

Writing Center Woes: Struggles with Speed Writing

By Michael Medlen

A couple of months ago, I received a text message from a friend that read: “Dou wantto hangout 2nite or are u actualy [*sic*]busy?” My first reaction was panic. The tone of the text message (or simply “text”) seemed angry, tinged with annoyance. From my perspective, I read the text as: “*Do u want to hang out 2nite or are u actually busy?*” (italics emphasizing sarcasm). I had not seen this person in two months, so I assumed he was being sarcastic and was reminding me that I was a terrible friend. But what if he simply wanted to hang out with me, without implying I was a lousy friend? My friend most likely texted me while driving, jamming his thumb against the buttons in a manner that I can only describe as “speed writing,” not allowing him enough time to compose a more detailed message. Alas, the problem with the text was that I was forced to interpret the message based on what I interpreted my friend’s *intent* and *tone* to be because he did not convey it in the message.

What is alarming about this text, however, is that as a writing center tutor, I am seeing more students use the process of “speed writing” in their papers. They struggle to write detailed and elaborate essays that convey precise meaning within their words, and instead write short and simple papers that have no substance or complex meaning. One of the hardest goals as a writing tutor is helping a student overcome this struggle. I learned this early on when a student I tutored was having trouble writing a two-page essay on a favorite holiday moment. The student brought in a three paragraph essay that was a half-page long, each paragraph consisting of three sentences, and complained that there were not enough details of the moment to write about. However, it was not until the student asked if the first letter of a sentence should be capitalized that alarms of concern, as well bewilderment, rushed through me. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated phenomenon—a survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed that half of the teenagers interviewed did not consider punctuation and grammar important (Johnson). What is most troubling about this survey is that many of these teenagers go on to attend universities and then cannot even write C-grade papers for introductory composition classes. The emerging genre of text-based speed writing negatively influences the ability of college students to produce quality academic writing, and writing center tutors should be cognizant of the ways in which speed writing affects essay composition.

While little research on speed writing has been performed, it is not hard to see a logical relationship between these students’ struggles to write elaborately and their need for speed in writing. This need possibly results from students using texts as a quick way to communicate with another person, often holding conversations through their cell phones while sitting in lectures. Just to get an idea of how fast people can compose a text, consider sixteen-year-old Ang Chuang Yang of Singapore, who in 2006 [broke the Guinness World Record](#) for the shortest time needed to type a 160-character SMS (short message service) message in 41.52 seconds, beating the previous record of 42.22 seconds set by American Ben Cook (“The Next Text”). While Yang’s record is an extreme case of speed writing, the popularity of texts—which owes much to the speed it takes to compose them—is staggering. A study done in 2006 showed that in just the first *six months* of the year, 64.8 billion texts were sent, which was almost twice as much as all that were sent in 2005 (Hayslett).

As is the case with many students, deadlines for essays are a more significant factor than the quality of writing. Several weeks ago, three out of the four students I tutored during a shift told me that they had to turn their papers in the next day. Perhaps when the student I mentioned who was writing an essay on a favorite holiday moment could not “write any more detail,” the student really meant that not enough thoughtful time was spent writing. While I am merely speculating about the influence of texts on this particular student’s academic writing, the effects that speed writing has on students’ writing contributes to a loss of meaning.

To show the possibility of a loss of meaning, I conducted a survey among eleven coworkers picked at random and asked them to guess what emotion they thought was being conveyed through real texts that I had received. The people asked were five women and six men—one person over the age of 40, three people between 30 and 40 years-old, and seven people under the age of 30.

I created a chart that had twelve texts, found in the Appendix, Table 1, such as the simple phrase “lol” as well as longer messages like “u busy 2nite or u wanna hang out?”. I also provided four preset emotions that the interviewees could check off—annoyed, happy, angry, or worried. This way, I had a general range of responses to compare. As a precaution, I left room for a written response in case the interviewee could not associate the text with any of the preset emotions. I also must concede that one problem with the interviews was that the faux texts were given completely out of context for the interviewee to base their interpretations on. However, texts such as “u busy 2nite...” are often sent randomly and without context, as exemplified in the text my friend sent to me.

After each interviewee filled out the chart, I compared the interpretations. The results varied quite a bit, as shown in Graph 1, with the messages “U CALL 2 MUCH”, “lol”, “I luv u”, and “huh?” having the most common responses. However, the eight remaining texts all had more than two interpretations, ranging from the preset emotion “annoyed” to written responses such as “curious,” “confused,” and “hopeful.” Surprisingly, some texts had almost the same amount of contradicting emotions, such as similar amounts of “happy” and “annoyed” the interviewees thought were expressed in “hello?”, revealing the ambiguity that often accompanies the sending and receiving of texts. As the results of the interviews reveal, the new genre of speed writing affects a person’s meaning through lack of details and ambiguous word choice.

Texts are quickly becoming one of the most popular modes of communication due to the convenience of speed writing. For writing center tutors, this means that many students will incorporate (perhaps even as a replacement) the text-based genre within academic writing. Tutors can merely tolerate this hybrid genre and let students write papers that lack any complex meaning, or we can devise new strategies to help students get over the “I can’t do it!” mentality. One solution that I have used is asking students who struggle to write detailed papers how they would explain what they wrote over a long phone conversation rather than through text message. While a longer phone conversation does not necessarily entail complex detail, it forces students to see their writing in comparison with genres they are familiar with, thus allowing them to see how texts lack explicit detail. Writing center tutors must acknowledge the influence that texts have on students’ academic writing in order to address the issue head on. If

not, the struggle to help students write papers with clear meaning will continue to be an uphill battle.

References

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Appendix

Table 1

Form used for interviews

Text	Emotion
u call 2 much	annoyed happy angry worried other emotion
U CALL 2 MUCH	
lol	
i luv u	
I love you?	
fine	
whatev	
WHERE YA AT?	
hello	
hello?	
huh?	

u busy 2nite or u wanna
hang out?