

Rule of Thumbs: Love in the Age of Texting

By Natalie Y. Moore
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I once had a boyfriend who was Mr. Text-o-Rama.

He never wanted to talk, but he always wanted to text. To him, the only way to communicate was via thumb.

I remember a Saturday afternoon I spent with a female friend when I didn't have my cellphone handy. By the evening, I had a logjam of text messages from him. The final mess of a message inquired whether our relationship was over because of my "lack of communication."

I called him. He didn't answer.

And so it went. During our relationship, he sent me curt texts reeking of attitude. He sent texts that had the elocution of an [August Wilson](#) soliloquy. If I tried to actually call him to work something out, he'd fire off a snippy "You're busy. I'll talk to you later." It got so I wished I could string him up by his thumbs.

Looking back, I see that relationship as the embodiment of how technology is slowly killing romance. It's draining the courting out of courtship. And frankly, I'm ready to hit "delete" on the whole thing.

A flirtatious text here and there is fine, but a text of more than 100 characters? That's overkill (not to mention hard to read). When the time comes, I don't want to see the words "will u marry me" in one-point font. Call me old-fashioned, but I wonder what's so "advanced" about these so-called advancements in communication. When they're abused, they can make a caveman's grunt seem refined. The same gadgets that allow you to be in touch all the time sometimes mask the fact that you never really touched at all.

"Texting is a way of life," says etiquette expert Joy Weaver, "but it cannot replace the human voice or touch." Tell me about it.

The relationship began sweetly enough. We met through mutual friends and quickly took a liking to each other. We visited museums and bookstores and camped out at dive bars. I liked that he was so expressive and open. And I had never dated a guy who liked to communicate quite so much in so many ways.

"I love you."

I looked down at my cellphone and read the text message. It was the first time he'd expressed those dreamy words. My heart fluttered. I immediately speed-dialed him back to hear him say it out loud. He didn't answer. "Call you later," he texted me back.

At the time, I was too giddy to notice -- or care -- how weird that was, or how even weirder the many scenarios that followed were: being forced to boost the allotment on my mobile text-messaging plan. So much passive aggression delivered via tiny rectangular pieces of plastic.

My thumbs becoming so tired.

Initially, texting with him was thrilling. Wherever I was -- on assignment, at the airport, out with friends - his sweet messages triggered butterflies. It was like talking, or flirting, but better. We were always only a few keystrokes away from communicating at any time, night or day.

But soon that became the problem.

On the day of my birthday bash, he texted me that he was "uncomfortable" with our relationship and that we needed to talk before the party.

Say what? We hadn't had a fight. I called him. No answer. I called again and again and again. Finally, he answered with some lame excuse. I'm still not sure exactly what the problem was.

Repeat scenario. Add water and stir. He often seemed unable to articulate what made him mad or uneasy. But that didn't stop him from firing off messages accusing me of not communicating. Me. The girl who likes to hear or see the person she's talking to.

The final few weeks before we broke things off were a blur, one long string of digitally delivered angst. Once upon a time, drunken dialing could ruin a relationship. Ha. Try getting drunken, misspelled texts at 3 a.m.

What was I to make of this? According to Barb Iverson, a professor of new media at Columbia College Chicago, the latest technology revolution means that there are now two kinds of people in the world: "digital immigrants" and "digital natives." The digital immigrants came of age before the technology revolution and they struggle to adapt to the new language, rituals and protocol. The digital natives instinctively emote through their thumbs and don't consider a relationship "official" until their [Facebook](#) or [MySpace](#) profile says it is.

Then there are the Gen-Xers like me who are somewhere in between.

In the United States, we have come fairly late to the texting game. The Chinese, who embraced this technology years before it arrived here, send 300 billion text messages a year, and the number is rising. Half the 13- to 15-year-olds in [Australia](#) own cellphones. In [Japan](#), some experts have noted that thumbs are growing physically bigger and people are now using that digit -- and not the index finger -- to point and ring doorbells. Texting is so prevalent that Japanese teenagers are called the "tribe of the thumb."

Anthropologist Bella Ellwood-Clayton studied texting and dating in [the Philippines](#), which she calls the texting capital of the world. In a 2005 study, she detailed how it works: A man might send an innocuous text message to a woman. If she replies quickly and with warmth, the texts back and forth increase in familiarity -- and innuendo. "It is also a fairly nonthreatening way to initiate communication with someone versus a phone call or face-to-face methods, which demand greater bravery and often directness of intention," Ellwood-Clayton noted.

As we catch up here in the United States, we are grappling with the social implications that come along with texting.

As I learned, if emotions become involved, texting can quickly devolve into a power play. Because people usually keep their cellphones within reach, angry text forces the hand of the recipient: If you love me, you'll respond right now! It's not the same interruption as a phone call. You can work, watch television, sit in class or talk to a friend while texting.

My single friend Thomas says that "good morning" texts or short messages in the middle of the workday from a girlfriend are fine to let him know she's thinking of him. But receiving a text at 7 p.m. asking "How are you?" is a chicken way of saying "I want to talk to you without actually calling." He says the woman is probably at home willing the phone to ring. Her recourse? A text.

This deranged texting dance doesn't stop with singles. A married friend rolled her eyes as she recounted how her husband, sitting in another room in their house, sent her a sour text after an argument to cancel their night out on the town. It was widely reported that [Britney Spears](#) ended her marriage to [Kevin Federline](#) via text.

But in text, nuances in tone, mood and intent go by the wayside. Just like the pseudolives of millions of addicted MySpacers, too much texting can create what media theorists call "parasocial" behavior. This term is applied to people who believe that constant virtual contact is more than just pretend intimacy.

In an online and magazine ad campaign, mobile phone company Helio put out guidelines on social etiquette and technology, filled with pop quizzes and diagrams. It includes a primer on emoticons and abbreviations (e.g. YMMFS -- you make my fingers sweat).

The company suggests several texting rules for dating: Don't flirt too long virtually; if someone doesn't text you back in 24 hours, it's not happening; only cowards settle arguments via text, and text breakups don't count.

And the No. 1 text message rule: Keep it short.

The campaign is all tongue-in-cheek, but if you ask me, some people need to pay attention.

I now believe that texting should be reserved for the following notifications: "I'm running late." "I'm outside." "Meet me at [insert location.]" "It's noisy; I'll call you later." "What time are the reservations?"

And yes, "I love you" is fine -- but only if you've already said those words in person.

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/14/AR2007091401972.html>