



# Getting Help

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# Asking Questions

- Asking questions via email is different from asking questions in person
- People on the other side do not have the background information you have
  - they also don't know you personally (usually)
- Other people are busy; their time is limited
- The instructor (me) is here to help in all circumstances but may not be able to answer all questions!

# Finding Answers

- Try to find an answer by searching the archives of the forum you plan to post to.
- Try to find an answer by searching the Web.
- Try to find an answer by reading the manual.
- Try to find an answer by reading a FAQ.
- Try to find an answer by inspection or experimentation.
- Try to find an answer by asking a skilled friend.
- If you're a programmer, try to find an answer by reading the source code.



# Asking Questions

- It's important to let other people know that you've done all of the previous things already
- If the answer is in the documentation, the answer will be "Read the documentation"
  - one email round wasted

# Example: Error Messages

```
> library(datasets)
> data(airquality)
> cor(airquality)
Error in cor(airquality) : missing observations in cov/cor
```

# Google is your friend



About 508,000 results (0.28 seconds)



[\[R\] Error in cor.default\(x1, x2\) : missing observations in cov/cor](#)

<https://stat.ethz.ch/pipermail/r-help/2008.../155523.html> - Block stat.ethz.ch

Mar 1, 2008 – [R] Error in cor.default(x1, x2) : **missing observations in cov/cor**. Daniel Malter daniel at umd.edu. Thu Feb 28 01:40:58 CET 2008. Previous message: [R] Error in ...

[\[R\] Null values in R](#) - Dec 3, 2008

[\[R\] cor\(data.frame\) infelicities](#) - Dec 3, 2007

[\[BioC\] maanova: missing observations in cov/cor](#) - Aug 25, 2006

[\[R-sig-Geo\] Some comments on calculations with 'asc' \(and 'kasc ...](#) - Mar 27, 2005

[More results from stat.ethz.ch »](#)

[EMBnet 2007 Course - Introduction to Statistics for Biologists](#)

[www.ch.embnet.org/CoursEMBnet/Basel07/tp2b.html](http://www.ch.embnet.org/CoursEMBnet/Basel07/tp2b.html) - Block ch.embnet.org

you will get an error: Error in cor(thuesen) : **missing observations in cov/cor** . [You will have seen a similar message above with sd .] This is because of the ...

[R help - Error in cor.default\(x1, x2\) : missing observations in cov/cor](#)

[r.789695.n4.nabble.com/Error-in-cor-default-x1-x2-missing-...](http://r.789695.n4.nabble.com/Error-in-cor-default-x1-x2-missing-...) - Block

[r.789695.n4.nabble.com](http://r.789695.n4.nabble.com)

13 posts - 5 authors - Feb 27, 2008

Error in cor.default(x1, x2) : **missing observations in cov/cor**. Hello, I'm trying to do cor(x1,x2) and I get the following error: Error in cor.default(x1, ...

# Asking Questions

- What steps will reproduce the problem?
- What is the expected output?
- What do you see instead?
- What version of the product (e.g. R, packages, etc.) are you using?
- What operating system?
- Additional information

# Subject Headers

- Stupid: "Help! Can't fit linear model!"
- Smart: "R 3.0.2 lm() function produces seg fault with large data frame, Mac OS X 10.9.1"
- Smarter: "R 3.0.2 lm() function on Mac OS X 10.9.1 -- seg fault on large data frame"



# Do

- Describe the goal, not the step
- Be explicit about your question
- Do provide the minimum amount of information necessary (volume is not precision)
- Be courteous (it never hurts)
- Follow up with the solution (if found)

# Don't

- Claim that you've found a bug
- Grovel as a substitute for doing your homework
- Post homework questions on mailing lists (we've seen them all)
- Email multiple mailing lists at once
- Ask others to debug your broken code without giving a hint as to what sort of problem they should be searching for

# Case Study: A Recent Post to the R-devel Mailing List

Subject: large dataset - confused

Message:

I'm trying to load a dataset into R, but  
I'm completely lost. This is probably  
due mostly to the fact that I'm a  
complete R newb, but it's got me stuck  
in a research project.

# Response

Yes, you are lost. The R posting guide is at <http://www.r-project.org/posting-guide.html> and will point you to the right list and also the manuals (at e.g. <http://cran.r-project.org/manuals.html>, and one of them seems exactly what you need).

# Analysis: What Went Wrong?

- Question was sent to the wrong mailing list (R-devel instead of R-help)
- Email subject was very vague
- Question was very vague
- Problem was not reproducible
- No evidence of any effort made to solve the problem
- RESULT: Recipe for disaster!

# Places to Turn

- Class discussion board; your fellow students
- [r-help@r-project.org](mailto:r-help@r-project.org)
- Other project-specific mailing lists (This talk inspired by Eric Raymond's "How to ask questions the smart way")