

The Sixth Form at George Abbot

'Academic excellence within a vibrant community.'



Subject: English Language

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Pre Sixth Form Tasks

Task	Detail	Demonstrated		
		Yes	Partially	No
Tasks	Over the summer we would like you to start thinking about some of the debates around the use of the English Language, attitudes to the ways in which different people might write or speak (including their accent or use of slang), our responses to different 'versions' of the English Language, and the ways in which people can be judged because of their language use. See tasks and texts below.			
Further Reading				
Additional task(s)				

All tasks completed	Yes	No
Subject Teacher Signature		

- Remember, the ways in which we use language says a great deal about us and our values and beliefs: we use language to impress, to offend, to fit in, to exclude, to demean, to make ourselves feel superior, to 'construct' or 'reconstruct' the world around us. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once famously said, "Every word is a prejudice." In short, this means that it is virtually impossible to be 'neutral' or objective in our language use. Do you agree or disagree with this point of view?
- Read the two articles about attitudes to Language use (*I H8 txt msgs*, by John Humphreys and *Confessions of a reformed grammar Nazi* by Rosie Driffill.)
- What issues has Humphreys got with electronic modes of communication? Try to identify at least 4 or 5 specific concerns that the writer has with the 'issues' caused by digital/ electronic communication.
- Explain why Driffill feels that some people are quick to judge others about their use of spelling, punctuation or grammar. What does Driffill's article suggest about some people's attitude to incorrect punctuation?
- Both of these articles are editorials which try to encourage readers to accept the writers' views as 'correct' or 'sensible' or just plain 'right.' How do the two writers use language to try to influence their readers to accept their point of view? Try to identify examples of the following in the two articles:
 - Emotive verbs
 - Emotive adverbs

- Pronouns likely to influence
 - Adjectives likely to influence
 - Rhetorical features (persuasive techniques)
 - Figurative or metaphorical language
6. Finally, language is a unique experience that we all value within different parameters, that's part of what makes us unique. Descend into the Internet and find a language article that interests you specifically. Summarise the article and say what issues are raised within it and how you feel about it/ why it interests you.

I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language

By JOHN HUMPHRYS

A good dictionary is a fine thing - I yield to no man in my love for one. If I stretch out my right arm as I type, I can pluck from my shelves the two volumes of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

They are as close to my heart as they are to my desk because they are so much more than a useful tool.

Leafing through a good dictionary in search of a single word is a small voyage of discovery - infinitely more satisfying than looking something up on the internet.

It's partly the physical sensation - the feel and smell of good paper - and partly the minor triumph of finding the word you seek, but it's rare to open a dictionary without being diverted somewhere else.

The eye falls on a word you've never seen before or one whose meaning you have always wanted to check, and you close the dictionary just a little bit richer for the experience.

But my lifetime love affair with the OED is at risk. The sixth edition has just been published and - I feel a small shudder as I write these words - it has fallen victim to fashion.

It has removed the hyphen from no fewer than 16,000 words.

So in future we are required to spell pigeon-hole, for instance, as pigeonhole and leap-frog as leapfrog. In other cases we have two words instead of one. Pot-belly shall henceforth be pot belly.

You may very well say: so what? Indeed, you may well have functioned perfectly well until now spelling leapfrog without a hyphen.

The spell-check (sorry: spellcheck) on my computer is happy with both. But that's not why I feel betrayed by my precious OED.

It's because of the reason for this change. It has happened because we are changing the way we communicate with each other, which means, says the OED editor Angus Stevenson, that we no longer have time to reach for the hyphen key.

Have you ever heard anything quite so daft? No time to make one tiny key-stroke (sorry: key stroke).

Has it really come to this? Are our lives really so pressured, every minute occupied in so many vital tasks, every second accounted for, that we cannot afford the millisecond (no hyphen) it takes to tap that key?

Obviously not. No, there's another reason - and it's far more sinister and deeply troubling.

It is the relentless onward march of the texters, the SMS (Short Message Service) vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago.

