

GWRJ Short: The Multimodality of Texting

Jessica Kreul

In this GWRJ Short, Jessica Kreul dissects the common language, structure, and techniques used in texting by examining the different modes we use to mimic verbal speech. This examination helps demonstrate how texting as a conversational, multimodal genre follows its own set of rules and genre conventions.

For a lot of us, texting dominates our various modes of daily communication, whether it is sending a quick message to someone or engaging in a longer conversation. We don't often think of this activity as writing or explore the intricacies of this **genre**. When it comes to writing in a more professional or academic setting, the texts that we compose look and feel different than the everyday, conversational writing that is a more natural and instinctual part of our texting communications. So, that email being drafted to send to a professor or that essay that still needs to be written are both going to have a certain language, set of grammar rules, and thought process behind them that differ greatly from how we communicate regularly with those who know us. Yet, there are still certain **genre conventions** when it comes to texting that we employ without even realizing it. So, when we are texting, we are still adhering to the rules of the genre and writing deliberately. Perhaps texting just isn't as daunting and draining as professional writing is.

“Genres are typified responses to recurring social situations. Often, when we talk about genres, we include so many different kinds of written texts ... seeing them as recognizable responses to recurring situations ... that accomplish specific social action in the world” (“Genre Research Terms”).

Genre conventions refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre.

Genre conventions include features like length, structure, formatting, different modes in use, language use, and tone (“Genre Research Terms”).

In addition to the unconscious ways that we write text messages, we don’t always think about how we’re using multimodality in texting. We don’t always need to compose a message using alphabetic words because there are so many modes that we have at our disposal to make meaning. According to the ISU Writing Program, “**Multimodality** describes how human communication always relies on more than one singular mode to

make meaning ... how we use multiple modes to compose texts in particular genres, and how our multimodal choices have consequences for making texts, making meaning, and mediating uptake” (“Multimodality Terms”). When we compose a text, we use many of the modes that we have at our disposal: aural, gestural, linguistic, oral, spatial, tactile, verbal, and visual. However, for the purposes of texting as a multimodal genre and what I most often use, I’ll be focusing on the linguistic, spatial, and verbal modes of my texting practices.

Texting as Linguistic

The first and most prominent mode that we use while texting is the **linguistic mode**. This mode refers to ways that we use language and consider elements such as word choice, grammar, organization, and tone (“Multimodality Terms”). There may be times that we deliberately say “yes” or “yes!” or “yeah” when they all, seemingly, get across the same idea. However, we use texting as a way to replicate what and how we would say something if we were actually having a face-to-face conversation. In academic writing, this doesn’t matter as much because we don’t necessarily want our everyday, colloquial voice to show through the text. I know when I write an essay, I’ll be far more conscious of my word choice and how I am presenting ideas so that I am conveying a more coherent and well-rounded thought. This can take a certain degree of care and consideration, but so does the way that we manipulate text messages to sound exactly the way that we intend them to. This is why we pick and choose the small details, such as an exclamation point, to better reflect our tone and intended meaning.

There are plenty of other ways that we manipulate words for the purposes of text messaging besides trying to give them a certain tone. We also abbreviate common phrases to make the activity of texting quicker. Common ones are LOL, TTYL, BTW, and more. While these abbreviations don’t

exactly reflect the way that we talk in person as we would not necessarily say each word in the abbreviation, texting as a genre is used as a quick mode of communication, so we have adapted and accepted these abbreviations and try to understand and use them ourselves. For instance, in Figure 1, multiple abbreviations make up a conversation that could be spoken out loud. For anyone who may be unfamiliar with these particular abbreviations, here they are spelled out: WYD is “what [are] you doing?”, WBY stands for “what about you?”, LYK is “let you know,” and I think most of us are familiar with IDK (“I don’t know”). These are all common phrases in everyday conversation, so they appear frequently in text messages too, which is why it has become so helpful to use the linguistic mode to incorporate some well-known abbreviations, making the activity of texting faster while still being able to comprehend the message all the same.

