

TECHNOLOGY: Send IM when U get this

Text messaging is sneaking into academia, with worrisome results.

By LORI ARATANI
The Washington Post

Zoe Bambery, a high school senior in Bethesda, Md., might send more than 100 instant messages — IMs — during a typical evening.

So during the SAT exam, the 18-year-old found herself inadvertently lapsing into IM-speak, using “b/c” instead of “because” as she scrambled to finish her essay.

She caught herself and now is careful to proofread before hitting “print.” But she is hardly the only student to find IM phrases creeping into schoolwork.

“They are using it absolutely everywhere,” said Sara Goodman, an English teacher at suburban Clarksburg (Md.) High School who has worn out many purple and red markers circling the offending phrases in papers and tests.

In 2004, 16 million teenagers used instant messages to communicate, up from 13 million in 2000, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Students say IM language has become so ubiquitous that they often do not realize they have lapsed into it.

Text messaging and instant messaging allow instant communication via phone or computer. But because the number of characters that can be used to convey a message can be limited, it has given rise to a whole new language. A phrase like “I know what you mean” is reduced to “IKWUM” in text-speak; “OTFL” translates to “on the floor laughing.”

“The biggest problem for me is I don’t IM, so I don’t know what they’re saying,” said Allison Finn, an English teacher in Silver Spring, Md. “They’ll say things like ‘TTYL’ (talk to you later), and I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

It’s not just teenagers. Some college professors say the lingo is popping up at their level, as well.

Jeff Stanton, an associate professor in the school of information sciences at Syracuse University, said sometimes he is taken aback at how informal students have become in the way they communicate.

Stanton shared one of his favorite pieces of correspondence: “hi prof how are u culd u tell me my xm grade - tim.”

“It bothers me at one level, but I try not to let it get under my skin,” he said. “But I am concerned (students) won’t be successful if they don’t know how to communicate on a formal basis. The first time they send a goofy message to the boss, they’re going to be out.”

Some academics fret that the shorthand will hurt students’ ability to write and communicate.

“The drawback of text messaging is that most services limit the messages to 30 words, and the ingenious young writers using that service have created symbols and abbreviations that lead to a very cryptic method of communication that does not lend itself to being transferred to academic writing,” said John Briggs, English professor at the University of California-Riverside who heads the university’s entry-level writing program for students.

But others see “teachable moments” in the new lingo. In fact, the National Council of Teachers of English, in a partnership with the International Reading Association, includes an outline on how to use IM and other forms of electronic communication on a Web site of lessons it maintains for educators nationwide.

“In some ways, (IM) is an English teacher’s dream because it’s using writing for a real purpose, toward a real audience, and that’s something we always struggle with in a classroom,” said Leila Christenbury, the council’s past president and a professor of English education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

A few years ago, after several weeks of grading papers filled with IM-speak and other jargon, Clarksburg’s Goodman took matters into her own hands.

When the students showed up for class the following day, she asked them to read a paragraph she had written using many of the same phrases they used in their papers:

“Chaucer’s the Canterbury Tales is a scathing attack on the Catholic Church of the late 1300s ... he uses the descriptions of many pilgrims (including several very sketchy religious dawgs) to deliver a veiled message about the mad corruption he like saw in the church the greed that some of his characters have for money, represents like the use of church scratch to build some pretty tight cathedrals.”

She said they laughed but understood her point.

Just 4 U

Here are a few examples of IM-speak, which some teachers and college professors worry is slipping into students’ academic work:

- AIGH: All right
- GRATZ: Congratulations
- GR8: Great
- TMI: Too much information
- WE: Whatever

Source: www.netlingo.com