

The 10 Commandments of Computer Ethics Handout

Rule: Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid.

Explanation: You should not program a computer to do dangerous things to people. For example, to program a robot to kill people, make viruses, or weapons of mass destruction. What this means is that computers are not an excuse to do bad things to people. The programmer is responsible for the actions of his programs.

Rule: Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.

Explanation: Everyone has the right to use computers. Likewise creating a computer virus is wrong because it wastes people's time and money and destroys potentially valuable property. As the hippies used to say: "Live and let live!"

Rule: Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that ensure consideration and respect for your fellow humans.

Explanation: It is illegal to open and read someone's real physical mail, and it is also illegal to snoop on network connections and read someone's email, passwords, files, databases, etc.

Rule: Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.

Explanation: This one is obvious. Stealing is just as bad with a computer or without one. Use your IT powers for good!

Rule: Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources, without authorization or proper compensation.

Explanation: This commandment means that you shouldn't use a computer to create false facts. For instance, photoshopping a picture to make an innocent man look guilty. Perhaps another equally important commandment should be, "Don't believe everything you see on the Internet". Just like in traditional media, it is a common practice to spread half-truths, exaggerations, lies, and rumors on the Internet. This is wrong.

Rule: Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.

Explanation: Think about how hard it is to write good software. Think about all the people and costs involved. You have two choices: 1) buy a license or 2) find an open source alternative. Using pirated software is not only unethical, it is dangerous because of hidden malware.

Rule: Thou shalt not snoop around in other's people computer files:

Explanation: Is it unethical to use a neighbor's lawn mower or mixer without telling them? How about their Internet connection? No, it isn't! Is it legal or ethical to do bad things on a computer while logged in as someone else? No, it isn't! Don't do it!

Rule: Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing.

Explanation: If you copy text or images from a website and post them on your own website it is a crime in most countries, and definitely not ethical. Why? You are causing irreparable damage to the creator of the content. Why not 'get a life and create your own unique and original content? You will be much happier, in the long run, creating new things rather than stealing from other people.

Rule: Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.

Explanation: Do you write software that helps people to steal, kill, spy, gamble, or spread pornography? Please ask yourself why. Is there a way you can use your IT talents for good purposes? Wouldn't the world be a better place if everyone was engaged in positive behavior instead of negative behavior? Think about it!

Rule: Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.

Explanation: Things that you do 'online' can have real effects in your 'offline' life as well. Perhaps Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, said it best, "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."