

Texting and Writing

Michaela Cullington
Marywood University

It's taking over our lives. We can do it almost anywhere—walking to class, waiting in line at the grocery store, or hanging out at home. It's quick, easy, and convenient. It has become a concern of doctors, parents, and teachers alike. What is it? It's texting!

Text messaging—or texting, as it is more commonly called—is the process of sending and receiving typed messages via a cellular phone. It is a common means of communication among teenagers and is even becoming popular in the business world because it allows quick messages to be sent without people having to commit to a telephone conversation. A person is able to say what is needed and the other person will receive the information and respond when it's convenient to do so.

In order to more quickly type what they are trying to say, many people use abbreviations instead of words. The language created by these abbreviations is called textspeak. Some people believe that using these abbreviations is hindering the writing abilities of students, some say that textspeak has no effect on student writing, and still others argue that texting is actually having a positive effect on writing. This is a great debate. Although some believe that texting has either a positive or a negative effect on writing, it in fact seems likely that texting has no significant effect on student writing.

Concerns about Textspeak

A September 2008 article in *USA Today* entitled “Texting, Testing Destroys Kids’ Writing Style” summarizes many of the most common complaints about the effect of texting. It states that according to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 25% of high school seniors are “proficient” writers. The article quotes Jacquie Ream, a former teacher and author of *K.I.S.S.—Keep It Short and Simple*, a guide for writing better and more effectively. Ream states, “[W]e have a whole generation being raised without communication skills.” She firmly believes that because of this lack of communication skills, students do not have the ability to write well. She blames the use of acronyms and shorthand in text messages for students’ inability to spell and ultimately write. Ream also points out that students struggle to convey emotion in their writing because, as she states, in text messages “emotions are always sideways smiley faces.” She also puts blame on teachers for not teaching their students good critical thinking skills. She says kids learn only to “parrot” information they’re given rather than use it to develop their own thoughts and ideas. Ream concludes that “there’s a whole generation that can’t come up with new ideas—and even if they did have a breakthrough thought or opinion of their own, they couldn’t share it with the rest of us.”

This debate became prominent after some teachers began to believe they were seeing a

decrease in the writing abilities of their students. Many attributed this perceived decline to the increasing popularity of text messaging and its use of abbreviations. Naomi Baron, a linguistics professor at American University, worried by the rise in its popularity, blames texting for the fact that “so much of American society has become sloppy and laissez faire about the mechanics of writing” (“Should We Worry or LOL?”). Teachers report finding “2” for “to,” “gr8” for “great,” “dat” for “that,” and “wut” for “what,” among other examples of textspeak, in their students’ writing. A Minnesota teacher of the seventh and ninth grades says that she has to spend extra time in class editing papers and must “explicitly” remind her students that it is not acceptable to use text slang and abbreviations in writing (Walsh). Other proponents of the argument contend that texting is interfering with standard written English: students do not learn how to write correctly because they are constantly texting their friends using textspeak. One English teacher believes that text language has become “second nature” to her students (Carey); they are so used to it that they do not even catch themselves doing it.

Many also complain that because texting does not stress the importance of punctuation, students are neglecting it in their formal writing. Teachers say that their students are forgetting commas, apostrophes, and even capital letters to begin sentences. Proper usage of grammar rules is necessary for writing effectively. If it is true that students are indeed failing to follow proper punctuation rules and correct spelling as a result of constantly texting, teachers will need to make more of an effort to instruct students on proper writing.

Another complaint is that text messages lack emotion. Many argue that texts lack feeling because of their tendency to be short, brief, and to the point. Communicating emotions through words is an important aspect of writing. The reader should be able to very easily understand and often even feel how the author is feeling. Because students are not able to communicate emotion effectively through texts, some teachers worry, they may lose the ability to do so in writing.

To get a more personal perspective on the question of how teachers perceive texting to be influencing student writing, I interviewed two of my former high school teachers—my junior-year English teacher and my senior-year theology teacher. Both teachers stress the importance of writing in their courses. They maintain that they notice text abbreviations in their students’ writing often. To correct this problem, they point out when it occurs and take points off for its use. They also remind their students to use proper sentence structure and complete sentences. The English teacher says that she believes texting inhibits good writing—it reinforces simplistic writing which may be acceptable for conversation but is “not so good for critical thinking or analysis.” She suggests that texting tends to generate topic sentences without emphasizing the following explanation. She also says that her students are “woefully unskilled in critical analysis and interpretation.” According to these teachers, then, texting is inhibiting good writing. However, their evidence is limited, based on just a few personal experiences rather than on a significant amount of research.

Responses to Concerns about Textspeak

In response to these complaints that texting is having a negative impact on student writing, others insist that texting should be viewed as beneficial because it provides motivation to write, a chance to practice writing skills, and an opportunity for students to gain confidence in their writing. For example, Sternberg, Kaplan, and Borck argue that texting is a good way to motivate students. Teens enjoy texting, and if they frequently write through texts, they will be more motivated

to write formally. Texting also helps to spark students' creativity because they are always coming up with new ways to express their ideas (417).

