally attract more positive attention from people reading it. Trying to solve the problem yourself will also enhance your understanding of FreeBSD, and will eventually let you use your knowledge to help others by answering questions posted to the mailing lists.

- Read the manual pages, and the FreeBSD documentation (either installed in `/usr/doc` or accessible via WWW at `http://www.FreeBSD.org`), especially the handbook and the FAQ.

- Browse and/or search the archives for the mailing list, to see if your question or a similar one has been asked (and possibly answered) on the list. You can browse and/or search the mailing list archives at `http://www.FreeBSD.org/mail` and `http://www.FreeBSD.org/search/search.html#mailinglists` respectively. This can be done at other WWW sites as well, for example at `http://marc.theaimsgroup.com` .

- Use a search engine such as Google or Yahoo to find answers to your question. Google even has a BSD-specific search interface.

6. How to submit a question

When submitting a question to FreeBSD-questions, consider the following points:

- Remember that nobody gets paid for answering a FreeBSD question. They do it of their own free will. You can influence this free will positively by submitting a well-formulated question supplying as much relevant information as possible. You can influence this free will negatively by submitting an incomplete, illegible, or rude question. It is perfectly possible to send a message to FreeBSD-questions and not get an answer even if you follow these rules. It is much more possible to not get an answer if you do not. In the rest of this document, we will look at how to get the most out of your question to FreeBSD-questions.

- Not everybody who answers FreeBSD questions reads every message: they look at the subject line and decide whether it interests them. Clearly, it is in your interest to specify a subject. “FreeBSD problem” or “Help” are not enough. If you provide no subject at all, many people will not bother reading it. If your subject is not specific enough, the people who can answer it may not read it.

- Format your message so that it is legible, and PLEASE DO NOT SHOUT!!!!!. We appreciate that a lot of people do not speak English as their first language, and we try to make

allowances for that, but it is really painful to try to read a message written full of typos or without any line breaks.

Do not underestimate the effect that a poorly formatted mail message has, not just on the FreeBSD-questions mailing list. Your mail message is all people see of you, and if it is poorly formatted, one line per paragraph, badly spelt, or full of errors, it will give people a poor impression of you.

A lot of badly formatted messages come from bad mailers or badly configured mailers. The following mailers are known to send out badly formatted messages without you finding out about them:

- Eudora®
- exmh
- Microsoft® Exchange
- Microsoft® Outlook®

Try not to use MIME: a lot of people use mailers which do not get on very well with MIME.

- Make sure your time and time zone are set correctly. This may seem a little silly, since your message still gets there, but many of the people you are trying to reach get several hundred messages a day. They frequently sort the incoming messages by subject and by date, and if your message does not come before the first answer, they may assume they missed it and not bother to look.

- Do not include unrelated questions in the same message. Firstly, a long message tends to scare people off, and secondly, it is more difficult to get all the people who can answer all the questions to read the message.

- Specify as much information as possible. This is a difficult area, and we need to expand on what information you need to submit, but here is a start:

  - In nearly every case, it is important to know the version of FreeBSD you are running. This is particularly the case for FreeBSD-CURRENT, where you should also specify the date of the sources, though of course you should not be sending questions about -CURRENT to FreeBSD-questions.

  - With any problem which *could* be hardware related, tell us about your hardware. In case of doubt, assume it is possible that it is hardware. What kind of CPU are you using? How fast? What motherboard? How much memory? What peripherals?

There is a judgement call here, of course, but the output of the dmesg(8) command can frequently be very useful, since it tells not just what hardware you are running, but what version of FreeBSD as well.

- If you get error messages, do not say “I get error messages”, say (for example) “I get the error message 'No route to host'”.
- If your system panics, do not say “My system panicked”, say (for example) “my system panicked with the message 'free vnode isn't'”.
- If you have difficulty installing FreeBSD, please tell us what hardware you have. In particular, it is important to know the IRQs and I/O addresses of the boards installed in your machine.
- If you have difficulty getting PPP to run, describe the configuration. Which version of PPP do you use? What kind of authentication do you have? Do you have a static or dynamic IP address? What kind of messages do you get in the log file?

- A lot of the information you need to supply is the output of programs, such as dmesg(8), or console messages, which usually appear in `/var/log/messages` . Do not try to copy this information by typing it in again; it is a real pain, and you are bound to make a mistake. To send log file contents, either make a copy of the file and use an editor to trim the information to what is relevant, or cut and paste into your message. For the output of programs like dmesg(8), redirect the output to a file and include that. For example,

  ```
  % dmesg > /tmp/dmesg.out
  ```

  This redirects the information to the file `/tmp/dmesg.out` .

