

Huffington Post **Style**

Txtspk 4eva

by Claire Gordon

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When my mother first began texting, I watched her painfully compose her virgin message. After the seventh typo and seventh clear-all, I suggest she use the abbreviation “u” for “you” to expedite the process. Every text I’ve received from my mother since then has gleefully made use of this, and only this, textspeak shorthand, like a non-native speaker who has just learned a foreign grammatical rule.



Will u be home this weekend? U can unpack some of u’re boxes. Xxx mom.

Textspeak, I realized, isn’t just English gutted into a naked, shivering skeleton of its former elegance. It’s a completely new language.

Born in the techie forums of the early Internet, textspeak was originally just [acronyms and abbreviations](#) that helped accelerate realtime typing. With the later space constraints of SMS, the need to cram maximum meaning into minimum characters became even more pressing.

Orson Welles once said, “The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.” Sure enough, digital restraints on time and space have led to ever more creative use of the letters, numbers and symbols available on our keyboards.

Over fifteen years, textspeak has evolved its own logic, subtleties, idioms, even history. Words are tweaked to better emote (awwww, miss youuu). Sentences are clipped for punchy intonation (hi. we have to hang out out. soon. like now.). Retro terms are tossed into a text as a throwback to a vintage digital era (ROLFCOPTER!!!).

Even a kind of literary high-mindedness has developed around this new dialect. Some people consciously reject the more widespread abbreviations of textspeak, typing “haha” as a subtle indictment against the lol-ing masses. Others flavor their digital writings with textspeak not because of space-time limitations, but for style. By ironically appropriating or inventing new forms, the author shows an awareness of textspeak culture, while indicating his or her sense of superiority towards it.

Indecipherable to the untrained eye, it’s understandable that older generations see textspeak as the linguistic apocalypse. Illiteracy is spreading, some professors claim, as bastardized speech

becomes the norm. The Queen's English Society is even establishing an [Academy of English](#) to purify and protect the mother tongue from digital butchering.

A slipped "cuz" into an email to a professor is not evidence, however, of cultural brain decay. It just reflects the informality of digital speech, originating as it did in the unfiltered channels of AIM. When writing an email, it takes some conscientiousness to yank oneself up to a higher register.

It's not illiteracy, but rather writing, that's spreading. With most of our interactions mediated by screens, young people are putting far more of their thoughts into text than generations past. From blogs to tweets, language is now in the hand-held devices of the masses.

Text plays a new, decentralized role in our society. In our [Alone Together](#) age, the written word has to express intimacy, recreate the rhythms of natural speech and get sarcasm to pierce through an interface. When we play with spelling and grammar, it's usually not out of ignorance, but rather a creative attempt to bend language to changing needs.

When it was first published, "Adventures of Huckleberry Fin" was banned from a public library in Massachusetts because of "[the coarse, ignorant language in which it was narrated.](#)" The same complaints are made against Cell Phone Novels today. Interestingly, it's young women, often housewives — the original consumers of the novel — who are becoming [the leaders of new digital genres.](#)

Yes, Cell Phone Novels are more pulp fiction than literary masterworks. But the appeal of both Twain and 15-year-old Bunny (the Japanese author of [Cell Phone Novel "Wolf Boy,"](#) which has sold over 110,000 paperback copies in the last year) comes from the way a spoken vernacular has been inventively put into print.

Language evolves according to who has the power to create with it. Right now, the most prolific wordsmiths are teens with cell phones. Given this shift of power, maybe the problem isn't that kids can't write a complete sentence, but rather that rentz cnt rd a txtspk 1.

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