WeGetletters
by Michael W. Lucas

letters@
freebsdjournal.org

Hi Michael,

    We were brainstorming column ideas for the FreeBSD Journal, and Kode Vicious suggested that you might be willing to handle a "Letters" column for us. People would submit their questions to the Journal, and you'd answer them for us. Any chance you'd be interested?

    Best,

                   George V Neville-Neil
          FreeBSD Foundation President

Hi George,

    This is a terrible idea. It's just awful. This is the Internet age. Nobody reads letters columns, advice columns, or anything like that. We have Stack Exchange, and all kinds of places for people to beg for advice.

    FreeBSD has a whole bunch of places where users can go to get specific help. Help ships with the system, in the man pages. Where a bunch of Unix-like operating systems made this absurd decision to bundle manual pages separately, FreeBSD ships with the manual. Actually, you can't not install the manual. You could build a FreeBSD that doesn't include the manual, of course, but to do that means reading a whole bunch of man pages.

    People say that the manual isn't a tutorial, and they're right. That's why FreeBSD has the Handbook and a whole bunch of articles. Unlike the man pages, you can choose to not install those on a FreeBSD host. You can browse all of the documentation online at https://docs.freebsd.org, though.

    New users can start with the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) file, which contains literally dozens of questions and answers. It goes into everything from hardware compatibility to ZFS, and while some of the gags in "The FreeBSD Funnies" have aged dreadfully—nothing scratches in memory banks these days, they fixed that bug back in 1996—the rest of the document is rock-solid. Looking at it now, I realize just how useful it is to new users. I still remember that feeling of enlightenment when I understood why du(1) and df(1) give different answers for disk space usage. Setting aside an hour to read the FAQ will give new users that enlightened feeling over and over again.

Then there's the Handbook. It's broken up by tasks. If a user's question has a little more depth than what's in the FAQ, the Handbook is there for you. Some of the material orients the reader, and is well worth reading so that new FreeBSD administrators understand why there's so much in /usr/local when everybody else just dumps everything in /etc and /bin.

    Plus there's all sorts of FreeBSD-related sites these days. Even my blog has some FreeBSD tutorials on it.

    If anyone did write in for help, it would be because they didn't use these resources.

                          —ml

Michael,

    Not necessarily. People do have problems that aren't yet documented. We really think a letters column could be useful addition to the Journal, and that you're the right person to write it.

                      —Best, George

George,

    Okay, let's talk about the those folks who have issues that truly aren't in the Handbook.

    Back when I started with FreeBSD, you got help via the FreeBSD-questions@FreeBSD.org mailing list. And it's still around today. The people on that list want to answer questions. They subscribe specifically so they can help people with their issues. Those brave people volunteer their time to answer user questions. What can I do that those heroes can't?

    For those young punks who've forgotten how email works, there's a FreeBSD forum at https://forums.freebsd.org. Unlike the mailing list, the forums are broken up by category. Users can delve into detailed discussions of installation, storage, hardware, packages, or whatever. Whenever I look at the forums, I find interesting discussions.

    There's a quarter century of problem-solving in the mailing list archives. What can I say that hasn't been said many times over?

    These channels are really suitable for issues with particular hardware. The Handbook and FAQ are permanent fixtures in the FreeBSD ecosystem—they've been around for decades. But if some chipset in your brand-new knock-off laptop is caus-

ing you grief, you can search the mailing list or the forum to see if anyone else has that same issue with that hardware.

Users who can't be bothered to DuckDuckGo the mailing list archives or search the forums certainly aren't going to bother composing a coherent letter to me.

—ml

> Michael,
> Seriously, there's people out there who have problems that aren't in the Forums or mailing list archives yet. You really could help them. When they see how helpful you are, it might even encourage them to buy your books.
> —Best, George

Dang it, George, you just don't give up, do you?

Okay, fine. Let's walk this through.

A user has a problem. A truly unique problem, that doesn't appear anywhere in the mailing list archives, the forums. The only reference on the Internet to a problem even vaguely like this is on a darknet site and in Siberian. They're sincerely and honestly in trouble.

Before anyone could help this user, they'd need to describe their problem in a useful way. This means they'd have to send a complete description of t he problem. Most people who compose a request for help can't be bothered to give the output of "uname -a" and a copy of dmesg.boot. They can't trouble themselves by giving actual error output or the contents of /var/log/messages. Or they "helpfully" strip out stuff they think is irrelevant, like the messages saying "PHP is dumping core" that appear all through their web server logs.

And that's another thing. People want help with stuff that has no relevance to FreeBSD. They know it has nothing to do with FreeBSD. And yet they send a message to a FreeBSD mailing list? I mean, that's just rude.

And speaking of rudeness—would it hurt people to be polite when they ask for help? Anyone on the mailing list or the forum who takes time to help a user is volunteering their own time. They have better things to do than to put up with your tantrum. I mean, I get that computers can really torque people off. I myself have more than once stood on a rooftop and screamed foul obscenities at the buffer cache— who hasn't? But there's no need to take that out on someone who's trying to help you.

Most often, the mere act of writing the problem description is enough to make my own brain to solve the problem.

And nothing short of high voltage would encourage people to buy my books.

So, no. Let users with trouble go to the mailing lists or the Forums. I have enough to do.

—ml

> Michael,
> We'll only send good letters. I promise.
> —Best, George

No. No, no, no.

NO.

Do you have any idea how many books I still have to write in my lifetime?

Ain't gonna. Can't make me.

—ml

> We'll pay you in gelato.
> —George

George,

Curse you. I'm in.

But tell Kode Vicious that if he drops my name again, he's going home in a bucket.

—ml

Questions?

Contact letters@freebsdjournal.org. Letters will be answered in the order that they enlighten or amuse the columnist.

MICHAEL W. LUCAS has been a sysadmin for over twenty years. His latest books include *SSH Mastery, 2nd edition*, *Ed Mastery*, the third edition of *Absolute FreeBSD*, and *git commit murder*. Learn more at https://mwl.io.