

How i Lrnd 2 Txt: An Adventure in Genre

Haley Stouffer

In this article, Haley Stouffer takes a personal look at the genre of texting and the changing technologies she has used to text. She traces her experience from new technology to new technology, examining the changing problems and benefits that texting brings with it.

My First Phone, or the proof of perseverance

I remember when I was in the sixth grade and my parents announced that my constant nagging had finally paid off: they had decided I was ready for a cell phone. Before this, communication with my friends outside of school had been difficult. My friends and I would make our plans to hang out during school hours when everyone was there to hear when and where we would meet. We decided who would provide the ride, what time we were getting picked up, and where we were going all ahead of time. If the plans changed I would have to call their home phones and get stuck talking to their parents for twenty minutes before getting to them. Even then, we had to worry about a nosy sibling listening in, so we made our conversations short and to the point. If we discussed anything like school gossip or who we had a crush on, my older sister, who should have had better things to do, would be sure to overhear and tease me about it later.

After I got a cell phone, it was another story. My first cell phone was an indestructible dinosaur that didn't even have text messaging on it. I didn't mind though because it opened a lot of doors for me and because I'd never

texted before. I could call my friends whenever I wanted and was even given more freedom as long as I promised to check in every so often. My parents and I had an agreement that I could go anywhere in town or spend as long as I wanted at the mall as long as I answered my cell phone whenever they called. My cell phone gave me the opportunity to build up my parents' trust. Thanks to the shrill, obnoxious ring and lack of a vibrate feature, I never missed a call and no one else did either (especially my teachers).

Communication made a different kind of advance when I was in the seventh grade. Yahoo instant messenger become an obsession for my friends and me. I would get home after basketball practice and go straight to my computer. My Yahoo account would show me which of my friends were online, and I could update my status to let everyone know my current favorite song. If I wanted to chat with one of my friends, all I had to do was click on their name and a messaging box would pop up. It opened the doors to visual and textual, rather than verbal, communication. By typing back and forth we could have long conversations without having to speak at all. I always tried to type things almost as fast as I would be able to say them out loud so that I could keep up with multiple conversations at once. Sometimes I would have as many as 10 conversations going on, each with their own window, so speed was a necessity. This is when I first began using acronyms, abbreviations, and emoticons to shorten my messages.

My Second Phone, or how I got into texting and was consumed by it

The new ability to shorten messages was very useful as I made a jump forward in cell phone technology and bought a text messaging phone. I quickly found out that texts had a 160 character limit. At the time, typing a text required using one of two methods. The first was multi-tapping keys. This method takes seven taps just to type the word "hey." The other was a rather slow and difficult method called T9. T9, or predictive texting, was meant to make texting faster and easier than the multi-tapping of keys, but I found that it was almost more time-consuming trying to teach the T9 new words. And always proofreading everything I typed was frustrating. I usually found myself turning off the T9 setting and tapping keys (even though it was sometimes up to four taps for one letter).

Texting caught on even faster than instant messaging in my seventh grade class. Everyone thought that there would be no need to pass notes across the classroom if we all had our cell phones hidden under our desks. The only problem was that, at 15 cents a text, it was too expensive to have a conversation. But that didn't stop me. All I was concerned with was gossiping

to the girls about which boys liked us and whether we looked better in pink or blue. After three outrageous phone bills and countless lectures from my parents, I started limiting my texting to occasional messages that got the most out of the 160 characters allowed. I made sure to pack as much as I could into one text message. For example, instead of asking one question and waiting for a reply, I would ask everything at once. Most of my texts looked something like this: “want 2 go 2 the mall? wat time? go eat first?”. Limiting my characters made me focus on learning as many abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons as possible.

Although I didn’t think about it at the time, each of these categories helped me in different ways.

