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Columns



Does IM Make U Dum?

by [Martha Brockenbrough](#)

B4 the Net, it wuz unheard of 2 use shorthand like this, unless U were writing a classified ad.

As you can see, I'm not very good at these abbreviations, probably "coz" in Internet years, I'm about 287 years old. It's a miracle my gnarled hands can type at all.

My own [decrepitude](#) aside, kids and hipsters everywhere regularly insert abbreviations, acronyms, and other Internetisms into their writing--even when they're offline.

Does this mean our language is going to LOL all the way to its doom? Does it mean that instant message (oops, I mean IM) abbreviators are dopes? Or are folks like me the real dummies because we can't bring ourselves to type "coz," except as a joke?

I know the answer, and it's not what you might think.

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The best way to understand it is to imagine a guy wearing a very small, tight swimsuit. I know. Close your eyes and do it anyway. Now that you're thinking of that suit and its wearer, imagine a place where that person is standing.

If your swimsuit guy is standing in, say, a shopping center, then it's probably not too hard to imagine the next people entering the landscape of your imagination are police officers, ready to arrest him for indecent exposure.

But if your swimsuit guy is standing alongside an Olympic-size swimming pool, waiting for his event to begin, then you've imagined a context where the image fits right in. No one looks at a competitive swimmer in his little swimsuit and says, "Hey buddy, put some pants on!"

So the key with Internetisms is to know when it's okay to use them, when it's not okay, and when not using them will make you look clueless.

When it's okay to abbreviate

We use language shortcuts all the time, sometimes without even knowing it. Even fancy people who don't even use contractions when they're talking will sometimes take

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shortcuts with their speech and writing.

The last time you hailed a taxi, for example, you used a shortcut. And I'm not just talking about shortening taxicab to taxi. The unabbreviated term for it is [taximeter cab](#). A [taximeter](#) is the thing in the cab that keeps track of your fare. Even cab is an abbreviation, for [cabriolet](#).

So anyone who tells you it's never okay to crunch down language into more easily chewable pieces had better be willing to holler "taximeter cabriolet" the next time he's in New York. My guess is that anyone who does that won't catch anything more than puzzled looks.

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Just as you'd sound crazy saying, "taximeter cabriolet!" the truth is, you run the risk of sounding hopelessly out of touch if you're in a chat room or using instant messaging software and you don't shorten things here and there.

Imagine the agony of chatting with someone who wrote, "What you just typed was very funny. I am at this moment laughing out loud," instead of LOL.

You can communicate more information in less time by adopting the Internetisms. The same goes for emoticons, those little sideways facial expressions made out of punctuation. When you're having a quick chat online, these tools help you communicate quickly and clearly when you're joking and when you're miffed. Later versions of the software even let you insert symbols that let a person know you're happy, sad, on the phone, or feeling a little bit romantic. For all these reasons, and even more that I'll get to later, it's A-OK to use Internetisms when chatting and sending instant messages.

Anywhere else, though, and watch out.

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