

Identifying Hoaxes



A CyberAngels Quick Tutorial

Adapted from the US Computer Emergency Readiness Team

Hoaxes and Chain Letters

After completing this tutorial, you will be able to:

Identify the main risks involved with hoaxes and chain e-mails.

Describe ways to detect a hoax e-mail.

Identify ways to avoid becoming the victim of an e-mail attack.

What is a hoax?

A hoax is a falsehood intended to deceive others and, in some cases cause harm to others in some way; it is one of the simplest and most common forms of fraud. Although hoaxes have been in existence throughout history, modern communication makes it very easy to propagate hoaxes quickly.

While many hoaxes are innocent or harmless, they often mask malicious instructions, a virus, or a phishing scam. Even if they do not have a malicious purpose, chain e-mails spread untrue information and waste time and inbox space for those who receive them.

What is a hoax?

The most common hoaxes are simply misleading or false information, often spread as trivia or interesting facts. Other hoaxes spread unfounded fear or paranoia on the basis of mistruth and deception.

However, there are a few simple steps that can help you determine whether your e-mail contains accurate information, or whether it may be a hoax.

Dangerous Hoaxes

A chain-letter may couple a hoax with potentially destructive or harmful code – a virus – or malicious instructions, such as those asking a user to delete certain essential data.

Other hoaxes lead to phishing scams and other fraudulent websites, and can be used to commit identity theft. This can be both damaging to your reputation and dangerous.

How Can You Identify a Hoax?

Hoaxes will often include a promise that it is not a hoax, or ask users to forward it to as many people as they can.

A hoax will frequently tell users that if they do not forward it something bad may happen, or that if they do forward it, they will be rewarded. Common examples include hoaxes promising a certain amount of money donated to a charity for each forward.

How Can You Identify a Hoax?

If you receive an e-mail claiming to be from a charitable organization, check the foundation's website for relevant information. Many, such as the Red Cross (www.redcross.org/fraud) devote web pages to debunking such rumors.

If the facts seem outrageous, it is likely a hoax. Claims made in chain letters are often illogical and contradictory. Even if it is not obviously spurious information, it is not hard to verify the truth with a web search.

What does a hoax e-mail look like?

Chain letters often feature poor grammar and spelling, or unusual syntactic structures.

Chain letters usually show evidence of having been forwarded many times, either by an abundance of repeated header information, displaying many e-mail addresses, showing a lot of brackets such as >>>> next to each line, or a subject line showing many forwards (e.g. Fwd: FWD: fwd: Fwd: Fwd: FWD).

What Can You Do?

Always be wary of any URL or e-mail address provided by a chain letter, as these may direct you to malicious websites or scams.

If a chain letter has an attachment, do not open it unless you are absolutely certain it is not malicious. See below for a list of websites that can aid you in verifying whether an attachment is safe.

If a chain letter instructs you to delete information or transmit sensitive data, it is likely fraudulent and may be damaging to your computer.

What Else Should You Do?

If you receive a chain letter, do not send it to anybody else. Hoaxes are only problematic if they are forwarded.

If the chain letter describes a real company or organization, notify the organization of the hoax, or ask them for verification.

If you do not know who sent you the chain-letter, do not reply, as it may be from a fraudulent source.

Where to find out more

Most common hoaxes can be found in lists maintained by the following websites:

Urban Legends and Folklore - <http://urbanlegends.about.com/>

Urban Legends Reference Pages - <http://www.snopes.com/>

Hoaxbusters - <http://hoaxbusters.ciac.org/>

TruthOrFiction.com - <http://www.truthorfiction.com/>

Symantec Security Response Hoaxes -
<http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html>

McAfee Security Virus Hoaxes - <http://vil.mcafee.com/hoax.asp>

Take the Hoax Identification Quiz

Hoax Quiz Question 1

What constitutes a hoax?

- A) Contains false information
- B) Propagates unfounded rumors or fears
- C) Asks users to forward to friends
- D) Describes unlikely rewards or repercussions
- E) All of the above

**The correct answer to Question 1 is
E) All of the above.**

Hoax Quiz Question 2

Which of the following is a common type of hoax e-mail?

- A) A forwarded joke.
- B) A company newsletter you signed up for.
- C) An advertisement.
- D) An e-mail promising you \$1.00 for every person you forward it to.
- E) All of the above

**The correct answer for question 2 is
D) An e-mail promising you \$1.00 for
every person you forward it to.**

Hoax Quiz Question 3

If you suspect an e-mail may be a hoax, you should:

- A) Forward the e-mail to your friends.
- B) Delete the e-mail and report it to the appropriate organization.
- C) Assume all information is verified and true.
- D) Save the message in your inbox.
- E) All of the above.

**The correct answer to Question 3 is
B) Delete the e-mail and report it to
the appropriate organization.**

Hoax Quiz Question 4

What should you do if you receive a chain-letter with an attachment?

- A) Only open the attachment if it is from a trusted source and you have verified that it is not malicious.
- B) Always open the attachment.
- C) Always forward the e-mail to your friends.
- D) All of the above.

The correct answer to Question 4 is

A) Only open the attachment if it is from a trusted source and you have verified that it is not malicious.