Is Texting Killing the English Language?

People have always spoken differently from how they write, and texting is actually talking with your fingers

By [John McWhorter](http://ideas.time.com/contributor/john-mcwhorter/) April 25, 2013 Time



Texting has long been bemoaned as the downfall of the written word, “penmanship for illiterates,” as one critic [called it](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2002/nov/11/mobilephones2). To which the proper response is LOL. Texting properly isn’t writing at all — it’s actually more akin to spoken language. And it’s a “spoken” language that is getting richer and more complex by the year.

First, some historical perspective. Writing was only invented 5,500 years ago, whereas language probably traces back at least 80,000 years. Thus talking came first; writing is just an artifice that came along later. As such, the first writing was based on the way people talk, with short sentences — think of the Old Testament. However, while talk is largely subconscious and rapid, writing is deliberate and slow. Over time, writers took advantage of this and started crafting tapeworm sentences such as this one, from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “The whole engagement lasted above 12 hours, till the gradual retreat of the Persians was changed into a disorderly flight, of which the shameful example was given by the principal leaders and the Surenas himself.”

(**MORE:** [Why Americans Need Spelling Bees *and* Vocabulary Tests](http://ideas.time.com/2013/04/16/why-americans-need-spelling-bees-and-vocabulary-tests/))

No one talks like that casually — or should. But it is natural to desire to do so for special occasions, and that’s what oratory is, like the grand-old kinds of speeches that William Jennings Bryan delivered. In the old days, we didn’t much write like talking because there was no mechanism to reproduce the speed of conversation. But texting and instant messaging do — and a revolution has begun. It involves the brute mechanics of writing, but in its economy, spontaneity and even vulgarity, texting is actually a new kind of talking. There is a virtual cult of concision and little interest in capitalization or punctuation. The argument that texting is “poor writing” is analogous, then, to one that the [Rolling Stones](http://topics.time.com/rolling-stones/) is “bad music” because it doesn’t use violas. Texting is developing its own kind of grammar and conventions.

(**MORE:** [Banning the Term *Illegal Immigrant* Won’t Change the Stigma](http://ideas.time.com/2013/04/16/why-americans-need-spelling-bees-and-vocabulary-tests/#ixzz2ROj6cpf7))

Texting is developing its own kind of grammar. Take *LOL*. It doesn’t actually mean “laughing out loud” in a literal sense anymore. *LOL* has evolved into something much subtler and sophisticated and is used even when nothing is remotely amusing. Jocelyn texts “Where have you been?” and Annabelle texts back “LOL at the library studying for two hours.” *LOL* signals basic empathy between texters, easing tension and creating a sense of equality. Instead of having a literal meaning, it does something — conveying an attitude — just like the -ed ending conveys past tense rather than “meaning” anything. *LOL*, of all things, is grammar.

Of course no one thinks about that consciously. But then most of communication operates below the radar. Over time, the meaning of a word or an expression drifts — *meat* used to mean any kind of [food](http://topics.time.com/food/), *silly* used to mean, believe it or not, blessed.

Civilization, then, is fine — people banging away on their smartphones are fluently using a code separate from the one they use in actual writing, and there is no evidence that texting is ruining composition skills. Worldwide people speak differently from the way they write, and texting — quick, casual and only intended to be read once — is actually a way of talking with your fingers.

All indications are that America’s youth are doing it quite well. Texting, far from being a scourge, is a work in progress.

*This essay is adapted from McWhorter’s* [*talk*](http://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk.html) *at TED 2013.*