They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.

This, I grant you, is a tall order. The texters have many more arrows in their quiver than we who defend the old way.

Ridicule is one of them. "What! You don't text? What century are you living in then, granddad? Need me to sharpen your quill pen for you?"

You know the sort of thing; those of us who have survived for years without a mobile phone have to put up with it all the time. My old friend Amanda Platell, who graces these pages on Saturdays, has an answerphone message that says the caller may leave a message but she'd prefer a text. One feels so inadequate.

(Or should that have been ansafone? Of course it should. There are fewer letters in that hideous word and think how much time I could have saved typing it.)

The texters also have economy on their side. It costs almost nothing to send a text message compared with a voice message. That's perfectly true. I must also concede that some voice messages can be profoundly irritating.

My own outgoing message asks callers to be very brief - ideally just name and number - but that doesn't stop some callers burbling on for ten minutes and always, always ending by saying: "Ooh - sorry I went on so long!"

But can that be any more irritating than those absurd little smiley faces with which texters litter their messages? It is 25 years since the emoticon (that's the posh word) was born.

It started with the smiley face and the gloomy face and now there are 16 pages of them in the texters' A-Z.

It has now reached the stage where my computer will not allow me to type the colon, dash and bracket without automatically turning it into a picture of a smiling face. Aargh!

Even worse are the grotesque abbreviations. It is interesting, in a masochistic sort of way, to look at how text language has changed over the years.

It began with some fairly obvious and relatively inoffensive abbreviations: 'tks' for 'thanks'; 'u' for 'you'; '4' for 'for'.

But as it has developed its users have sought out increasingly obscure ways of expressing themselves which, when you think about it, entirely defeats the purpose.

If the recipient of the message has to spend ten minutes trying to translate it, those precious minutes are being wasted. And isn't the whole point to 'save' time?

Then there's the problem of ambiguity. With my vast knowledge of text language I had assumed LOL meant 'lots of love', but now I discover it means 'laugh out loud'. Or at least it did the last time I asked.

But how would you know? Instead of aiding communication it can be a barrier. I can work out BTW (by the way) but I was baffled by IMHO U R GR8. It means: "In my humble opinion you are great." But, once again, how would you know?

Let me anticipate the reaction to this modest little rant against the text revolution and the OED for being influenced by it. Its defenders will say language changes.

It is constantly evolving and anyone who tries to get in the way is a fuddy-duddy who deserves to be run down.

I agree. One of the joys of the English language and one of the reasons it has been so successful in spreading across the globe is that it is infinitely adaptable.

If we see an Americanism we like, we snaffle it - and so we should. But texting and 'netspeak' are effectively different languages.

The danger - for young people especially - is that they will come to dominate. Our written language may end up as a series of ridiculous emoticons and everchanging abbreviations.

It is too late to save the hand-written letter. E-mailing has seen to that and I must confess that I would find it difficult to live without it. That does not mean I like it.

I resent the fact that I spend so much of my working day (and, even more regrettably, weekends) checking for e-mails - most of which are junk.

I am also cross with myself for the way I have adapted my own style. In the early days I treated e-mails as though they were letters. I tried to construct proper, grammatical sentences and used punctuation that would have brought a smile to the lips of that guardian of our language, Lynne Truss.

Now I find myself slipping into sloppy habits, abandoning capital letters and using rows of dots.

But at least I have not succumbed to 'text-speak' and I wish the OED had not hoisted the white flag either. I recall a piece of doggerel which sums up my fears nicely: Mary had a mobile.

She texted day and night. But when it came to her exams She'd forgotten how to write.

To the editor of the OED I will simply say: For many years you've been GR8. Don't spoil it now. Tks.

Confessions of a reformed grammar nazi

[Rosie Driffill](#)

Rather than sneering at their grammar and spelling mistakes, I've learned to give people the benefit of the doubt.

People's responses to mistakes include smugness, derision, outrage and on-the-spot correction.

