

Ultimate Spelling Bee: Learn 21st Century Language Skills from Erin Jansen at www.NetLingo.com

Long before computer jargon and “text speak” became part of the ongoing argument about spelling skills and the development of the English language, Erin Jansen saw the need to collect and document all of the terminology associated with the digital world, and the virtual world that followed. Now her site is the top-ranked resource for information on the language of the internet, of mobile chatting, and of 21st-century communication in general. We talked to Erin recently about the website, and how the English language is growing and adapting to keep up with the ongoing cyber-evolution of our world.

US: You were a pioneer in classifying and tracking the terminology associated with computers back in the mid-1990s and your website now covers vocabulary used in all aspects of the digital world, from the internet in general to blogging, texting, gaming, and marketing. What has been the biggest change in “cyberspeak” you’ve noticed over the last 15 years?

EJ: The biggest change in cyberspeak over the past 15 years has been the increasing use of [acronyms](#) and text shorthand, and specifically the use of numbers and symbols within acronyms and text shorthand. For example, 10Q means thank you; 143 means i love you; 182 means i hate you; <3 means a heart; 9 means a parent is watching; 99 means a parent is no longer watching. This kind of code has evolved rapidly into what is known as [leetspeak](#).

Here’s one of my favorite quotes: “The digital frontier is a nurturing place where verbs and nouns are not only born, but in fact bear offspring.” —Don Altman

US: Here at Ultimate Spelling we’ve frequently discussed the topic of [texting](#), and whether or not using abbreviations and acronyms has a negative impact on spelling skills. What’s your opinion on this?

EJ: I do not believe the use of abbreviations and acronyms while texting has a negative impact on spelling skills, it’s simply another way of talking or writing. While I don’t think this kind of shorthand is appropriate for school course work, I do think it can spur on the creative writing process. So the challenge for educators is to encourage creative writing in the first draft, but by the final paper, make sure the student is using proper grammar and spelling.

Here’s another favorite quote: “No language as depending on arbitrary use and custom can ever be permanently the same, but will always be in a mutable and fluctuating state; and what is deemed polite and elegant in one age, may be accounted uncouth and barbarous in another.” —Benjamin Martin

US: AFAIK, UNOIT, and HTNOTH look like serious cases of misspellings, but they’re fairly common acronyms used in text messages. In general, do people use acronyms like these rather than the phrases themselves, when they’re typing out e-mail messages or other non-texting communication?

EJ: Many people use these kinds of acronyms on a regular basis while others do not, it depends on the person. I continue to receive new acronym submissions on a daily basis, and I continue to see this type of shorthand even on social networking sites, not just in email or text messages. I get the feeling that people either love acronyms and use them as often as possible, or people don’t like acronyms and use shorthand sparingly.

Another favorite quote: “A dictionary is an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view, and the wrong ways into which a language has wandered ... may be nearly as instructive as the right ones.” —Richard Chenevix Trench

US: The acronym WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”) has been around long enough that it’s actually become a spoken vocabulary word, pronounced WIZZ-ee-wig. It’s even listed in the Oxford English Dictionary! Do you think that this illustrates the next step in the evolution of the English language?

EJ: I absolutely think that acronyms and tech talk in general illustrate the next step in the evolution of language. On a recent episode of the popular TV show “Dancing with the Stars” one of the stars was “talking in hashtags” when she said “OMG, hashtag intense” to refer to a posting she made on Twitter under “#intense” at which point the host responded “You talk in hashtags? OMG, please hashtag stop.” Acronyms and tech talk crossed over into mainstream media in the early 2000’s with the popularity of social media sites. NetLingo continues to track all of these terms as they keep evolving, and the good thing about the website as oppose to printed versions is that it is always updated and always growing. (The first NetLingo Dictionary book published in 2002 had 500 pages while the website had 5,000 pages; now in 2013 the website has 10,000 pages, it’s unrealistic to publish all of that in a book.)

A quote to help illustrate: “Telephone books are, like dictionaries, already out of date the moment they are printed.” —Ammon Shea

US: One of the sections of your website is titled “Top 50 Internet Acronyms Parents Need to Know.” What are the issues that come up between parents and kids, as far as “net lingo” is concerned?

EJ: The issues that come up between parents and kids as far as “net lingo” is concerned are primarily that parents don’t understand what kids are saying when they are texting and they don’t know what they are doing when spending time online. This is a problem because kids are often approached by strangers online. The statistics say it all: 95% of parents don’t recognize the lingo kids use to let people know that their parents are watching. One third of kids have been contacted by a stranger and half of these were considered inappropriate. 75% of youth who received an online sexual solicitation did not tell a parent. 81% of parents of online youth say that kids aren’t careful enough when giving out information about themselves online. These are unfortunate facts and it is why I try to educate parents about the lingo used online, and the need to stay engaged and set rules around online usage.

Here’s a cute joke to help illustrate: “The linguistics professor was explaining to his class that there were languages on this earth where a positive and a negative was always positive, some where this was always negative, and some where a double negative was in fact a positive, but that there was no language on earth where a double positive was a negative. To which a student at the back of the class called out, “Yeah right!” —Anonymous

Erin Jansen is the founder of NetLingo.com and author of “NetLingo The Internet Dictionary” and “NetLingo The Largest List of Text & Chat Acronyms.” She is online at ErinJansen.com.

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