

Don't blame texting teens for writing woes

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When you're a straight-laced word nerd - dictionary in one hand and red pen in the other - people expect you to stick up for the good old ways. But sometimes it's more fun to roll with the times. For example, let's embrace a little Webspeak.

Webspeak - also known as IM language, chat slang and NetLingo - is that tech-induced shorthand in which people write things such as GR8 for "great" and BRB for "be right back." It's handy for typing quickly on a cell phone keypad, it's useful for casual online chats among friends - and it's generally associated with teenagers who are using it to bring about the fall of civilization. "CU L8R" the little subversives tap out, as the grown-ups fret and mumble.

There's a general outcry that "kids these days" can't write, and their incessant texting and silly shorthand are to blame. But does that argument really hold water? After all, Americans have been having trouble on the writing front for years.

In 2003, a survey conducted by the College Board found that one-third of employees at America's top companies - these are well-employed adults, mind you - wrote "poorly," and businesses were spending billions on remedial training. And lots of other researchers have come up with similar results.

In fact, remember "A Nation at Risk"? That scathing summary of our country's academic skills reported way back in 1983 that 23 million Americans were functionally illiterate and a measly one-fifth of high-school seniors could write a persuasive essay. Today's text-crazy teens weren't even born yet, much less polluting the literary atmosphere with their LOLs (for "laughing out loud") and 2B or not 2Bs.

Still, tech-savvy kids have definitely brought Webspeak to a new level, and according to many observers, some of them are using it in inappropriate places - such as in term papers and within e-mails to potential employers. In those venues, of course, shorthand can look so informal and lazy that it tells the reader, "I'm not taking this work seriously," and it can look so juvenile and half-baked that it says, "My intellect is underdeveloped." But then again, so can the typo-riddled and grammar-botched communications that at least one-third of American employees send out every day.

Learning to write for real life involves recognizing different standards of communication: among friends, between students and teachers, between applicants and employers, and so on. A lot of people feel comfortable typing "huh?" to a sibling or a close colleague but know to write "Can you help me understand the details more thoroughly?" to a boss or a stranger. And maybe a lot of high schoolers need to learn that.

But let's stop pointing fingers at "kids these days" and give them a little helpful advice instead. Remind them that Webspeak is fine in its place, and explain why using it in formal situations works against their best interests. In the meantime, let's spend a little time proofreading our own business communications. Once we do, we might find ourselves LOL.

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