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Language pedants should ask themselves what really drives them in their policing efforts: genuine concern for sliding standards or a sinisterly hidden form of one-upmanship?

A few months ago, a friend of mine – and a very clever one at that – began a text message with the words “its going to be a long night”. As I rode the waves of shock and smugness, imagine my delight when I then found the missing apostrophe inelegantly wedged between the Y and the S in the word “trolley’s”, an obvious indication of his inability to know a possessive adjective when he sees one or pluralise words properly. On reading the text, I could have reacted in one of two ways: stay quiet for eternity but for ever hold on to this text as a private adjunct to his every future accomplishment, or rib him until the cows come home. I went with the former.

It was not until I was on the receiving end of some no-holds-barred grammar “nazism” (not that I condone the word's being bandied about but given its status as a much-used marker of grammar militants, I'll use it as shorthand for now) that I was revolted at my own snobbery. Having written “here” instead of “hear” in a fleeting moment of lapsed concentration – I'd like to think autocorrect had a role to play but I may have to admit to momentary abdication of consciousness – I found myself castigated by a friend who was far more forthcoming in her criticism than I had been some weeks previously. And thank heavens, for had she not been I may have for ever remained in a most abject state of heathenness as far as she was concerned; me, who gets visibly and audibly excited over the likes of the subjunctive.

People's reactions to poor use of grammar are manifold: quiet smugness, mock derision, actual derision, outrage and on-the-spot correction (usually accompanied by derision or a cursory tut for your troubles) probably constitute the most common. But while mockery and outrage may have their place – David Cameron's [pledge to make children illegal](#) in a recent Twitter gaffe could well have incurred both, while the state of grammar teaching in schools and an application for a writer's job replete with errors might trigger the latter – it's the smugness at others' mistakes and the accompanying assumptions we make that we ought to reassess.

Had my friend not butchered me for my own inexcusable spelling mistake, for example, she might have gone on to make all manner of judgments about my education, knowledge and intelligence. (By labelling my error “inexcusable”, I'm surreptitiously foisting a judgment on myself.) She might never have known I am just as much a stickler for good grammar as she is if she had kept her opinions to herself and not given me the chance to explain.

In light of this, I now subscribe to the belief that we should sometimes give people the benefit of the doubt when it comes to spelling and grammar errors, especially in a world of hurried messaging and autocorrect. Mistaking “its” for “it's” and “your” for “you're” does not a criminal make; knowledge of the correct forms may not necessarily be lacking, and we cannot make the assumption that it is.

Likewise, chortling at a grammatically challenged friend whom you may have put on a pedestal by warrant of their intelligence is surely a sign – albeit a subtle one – of our implicit desire for others to fail, or to look daft, lest we one day have to experience the same fate and feel like we're the only ones exposed to such dismal humiliation. Perhaps the least excusable reaction to poor grammar comprises the associated judgments made about somebody's intelligence. This argument must not be conflated with one that says we should go easy on children when it comes to correcting grammar in the classroom: it is of course vital that young people are afforded a sound understanding of language before they leave school, and [things may well be changing to that effect](#).

Rather, it's often the case that declaring oneself a “real grammar nazi” can mask a crude form of one-upmanship, one that finds its basis in unsolicited pigeonholing of others and a hidden self-righteousness such that you

wouldn't otherwise find in them. Would we be so quick to judge someone for struggling with basic maths – working out percentages, for example – or forgetting all their secondary school French, two elements of the curriculum likely to have been inculcated to a far greater degree than English grammar?

Granted, we may be more exposed to grammar on a daily basis, but it's no good just seeing something the workings behind which you've never really been shown; the quality of grammar teaching varies between passable to barely there in Britain, so poor grammar ought not to be ascribed to an inability to process information.

While it's of paramount importance that good grammar is upheld and taught well, a bit of self-reflection is needed before we sneer at others' mistakes.

*Rosie Driffill is a freelance writer. She writes about mental health, language, veganism and sustainable living.
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