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On Texts, Tech and Teens

The finding that 38 percent of high-school-age students have used abbreviations like "LOL" in school assignments — with 25 percent admitting to having slipped in an emoticon or two — sounds like enough to make the typical English instructor dread the next incoming freshman class. After all, according to a report released on Thursday, half of those teenagers "sometimes use informal writing styles instead of proper capitalization and punctuation" in essays and other school assignments.

It's a finding that might prompt some to ask, as the report did: "What, if anything, connects the formal writing teens do and the informal e-communication they exchange on digital screens?"

Is there a steady decline of writing ability at the hands of technology? Or do new media and online communications actually encourage students to write more, providing an opening for educators to focus on boosting their composition and critical thinking skills?

The [report](#), from the Pew Internet & American Life Project and the College Board's National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges, leaves open the latter as a possibility even as it calls for more research on how technology can best be marshaled in the writing classroom.

For now, it's clear from the findings that the vast majority of students (86 percent of respondents) think that writing is important to their future success. At the same time, 85 percent of them use "some form of electronic personal communication" — such as e-mail, instant messaging and text messages — on at least an occasional basis, even though most of them don't classify it as "writing" per se.

"[D]espite the nearly ubiquitous use of these tools by teens, they see an important distinction between the 'writing' they do for school and outside of school for personal reasons, and the 'communication' they enjoy via instant messaging, phone text messaging, e-mail and social networking sites," the report states.

It later continues: "At the core, the digital age presents a paradox. Most teenagers spend a considerable amount of their life composing texts, but they do not think that a lot of the material they create electronically is real writing. The act of exchanging e-mails, instant messages, texts, and social network posts is communication that carries the same weight to teens as phone calls and between-class hallway greetings."

The report, "Writing, Technology and Teens," is based on a survey conducted last year of 700 children from ages 12 to 17, each accompanied by a parent, in addition to eight focus groups in four different cities. While it focuses on students currently in middle or high school, the portrait it paints is applicable to many of the incoming freshmen at colleges across the nation who will surely enter their first composition or English class. As such, it provides a window into some of the issues educators at the postsecondary level will increasingly have to grapple with: students' increasing expectations for shorter and less nuanced assignments, for example, as well as changing reading and writing habits.

About 93 percent of respondents said they wrote for their own pleasure outside of school, and evidence suggests that an increasing fraction of that writing is done online, either on social networking sites or in blogs. But in class, 82 percent said their assignments tend to be a paragraph to a page long. Part of the problem, the authors suggested, is finding ways to move that excitement about writing into rich, engaging assignments in the classroom.

"We always want more from students. I think that this explosion of writing is actually a very good thing," said [Richard Sterling](#), an adjunct professor at the University of California at Berkeley's Graduate School of Education and the departing executive director of the National Writing Project. "Society at large is fast, quick-paced; a lot of the media is in small bites, and that does get reflected in their writing. There tends to be a kind of breathless pace to a lot of the work that they produce," he said.

So the job of educators is to "get students to slow down and be more thoughtful and more reflective about what they're reading and what they're writing," added Sterling, who also contributed to the survey.

And the smilies? Sterling suggested that if a ";" ever shows up in an assignment, "you actually have an opportunity ... a teachable moment" to instruct students on when such expressions are acceptable and in which contexts more formal language is required.

Cheryl Ball, a professor of English at Illinois State University who is chairing the Conference on College Composition and Communication's [Committee on Computers in Composition and Communication](#) (which employs what an English professor would recognize as alliteration), said that there is still not enough knowledge about students' writing habits at home versus at school, and how technology should be used to best improve the teaching of writing.

But she also stressed that writing instruction shouldn't necessarily be restricted to typical forms like the academic essay, and that educators should consider how to incorporate newer modes into their teaching.

Ball suggested, in an e-mail, that "educators need to attend to the ways that students conceive of 'what counts' as writing, be capacious in our own definitions of writing and recognize that writing will continue to expand to include forms such as the report mentions [like] IM, social networking and multimedia. I look forward to teaching more students who have such an expansive view of writing, even if they don't call it that."

— [Andy Guess](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
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