

CIS Helpdesk Best Practices

The CIS Helpdesk is the primary means of receiving help with CIS IT. The Helpdesk processes thousands of helpdesk requests each year, so it's important to help the IT staff quickly understand the issue you are reporting. Here are four simple steps for getting timely and successful results.

1. **Use Descriptive Subjects.** We often get tickets with a subject line of “help” or no subject at all. Please provide a descriptive subject, such as “Subversion authentication is failing for cs693 repository”.
2. **Fully Explain the Problem.** If it is a software problem, please provide the exact error message that you are receiving. Describe the behavior you expected, and the behavior you actually observed. If it is a hardware problem, please describe the symptoms and/or machine behavior.
3. **Tell Us How to Reproduce the Problem.** Tell us what you did that caused the error, so that we can reproduce it to study the problem.
4. **Tell Us What You've Already Tried.** Let us know of your own attempts to solve the problem, and the results. If you think you know the problem, describe a suggested fix.

Example of a poor Helpdesk request

Subject: help

I tried to edit my course's web page but cannot. Please help.

This is troublesome for several reasons. The subject line is vague and does not help us assign the ticket to the right person or easily find the ticket in the Helpdesk. The problem description is too general; there are many different reasons why a user might not be able to edit a file, and this report does not say which file or for which course. It does not tell us what error message was received. Finally, it does not tell us what investigation the user has done or what they think the problem might be, so the IT staff may end up spending time redoing what you have already tried, delaying a resolution to the issue. Let's look at a counter-example now.

Example of a good Helpdesk request

Subject: joeuser does not have permission to edit CS306 web files. **[Step 1]**

I am the TA for CS306 and attempted to update the course web pages in /nethome/webfiles/courses/cs306/summer2007/ by logging into the vulcan machines and editing them using vi. However, I received the error “permission denied” when attempting to save my changes. I was successful doing this last week, but as of last night it does not work. **[Step 2]**

The file in question is index.html. If you attempt to edit and save that file as 'joeuser' on vulcan1, you receive the error above. **[Step 3]**

I have examined the permissions on index.html. The file is owned by 'jane' and is in group 'cs306web'. The owner and group both have write permissions. Perhaps I was accidentally removed from the 'cs306web' group? **[Step 4]**

This is descriptive, thorough and to the point. An excellent Helpdesk request! Following these guidelines will help CIS IT serve you better, and will provide a better IT experience for the entire CIS community.