

# Texting turns 20, LOL

December 10 2012, by Meghan Daum

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It's been an especially fruitful week for rueful lamentations about "kids today." Monday marked the 20th anniversary of the text message. Along with it came the predictable chorus of bellyaching about the demise of literacy, the shortening of attention spans and the rise of abbreviations and acronyms that take longer to decipher than it would to pick up the phone and have a real conversation.

SMS, or [short message service](#), technology dates to 1984, when a Finnish [engineer](#) named Matti Makkonen brought it up at a telecommunications conference. It wasn't until Dec. 3, 1992, that the words "Merry Christmas" were sent from a PC to a mobile device over Britain's [Vodafone](#) network and became the world's first [text message](#). Two years later, [Nokia](#) introduced texting as a general service on one of its mobile phone models, and by 2010, according to data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, some 188 billion messages were being exchanged each month in the U.S. alone - mostly by young people. The Pew data also showed that 25 percent of texters between the ages of 18 and 24 send or receive more than 100 messages a day, and just over 10 percent field more than 200 a day.

In the process, an entire language, designed for maximum compactness and efficiency, has evolved. Most of us know the more common phrases - "LOL" for "laughing out loud," for instance. But the lexicon runs deep. "LMKHTWOFY" means "Let me know how that works out for you." "LMIRL" means "Let's meet in real life." All these acronyms, not to mention the endless emoticons and other signs and symbols, like "(ASTERISK)\$" for Starbucks, could lead to some serious POAK

("passing out at keyboard") especially if you're a POTATO ("Person over thirty acting twenty-one.")

As a person who's not only well over 30 but tasked with regular weigh-ins about the state of the culture (the sorer the state the better, since it's so much easier to scold than to exalt), I was all ready to write a column about the ill effects of text messaging. I was ready to cite those hoary statistics about the average American attention span being eight seconds long, and ready to complain about the sudden ubiquity of the Internet phrase "tl/dr" - "too long/didn't read" - which, for some Internet users, is the prima facie response to anything more than a tweet.

But I'm NGGT ("not gonna go there" - I think I just invented that one) because, let's face it, the good-old days of Rolodexes and caller ID-less land lines weren't all that good. Remember being a teenager and having to summon a mountain of courage to call the object of your affection because invariably her father would answer the phone? Remember making cold calls while searching for a job and having to explain yourself to a receptionist who was almost certain to put you on hold while you were still talking? Remember having to use pay phones?

The post-caller ID, post-cellphone, post-email-and-text-messages generations do not have such memories. And you know what? Lucky them! It was a drag to have to call a potential employer without being able to email him or her ahead of time. There was nothing particularly character-building about having to talk to your girlfriend's grouchy dad. The telephone may be great for complicated business discussions and catching up with old friends, but for day-to-day logistics ("mma (ASTERISK)\$") texting trumps talking. (In case you're a failed POTATO and didn't catch that, it was "meet me at Starbucks.")

That's why I can't quite bring myself to use texting's vicennial as an occasion for wallowing in false nostalgia. I can, however, continue to

uphold my policy of never using text speak (except in a column like this). It's repellent, though I probably think that because I can never find the smiley face on my keypad.

As it happens, I'm in good company. In a recent interview, Makkonen himself said he doesn't use [abbreviations](#) but rather composes his texts in complete sentences using proper spelling and grammar - in Finnish, no less. Considering that meeting someone at Starbucks would require typing "Tavatkaa minut Starbucksissa," that's pretty impressive.

So in Makkonen's honor, I say we would-be curmudgeons swallow our pride and say "hpe anvrsre, txtn!" Or, as he would put it, "Onnellinen vuosi paiva, lahettaen tekstiviesteja!"

That's POAK to you.

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