- **Abbreviations** leave out vowels and often incorporate numbers that have the sound of particular syllables to save space. A good rule for an abbreviation is that it must have a close enough resemblance to the actual word that the receiver of the text comprehends your meaning. Cutting down on the letters in words is good because you use less characters and can type a message faster.
- **Acronyms**, however, do not resemble a specific word but use letters to represent commonly used phrases. In texting, acronyms are perhaps the best way to shorten a message because they allow a phrase, such as “just so you know,” to be expressed in just a few letters (jsyk). But despite how helpful they are, texting acronyms can be dangerous because they do not make sense to people who do not have a strong background in texting or instant messaging. My mother, for example, gets very confused if I send her texts that say “hbu” or “omw.” Confusion also occurs if people try to create their own acronyms that no one else has ever heard of. It’s best to stick to ones that are commonly known.
- **Emoticons** are symbols made up of punctuation, letters, and numbers to depict emotion in the context of a text message. For example, a winking face [;)] implies that you’re being flirty or joking, while a sad face [:(] suggests the opposite. This is useful to show the emotion that is often difficult to portray in text alone.

Looking back, I realize that these are all skills that I learned from using Yahoo instant messenger, and it might be more difficult for someone to understand these concepts if they had never used instant messaging. For example, I’ve been attempting to teach my mother the art of texting for years. I’ve even gone as far as to print off a list of common texting acronyms for her, but for some reason she still thinks it’s acceptable to make up her own, ignoring the

fact that no one has a clue what they mean. Without the ability to shorten her sentences, she often has to send it in multiple parts and usually gives up and calls me on the phone instead. She simply can't adjust to the change in technology and doesn't understand the genre. My new strategy is to teach her in the way that I learned. Yahoo Messenger is outdated now, but Facebook chat uses the same concept and incorporates the same techniques to shorten sentences. By starting out with some form of textual communication, I think the transition to texting will be much easier.

Things really started to change when my parents got me unlimited texting for my eighth grade graduation present. From that moment on, texting consumed my life. I started having full conversations solely through text messages; talking on the phone became a thing of the past. This also encouraged my high school boyfriend to become something of a stalker. I received a constant stream of text messages from him asking, "where r u?"; "who r u wit?"; and "wen u comin home?". This was slightly endearing at first but quickly became, well, creepy.

My Third Phone and Beyond, or how I learned to drive with no hands

Next came my driver's license, and of course my sixteen-year-old self thought that she could handle the challenge of texting while driving. Take it from me, not a good idea. I was lucky for a while, but then the full keyboard phones came out and they require two hands to operate. This left me with no hands to drive with and resulted in a totaled car and very angry parents.

On a more positive note, phones with the full QWERTY keyboards made texting even faster. Using a full keyboard came naturally to me since I had been using computers for most of my life, but it's not that way for everyone. Texting on a full keyboard is difficult for someone who never learned to type properly. The hunt and peck method that often slows people down when they type on a computer has the same effect when used in texting.

And that takes us up to today. All of these experiences have helped me realize that texting is its own unique genre. It's taken the visual communication method from instant messenger and made it even more convenient by making it mobile, but texting also has the 160 character limit which does not apply to instant messaging. That limit means texting is even more about keeping your messages short in as many ways as possible. Texting also has a slight time lag while sending a message, which means you occasionally send a lot of messages to someone without ever hearing back from them. This can be frustrating because unlike instant messenger, you can never tell if the person you are texting is "online."

Nearly all of my conversations that are not in person take place in email or texting. I've also noticed that the majority of my professional communication, such as with a professor or a boss, takes place through email now rather than speaking over the phone. Textual genres have taken over communication for me. The only people that I speak to on the phone now are people much older than me who have not adapted to textual communication. My grandma and my father, for example, do not like the change in communication and prefer to speak either in person or on the phone because they find textual technology impersonal and difficult to use. I can agree with this assessment to a certain extent because if you don't know the person that you are texting, it is often difficult to "hear" their voice and tone. I've found that if the texter is someone I know, however, I can almost hear exactly how they would say their message out loud.

Texting has become a huge part of my life in the last few years. Texts are being used by hotels to inform people when their room is ready, by pharmacies when a prescription is ready to be picked up, and by newspapers to inform people when schools are cancelled or the weather is bad. In the past these were things that would be handled by phone call, but texting has become the way our generation handles its business. I can understand this because I also choose to send texts rather than making a phone call; it saves me time and helps me to keep up with my world. While I may have started texting for fun, it's now so important to my entire life that I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have it.



Haley Stouffer is a farm-girl from La Moille, Illinois. She is currently a 19-year-old sophomore at Illinois State University, pursuing a degree in English education. She spends her spare time reading, playing basketball, and being a Lord of the Rings fanatic.