

Professor says teens' social media lingo hurts writing skills

July 23 2012, By Walter Pacheco

Shelby Hill, a Howard Middle School student from Orlando, sits in a writing camp sharing her ideas about a character she created for a zombie script.

Shelby, an eloquent 13-year-old [blogger](#), is an avid user of Facebook, [Twitter](#) and other [social media](#) sites. She also considers herself an "out of control" [text-message](#) whiz but doesn't think any of that interferes with her formal [writing](#) skills.

"I feel texting is easier because I'm not always at a place where I can talk on the phone," Shelby said. "My friends and I use some abbreviations like 'LOL' (laughing out loud), but just in texts. I'm sure it's not taking a toll on our academic writing."

But some writing advocates say Twitter's frugal word structure, Facebook's short-post syntax and acronym-filled text messages are degrading writing skills.

"Just the other day, I asked my students to write four lines of dialogue they had over the weekend," said Terry Thaxton, a University of Central Florida English professor who runs the summer writing camp Shelby attended earlier this month. "Three of them reached for their phones to read their text messages. They said they couldn't remember any face-to-face conversations."

The writing camp at University of Central Florida Continuing Education

focuses on helping students ages 9 to 18 enhance their writing skills by working screenplays as a team, developing characters and interpreting writing as an act of imagination.

Thaxton said students worked on scripts for a zombie movie and mystery caper. Students then filmed their low-budget zombie flick and posted it on a password-protected website.

Thaxton enjoys how students use social media to share their stories among friends but thinks their writing skills have suffered in the exchange of ideas.

"Social media takes out all the imaginative threads, descriptions and interesting parts of a language," she said. "I find that troubling."

A report published in 2010 by Clarion University shows social media and text messages are "consistently associated with the use of particularly informal written communication techniques, along with formatting problems, nonstandard orthography, and grammatical errors."

But Susie Robertshaw, a tutoring and writing coordinator at Rollins College, said she's not sure if social media has degraded writing.

"For the most part, this type of writing is more like an informal spoken language in written, unedited format," Robertshaw said. "People are focusing more on content and catching the drift of what was written and not how it looks, especially if you're sending it quickly on an iPhone or iPad before reviewing it."

And some students who are also avid social media users strive to keep acronyms, errors and non-traditional techniques out of their writing, whether academic or text-driven.

"I see abbreviations like 'LOL' on Facebook used by my friends, but that's not how I write," said Luke Reggentin, a 14-year-old student at Winter Park's Trinity Preparatory School in Thaxton's writing class. "It doesn't belong there. That's not how I was educated by my teachers."

Thaxton said despite some of the bad habits and shortcuts to writing encountered in social media, the challenge for writers will be to "keep the art form pure while also embracing new forms."

"Social media has certainly brought attention to the poor and declining writing, communication and critical-thinking skills that teachers have seen for a long time," she said. "But it's also helping writers develop experimental ways of writing narrative while enhancing their writing skills. That's exciting."

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