



THE IMPACT OF SHORT MESSAGE SERVICES ON WRITING:

Is It 2 L8?

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How r u?

Fine, thx.

Today, daily interactions amongst people often rely upon quick and efficient communication, and since the cell phone has become the main vehicle of human conversation, abbreviated written dialogue is commonplace. Whether we choose to text, post, or tweet, we are looking for the fastest way to make contact with others. Of course, due to this, our language through these mediums is fragmented and truncated, and we've grown so accustomed to it that the interchange illustrated above is unremarkable. What will happen to our writing systems if we continue in this manner? Will our lexicon change? Will it have an impact upon other genres of writing, such as academic arguments, journalism or fiction? No— in fact, it can be speculated that while writing done via texting will be compartmentalized, we will continue to write in other areas as their requirements dictate.

If we analogize the types of writing that we do to the roles of a chef, we could liken texting to the short-order cook, as this cook specializes in quick turn-around time and meals that require rapid preparation. Because the short-order cook is pro-

ficient at this type of cooking, however, does not necessarily mean that he or she will one day be a gourmet cook. He would need to take classes and most likely become an apprentice to an experienced chef in order to perfect a bordelaise sauce or roasted duck with an orange and ginger glaze. Similarly, a world-class texter (if such a distinction existed) would need to learn to write academically, meaning that certain skills such as research, synthesis, diction, and conventions would need to be acquired and applied. Ultimately, the short-order cook/texter might have an easier transition to the gourmet cook/academic writer, but one does not lead directly, in either case, to the other.

In general, people are highly resistant to change, and as Van Herk noted, “[the] idea that language is getting worse, or that standards are slipping, has been around for a long time” (2014). Howard Gardner, in his 2008 article, “The End of Literacy? Don’t Stop Reading,” remarked that “[in] the past 150 years, each new medium of communication—telegraph, telephone, movies, radio, television, the digital computer, the World Wide Web—has introduced its own peculiar mix of written, spoken and graphic languages and evoked a chaotic chorus of criticism and celebration.” His suggestion is to embrace such changes; “if we’re going to make sense of what’s happening with literacy in our culture, we need to be able to triangulate: to bear in mind our needs and desires, the media as they once were and currently are, and the media as they’re continually transforming” (Gardner, 2008). We also need to consider the role that texting actually plays. As McWhorter noted, “Texting properly isn’t writing at all—it’s more akin to spoken language” (2013). Thus, large-scale texting involves interpersonal communications about daily activities and issues. It has supplanted our phone calls because of its mobility and efficiency, but it has not replaced the writing we do in school or at work.

Some educators cannot separate texting from writing. Therefore, the debate over what texting is doing to writing wages on in schools all over the world, and many take a firm stand on the issue. There are surely those who see writing as

writing, regardless of the type, and thus texting contributes to writing in all genres. There are those in the opposing camp who vehemently insist that writing will surely suffer from the prolific text messaging that goes on in the lives of adolescents and adults. Undergraduate researcher Michaela Cullington, however, insisted that “texting has no significant effect on student writing” (2011, p. 90). Cullington conducted primary research by interviewing two high school teachers and surveying seven high school and college students. She supplemented the candid answers of the teachers and students with student writing samples. She deduced that “[texting] was not created to replace the English language, but rather to make quick communications shorter and easier” (Cullington, 2011, p. 93). Her article included a passage from Dennis Barron’s book *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*, in which he stated that “writers learn to adapt their style to the demands of their audience and the conventions of the genre in which they’re writing” (as cited in Cullington, 2011, p. 94). Thus, student writers adjust to the assignments that they are given, and they use the appropriate conventions when necessary.

While textese rarely finds its way into a college-level research paper, there are two areas in which faculty find issues with texting. One involves the concept of multitasking. It has become routine to do more than one thing at a time, and texting while performing other tasks has become even a dangerous phenomenon, such as when texting while driving. In the classroom, most students have ready access to their phones, which can be detrimental. Because they desire to stay connected with friends and family continuously, students monitor their phones. This becomes problematic when trying to pay attention in class. Lin noted, “Different individuals have varying degrees of situational awareness and may be affected differently while eating, listening, seeing, texting and playing. As it is not easy to do two or more tasks at the same time, certain planning and skills are necessary” (2013, p. 42). Students often do not “plan” to ingest course content while simultaneously catching up with their roommate’s latest gripe; therefore, one

area that faculty note concerns with texting comes from students lacking an understanding of assignments or other course-related tasks. This confusion is directly related to an attention deficit. Consequently, rather than seeing a spillover of textese into academic papers, texting during class results in teachers receiving multiple emails from students with questions that were likely covered during class.

Another area that has created some apprehension is with the relatively new predictive function most smartphones possess. In a recent *BuzzFeed* article, it was discovered that the word “firstable” (in place of first of all) has drifted into texts and social media posts (Broderick, 2014). When checking to see whether her iPhone corrected the word “firstable,” a colleague discovered that it was one of the three suggested spellings of the word. In their study of American undergraduate students, Drouin and Driver (2014) found that “predictive texting affected the correlational patterns between textism category usage and literacy skills. Therefore, it appears that the predictive texting functionality does play some moderating role in the relationship between use of textese (in terms of category density) and literacy skills” (p. 265). The impact of seeing “acceptable” spellings via functions such as auto-correct can be negative, and this can be observed in students’ papers when, for example, “should of” is used instead of “should have.” Ultimately, then, predictive texting can lead to subtle inaccuracies in a writing system’s orthography. These errors, however, are easily corrected when pointed out and are related more to colloquialisms than to a lack of literacy skills. Whorter insisted that “people speak differently from the way they write, and texting—quick, casual, and only intended to be read once—is actually a way of talking with your fingers” (2013). Historically, students have occasionally drifted into a conversational level of diction when writing and have needed gentle prodding towards the necessary formality.

Such situations will undoubtedly continue to occur, but it is this teacher’s own observations that students will adapt to the level of writing required if they desire success. Furthermore,

McHale's analysis of the study "Writing, Technology and Teens" revealed that "students [. . .] understand the importance of this skill [writing] to their future and don't even consider the enormous amount of text-based communication they are producing to be writing" (2008, p. 16). The majority of students are interested in developing their writing skills because they are cognizant of its necessity beyond college. A student recently articulated this idea in an end-of-the-semester reflection: "Apart from developing my writing skills, [. . .] I can take what I have learned and incorporate it into my career and life" (A. Crecelius, personal communication, December 4, 2014).

The gourmet cook would most likely refrain from serving chili cheese fries to the high-paying customers at his or her restaurant because of their expectations. Similarly, the diners at the local dive would be puzzled to find pumpkin ravioli in a creamy butternut sauce on the menu. Each cook has adapted to his or her audience, and writers will do the same. The battle may wage on, but students know the score. They will either adjust their approach, or suffer the consequences. For most students, failing a class or an assignment is not worth the risk of inserting an acronym.

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