



OMG! Is Texting Ruining the English Language?

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Are cell phones and electronic messaging lowering the bar when it comes to writing standards?

Thirteen years ago, when I first asked that question, teenagers were busily thumbing out abbreviations such as LOL, BRB and OMG while worried parents and teachers wondered whether anyone under 20 would ever again write a complete English sentence. Well, the teenagers survived. So did English.

In fact, texting has become so thoroughly woven into everyday communication that those teenagers are now adults texting their own children. Meanwhile, the English language continues doing what it has always done: changing, borrowing, inventing and adapting.

English Has Never Stood Still

Think about the word *text*. Not very long ago, most of us thought of *text* primarily as a noun—the words printed in a book. Then it became perfectly ordinary to say, “I’ll text you.” The noun became a verb, which promptly gave us *texted* and *texting*. English didn’t collapse. It simply acquired some useful new vocabulary.

The same process has been going on for centuries. New technologies produce new words, old words acquire new meanings, slang occasionally graduates into accepted usage, and expressions that once sounded strange eventually become so ordinary that nobody notices them anymore. Texting didn’t invent linguistic change. It merely accelerated some of it.

Standard English Isn’t Going Anywhere

Purists can relax. LOL, OMG and BRB have not replaced sentences in college essays, business reports or serious journalism. Nor have emojis eliminated punctuation. What texting created was another **register** of language—a style appropriate to a particular situation.

We already use different registers every day. You probably don't speak to your spouse exactly as you would address a judge. A teenager doesn't talk to a best friend the same way she speaks during a job interview. A business email doesn't sound like a birthday card. Nobody considers those differences evidence that English is falling apart. They demonstrate that competent users of language adjust their communication to the audience and occasion. Texting works the same way.

“C U @ 7” may communicate perfectly well to a friend. Put it in a résumé cover letter and you've got a different problem.

Texting Is Today's Morse Code

I compared texting to Morse Code in 2013, and I still like the analogy. Morse Code wasn't bad English. It was an efficient method of transmitting information through a medium in which brevity mattered. Early texting developed under similar constraints. Cell-phone keyboards were cumbersome, messages had character limits, and tapping a key three times to produce one letter encouraged economy. So people abbreviated.

BRB meant *be right back*. BTW meant *by the way*. LOL originally meant *laughing out loud*, although it eventually became almost a punctuation mark expressing amusement. Emojis supplied facial expressions and emotional cues that ordinary text couldn't easily convey.

The technology has changed dramatically since then. Smartphones now offer full keyboards, predictive text, voice dictation and automatic correction. Messaging has expanded far beyond SMS into iMessage, WhatsApp, social media and countless other platforms.

Yet the impulse remains the same: **Communicate what needs to be said with the least necessary effort**. Samuel Morse would probably understand.

Could Texting Actually Help Writing?

Here's the part that bothered some people when I wrote the original article: If students are texting constantly, **they're writing constantly**. That doesn't mean they're writing *well*, but they're regularly turning thoughts into written language and sending those thoughts to an audience. That's something teachers can work with.

Imagine a classroom exercise built around an ordinary text exchange. Put several informal messages on the board and ask students to rewrite them as Standard English. Add capitalization, punctuation and complete sentences. Then change the assignment: Rewrite the same message as an email to a teacher. Now make it a note to a friend. Finally, turn it into a paragraph suitable for a school paper.

The lesson isn't that one version is “good English” and all the others are bad. The lesson is **appropriateness**. Students learn that effective writing changes with purpose and audience.

A New Wrinkle: Artificial Intelligence

The question has acquired an interesting new dimension since 2013. Back then, people worried that texting would make young people lazy writers. Today, artificial intelligence can compose an entire email, essay or report from a short prompt. Smartphones can predict the next word, correct spelling, supply punctuation and rewrite messages before they're sent.

That creates a more serious educational question than whether somebody types LOL. If technology does too much of the composing, will people still develop the ability to organize their own thoughts and express them clearly?

The answer isn't to reject the technology. Spellcheck didn't destroy spelling, calculators didn't eliminate mathematics, and texting didn't destroy English. But students still need to understand the skills underneath the tools. AI can suggest a better sentence. The writer should know **why** it's better.

The Real Lesson Is Knowing When

So was texting lowering writing standards when I worried about it in 2013? Apparently not.

English absorbed texting just as it absorbed the telephone, radio, television, email and every other communications technology that came before it. Some texting expressions survived. Others disappeared. New ones took their place. The important lesson remains the one I reached thirteen years ago: **Know when to text and know when to write.**

Send your friend an emoji. Text "On my way." Abbreviate when everybody involved understands the abbreviation. Language is supposed to communicate, and sometimes three letters accomplish the job nicely. But when the occasion calls for clear, professional Standard English, be able to shift gears and produce it.

Texting isn't the enemy of good writing. Neither is technology. Not knowing the difference between the two registers is the problem. BION.

That's **Believe It Or Not** for anyone who wasn't texting in 2013.