In addition, because they are engaging in written communication rather than oral speech, texting teens learn how to convey their message to a reader in as few words as possible. In his book *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*, David Crystal discusses a study which concludes that texting actually helps foster "the ability to summarize and express oneself concisely" in writing (168). Furthermore, Crystal explains that texting actually helps people to "sharpen their diplomatic skills . . . [because] it allows more time to formulate their thoughts and express them carefully" (168). One language arts teacher from Minnesota believes that texting helps students to learn an "element of writing," letting students develop their own "individual voice" (Walsh). Perfecting such a voice allows the writer to offer personal insights and express feelings that will interest and engage readers.

Supporters of texting also argue that it not only teaches elements of writing but provides extra practice to those who struggle with the conventions of writing. As Crystal points out, children who struggle with literacy will not choose to use a technology that requires them to do something that is difficult for them. However, if they do choose to text, the experience will help them learn to write. Through this experience, teenagers can "overcome their awkwardness and develop their social and communication skills" (*Txtng* 171). Shirley Holm, a junior high school teacher, describes texting as a "comfortable form of communication" (Walsh). Teenagers are used to texting, enjoy doing so, and as a result are always writing. Through this experience of writing in ways they enjoy, they can learn to take pleasure in writing formally. As Derek Anderson, a composition and literature teacher, explains, "[A]ny writing is good writing, as long as you get your point across" (Walsh). Writing skills improve with time and practice. If students are continually writing in some form, they will eventually develop better skills.

Furthermore, those who favor texting explain that with practice comes the confidence and courage to try new things, which some observers believe they are seeing happen with writing as a result of texting. Teenagers have, for example, created an entirely new language—one that uses abbreviations and symbols instead of words, does not require punctuation, and uses short, incomplete phrases throughout the entire conversation. It's a way of speaking that is a language in and of itself. Crystal, among others, sees this "language evolution" as a positive effect of texting; he seems, in fact, fascinated that teenagers, who are so young, are capable of creating such a phenomenon. He describes it as the "latest manifestation of the human ability" (*Txtng* 175). David Warlick, a teacher and author of books about technology in the classroom, would agree with Crystal. He believes students should be given credit for "inventing a new language ideal for communicating in a high-tech world" (Carey).

Methods

I decided to conduct my own research into this controversy. I wanted to get different, more personal, perspectives on the issue. First, I surveyed seven high school and college students on their opinions about the impact of texting on writing, which provided a personal account of how students believe texting is affecting them. Second, I questioned two high school teachers (as noted above). Finally, in an effort to compare what students are actually doing to people's perceptions of what they are doing, I analyzed student writing samples for instances of textpeak.

To let students speak for themselves about how their texting habits were influencing their writing, I created a list of questions for seven high school and college students, some of my closest and

most reliable friends. Although the number of respondents was small, I could trust my knowledge of them to help me best interpret their responses. In addition, these students are very different from one another, which I believed would allow for a wide array of thoughts and opinions on the issue. I was thus confident in their answers regarding reliability and diversity, but was cautious not to make too many assumptions because of the small sample size.

I asked the students how long they had been texting; how often they texted; what types of abbreviations they used most and how often they used them; and whether they noticed themselves using any type of textspeak in their formal writing. In analyzing their responses, I looked for commonalities to help me draw conclusions about the students' texting habits and if/how they believed their writing was affected.

I also wanted some teachers' opinions. Had they seen textspeak in their students' writing? Did they believe texting is hindering their students' writing? I created a list of questions for the teachers similar to the one for the students and asked two of my high school teachers to provide their input. I asked if they had noticed their students using textspeak in their writing assignments and, if so, how they dealt with it. I also asked if they believed texting had a positive or negative effect on writing. Next, I asked if they were texters themselves. And, finally, I solicited their opinions on what they believed should be done to prevent teens from using text abbreviations and other textspeak in their writing.

I was surprised at how different the students' replies and opinions were from the teachers'. I decided to find out for myself whose impressions were more accurate by comparing some students' actual writing vis-à-vis students' and teachers' perceptions of that writing. To do this I looked at twenty samples of student writing—end-of-semester research arguments written in two first-year college writing courses with different instructors. The paper topics varied from increased airport security after September 11 to the weapons of the Vietnam War to autism, and ranged from eight to ten pages. This sample gave me a firsthand look at whether or not students were in fact incorporating textspeak into their formal writing assignments. To analyze the papers for the presence of textspeak, I looked closely for use of abbreviations and other common slang terms and sayings, especially those usages which the students had stated in their surveys were most common. These included “hbu” (“How about you?”); “gtg” (“Got to go”); and “cuz” (“because”). I also looked for the numbers 2 and 4 used instead of the words “to” and “for.”