- If you do all this, and you still do not get an answer, there could be other reasons. For example, the problem is so complicated that nobody knows the answer, or the person who does know the answer was offline. If you do not get an answer after, say, a week, it might help to re-send the message. If you do not get an answer to your second message, though, you are probably not going to get one from this forum. Resending the same message again and again will only make you unpopular.

To summarize, let's assume you know the answer to the following question (yes, it is the same one in each case). You choose which of these two questions you would be more prepared to answer:

Example 1. Message 1

```
Subject: HELP!!?!??
```

```
I just can't get hits damn silly FereBSD system to
workd, and Im really good at this tsuff, but I have never seen
anythign sho difficult to install, it jst wont work whatever I
 try
so why don't you guys tell me what I doing wrong.
```

Example 2. Message 2

```
Subject: Problems installing FreeBSD

I've just got the FreeBSD 2.1.5 CDROM from Walnut Creek, and
 I'm having a lot
of difficulty installing it.  I have a 66 MHz 486 with 16 MB of
memory and an Adaptec 1540A SCSI board, a 1.2GB Quantum
 Fireball
disk and a Toshiba 3501XA CDROM drive.  The installation works
 just
fine, but when I try to reboot the system, I get the message
“Missing Operating System”.
```

7. How to follow up to a question

Often you will want to send in additional information to a question you have already sent. The best way to do this is to reply to your original message. This has three advantages:

1. You include the original message text, so people will know what you are talking about. Do not forget to trim unnecessary text out, though.
2. The text in the subject line stays the same (you did remember to put one in, did you not?). Many mailers will sort messages by subject. This helps group messages together.
3. The message reference numbers in the header will refer to the previous message. Some mailers, such as mutt, can *thread* messages, showing the exact relationships between the messages.

8. How to answer a question

Before you answer a question to FreeBSD-questions, consider:

1. A lot of the points on submitting questions also apply to answering questions. Read them.

2. Has somebody already answered the question? The easiest way to check this is to sort your incoming mail by subject: then (hopefully) you will see the question followed by any answers, all together.

   If somebody has already answered it, it does not automatically mean that you should not send another answer. But it makes sense to read all the other answers first.

3. Do you have something to contribute beyond what has already been said? In general, "Yeah, me too" answers do not help much, although there are exceptions, like when somebody is describing a problem he is having, and he does not know whether it is his fault or whether there is something wrong with the hardware or software. If you do send a "me too" answer, you should also include any further relevant information.

4. Are you sure you understand the question? Very frequently, the person who asks the question is confused or does not express himself very well. Even with the best understanding of the system, it is easy to send a reply which does not answer the question. This does not help: you will leave the person who submitted the question more frustrated or confused than ever. If nobody else answers, and you are not too sure either, you can always ask for more information.

5. Are you sure your answer is correct? If not, wait a day or so. If nobody else comes up with a better answer, you can still reply and say, for example, "I do not know if this is correct, but since nobody else has replied, why don't you try replacing your ATAPI CDROM with a frog?".

6. Unless there is a good reason to do otherwise, reply to the sender and to FreeBSD-questions. Many people on the FreeBSD-questions are "lurkers": they learn by reading messages sent and replied to by others. If you take a message which is of general interest off the list, you are depriving these people of their information. Be careful with group replies; lots of people send messages with hundreds of CCs. If this is the case, be sure to trim the Cc: lines appropriately.

7. Include relevant text from the original message. Trim it to the minimum, but do not overdo it. It should still be possible for somebody who did not read the original message to understand what you are talking about.

8. Use some technique to identify which text came from the original message, and which text you add. I personally find that prepending "> " to the original message works best. Leaving white space after the "> " and leave empty lines between your text and the original text both make the result more readable.

9. Put your response in the correct place (after the text to which it replies). It is very difficult to read a thread of responses where each reply comes before the text to which it replies.

10. Most mailers change the subject line on a reply by prepending a text such as "Re: ". If your mailer does not do it automatically, you should do it manually.

11. If the submitter did not abide by format conventions (lines too long, inappropriate subject line), *please* fix it. In the case of an incorrect subject line (such as "HELP!!??"), change the subject line to (say) "Re: Difficulties with sync PPP (was: HELP!!??)". That way other people trying to follow the thread will have less difficulty following it.

    In such cases, it is appropriate to say what you did and why you did it, but try not to be rude. If you find you can not answer without being rude, do not answer.

    If you just want to reply to a message because of its bad format, just reply to the submitter, not to the list. You can just send him this message in reply, if you like.