Additionally, as in Figure 1, punctuation is not often a consideration in texting amongst younger generations. I think this is one of the major differences between the texting that goes on between members of Generations Z and Alpha and the texts between Gen Y and the generations before it. Punctuation is not a factor in spoken communication, and this idea has translated to text messages as well. In keeping with the fast nature of texting, certain punctuation, mainly commas and periods, have become redundant and wasted effort because the message is still interpreted without them. In Figure 1, there absolutely could be a comma placed in the first,



Figure 1: A texting conversation with various abbreviations.

second, and fourth messages to break up the different phrases or ideas. However, the text messages still read the same without them.

Texting as Spatial

Another tactic that we employ instead of punctuation is the use of space. This has become more popular in recent years, but instead of sending a long text message, it is easier to break them up into separate message bubbles to show different thoughts, which can be seen in Figure 2. Here, the use of space signifies a progression of separate ideas that contribute to the larger conversation. When considering the **spatial mode**, we “might use physical spaces and objects (like where items in a classroom are), or physical arrangement, organization, and proximity within a text (like where items are in a brochure)” (“Multimodality Terms”). In Figure 2, the three text messages on the right could have been placed together in one message bubble. However, instead of messages with punctuation, messages are sent separately to indicate an exclamation point or a question mark. The blank space between the message bubbles allows the writer to break up the text and the recipient to understand they are meant to be read as a progression of separate messages coming together to make meaning and create a conversation. This is similar to how we may use line breaks or paragraph indents to represent a shift in content. Whether done intentionally or not, the



Figure 2: A texting conversation with separate messages instead of traditional punctuation.

use of the spatial modality through separate message bubbles operates on the same principle.

Texting as Verbal

Another mode that we consider when composing text messages is the **verbal mode**. When we use this mode, we “rely on speaking or writing and consider some of the same things we do when we use aural or oral modes (volume, voice) or linguistic modes (word choice, grammars)” (“Multimodality Terms”). Verbal is similar to linguistic mode, but instead of focusing on tone through word choice or punctuation, we are manipulating the way that specific words are actually heard by our recipient. For example, in Figure 3, the word “oh” has multiple h’s tacked onto the end of it. Writers do this because we want our recipient to hear the elongated sound of the word. Simply putting “oh” sounds blunt and may not best replicate our response. This can be done with many words such as um, uh, and okay,



Figure 3: A texting conversation using written language to imitate how we speak.

simply by inserting the last letter as many times as desired. Something like this would most likely not be done in professional writing. However, in casual conversations, we elongate words all the time to give them a different meaning or emphasis. Because texting so closely represents the way that we speak, it makes sense that this feature carries over from verbal conversations into text message writing. This convention of texting communication not only changes the tone, but it also can change the message behind the words; it is deliberate in that the recipient is supposed to hear the words exactly as they are written.

Texting as a Genre

Texting can happen almost as quickly as an in-person conversation. It is not meant to use fancy language, varied sentence structure, or follow a set of rules like we would expect to find in an essay. Yet, texting uses a lot of similar principles, just with lower stakes (usually). We still use the linguistic and verbal modalities by incorporating abbreviations or making words longer than they are. We omit unnecessary punctuation in favor of blank space, using the spatial modality, because who needs those periods and commas anyway? This certainly contributes to a unique sentence structure. We have all these modes at our disposal that we use, intentionally or not. We follow the multimodal conventions of texting as a genre because we have adapted to them and understand the affordances (benefits and limitations) that come with multimodal communication. So, it is helpful to understand why we communicate the way that we do through different modes. With texting, there are different modes at our disposal that we can use to make conversations faster, keep them informal, and still replicate our spoken voice. When we play around with multiple modes in texting, we can use these modes effectively in the texts that we compose—and continue to evolve the conventions of the genre for ourselves and future generations.

Works Cited

“Genre Research Terms.” ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/genre-research-terms. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

“Multimodality Terms.” ISU Writing Program, www.isuwriting.com/multimodality-terms. Accessed 17 Oct. 2023.

Jessica Kreul is an undergraduate English major at Illinois State University. She hopes to progress her writing skills before graduating and entering a career in editing. Besides her love of reading and writing, Jessica also enjoys working out, playing *Animal Crossing*, and watching movies.



Notes