Discussion of Findings

My research suggests that texting actually has a minimal effect on student writing. It showed that students do not believe textspeak is appropriate in formal writing assignments. They recognize the difference between texting friends and writing formally and know what is appropriate in each situation. This was proven true in the student samples, in which no examples of textspeak were used. Many experts would agree that there is no harm in textspeak, as long as students continue to be taught and reminded that a formal language occasion is not the place for it. As Crystal explains, the purpose of creating the abbreviations used in text messages is to allow for more space, not to replace language. In a standard text message, the texter is allowed only 160 characters for a communication: abbreviations were created to shorten words and use less space in each message (“Texting” 81). Texting was not created to replace the English language, but rather to make quick communications shorter and easier.

Dennis Baron, an English and linguistics professor at the University of Illinois, has done much

research on the effect of technology on writing, and his findings are aligned with my own study. In his book *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*, which examines how technology has changed the way people write, he concludes that students do not use textspeak in their writing. In fact, he suggests students do not even use abbreviations in their text messages very often. The students I surveyed stated that they rarely, if ever, use abbreviations even in their texts. Barron says that college students have “put away such childish things, and many of them had already abandoned such signs of middle-school immaturity in high school” (qtd. in “A Better Pencil”). He also observes that “writers learn to adapt their style to the demands of their audience and the conventions of the genre in which they’re writing.” His conclusions are surprising because most people assume that texting is affecting student writing. But Barron’s findings directly oppose that assumption.

In surveying the high school and college students, I found that most have been texting for a few years, usually starting around ninth grade. They said they generally text between thirty and a hundred messages every day. I also found that they use abbreviations only occasionally but the most common are “lol” (“Laugh out loud”), “gtg” (“Got to go”), “hbu” (“How about you?”), “cuz” (“because”), and “jk” (“Just kidding”). Each student admitted to using abbreviations in writing on occasion but did not believe they were acceptable in formal writing. Most students, including those I surveyed, report that they do not use textspeak in formal writing. As one Minnesota high school student says, “[T]here is a time and a place for everything,” and formal writing is not the place for communicating the way she would if she were texting her friends (Walsh). Another student admits that she sometimes finds herself using these abbreviations. However, she notices and corrects them before handing in her final paper (Carey). One teacher reports that, despite texting, her students’ “formal writing remains solid” (Walsh). She occasionally sees that a student has used an abbreviation; however, it is in informal, “warm-up” writing. She believes that what students choose to use in everyday types of writing is up to them as long as they use standard English in formal writing (Walsh).

In analyzing the student writing samples, I found no evidence of textspeak. This contradicts suggestions that texting is having a negative influence on the writing abilities of students. This also discounts the teachers’ worries that textspeak may appear in student writing. In both the reports from students and the writing samples, it is evident that students recognize context: in texting, as in conversations with their friends, they can use more casual language. However, when writing formally, they know they must use standard written English.

Also supporting my own research findings are those from a study which took place at a mid-western research university. These results dispel the belief that the use of text abbreviations hinders students’ spelling abilities. This study involved eighty-six students who were taking an Introduction to Education course at the university. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that included questions about their texting habits, the spelling instruction they had received, and how proficient they were at spelling. They also took a standardized spelling test. Before starting the study, the researchers reasoned that texting and the use of abbreviations would have a negative impact on the spelling abilities of the students. However, after analyzing the data they found that the results did not support their hypothesis. The researchers also remarked that while their study did not support the belief that texting is affecting the spelling abilities of students, the use of text messaging as a common means of communication is becoming increasingly popular; therefore, this issue should continue to be examined (Shaw, Carlson, and Waxman).

I myself am a frequent texter. I chat with my friends from home every day through texting. I also use texting to communicate with my school friends, perhaps to discuss what time we are going to meet for dinner or to ask quick questions about homework. According to the cell phone bill, I send and receive around 6,400 texts a month. This may seem like a lot, but compared to many texters it is a relatively low number. In the messages I send, I rarely notice myself using abbreviations. The only time I use them is if I do not have time to write out the complete phrase. However, sometimes I find it more time consuming to try to figure out how to abbreviate something so that my message will still be comprehensible to the reader.

Since I rarely use abbreviations in my texting, I never use them in my formal writing. I know that they are unacceptable and it would make me look unintelligent if I included acronyms and symbols instead of proper and formal language. I also have not noticed an effect on my spelling as a result of texting. I am confident in my spelling abilities and even on the occasion that I use an abbreviation, I know what it stands for and how to spell it. Based upon my own research, expert research, and personal observations, I can confidently state that texting has no effect on writing abilities.

The issue of whether texting is affecting students' writing and, if so, whether it is a positive or negative influence is much debated. It is very interesting to look at the dynamics of the arguments. Teachers and parents who claim that they are seeing a decline in the writing abilities of their students and children mainly support the negative impact argument. Some teachers and researchers suggest that texting provides a way for teens to practice writing in a casual setting and thus helps prepare them to learn to write formally. Ultimately, however, experts and students themselves report that they see no effect, positive or negative, on their writing as a result of texting. Teachers' personal anecdotal experiences should not overshadow the actual evidence, which shows that texting is not interfering with students' use of standard written English.

Note

¹ All participants in the study have given permission for their responses to be published.

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