

Production and reception of email, texts, forum posts context-dependent

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“Hey, where are u?” “Ummm, right next to you”. Credit: TonZ

Emoticons, punctuation and creative spelling have been debated, condemned, and regulated since the very beginning of online text-based communication.

We've all seen "netiquettes" on how not to use ALL CAPS BECAUSE

IT IS SHOUTING, or not to use smileys, because it is unprofessional. Recently, an article about the [angry full stop](#) caused [great uproar](#), and issues about [what, how and when to write](#) show that we are still unsure about the conventions of online writing.

We shouldn't be so hard on ourselves though. Online [communication](#) may have become absolutely essential to our private and professional lives but it's still very new.

When we email, [instant message](#) or write on forums, the production of the text and the reception of it take place in two completely different contexts. Often we don't even know where the person reading our missive is, let alone how they are feeling when they read it. When people communicate online, they don't share the same physical environment, so they can't rely on signals that would normally help them to understand the intended messages, like the tone of voice, gestures or [facial expressions](#) that accompany it.



A Very British Problem.

In face-to-face interactions, non-verbal signals have an extremely important role in conveying how exactly messages should be understood. They can clarify, emphasise, complement, repeat, but also contradict the words we say, signal if something is to be taken lightheartedly or if something is meant to be a serious message. Audio signals, prosody, such as the tone of voice, pitch, rhythm, pause or loudness play a crucial part in this, but facial expressions or body language are also often used.

In digital writing, we have none of these cues available so people have taken great effort to come up with [creative and playful ways](#) to somehow replicate or replace these signals. Emoticons are one obvious example but everyone has their own way of making themselves understood, be it by using exaggerated or unconventional spelling, punctuations or capital letters.

Both research and mass media have tended to over-generalise and stereotype these techniques, describing them as merely "stand-ins" for non-verbal cues. In an attempt to understand the new rules of communicating, they seek to assign a well-defined meaning to each cue. A smiley is thought to denote a joke or a smile and a full stop or caps lock is seen as a sign of anger.

Breakthrough! AT&T just credited me with the \$500 of disputed cell phone charges! After... drumroll..... TWO HOURS of negotiations on the phone.... maybe my luck is changing????? Here's to hopeful.

Like · Comment · Share · 11 hours ago near New York, NY, United States · 🌐

A Facebook message from a creative friend.

But the picture is much more complex than this. Consider an email written by your boss, reminding you of a looming deadline: *"Everyone else has already submitted their report. You are the LAST!:)"*

Even if you are on very good terms with your boss, the emoticon here clearly doesn't function as a representation of a smile or signal a joke, and capitals are not meant to be read as shouting. They have a more complex function in communication, and the best way to demonstrate it perhaps is to read the same message without them.

"Everyone else has already submitted their report. You are the last!"

Capitals clearly gave some added emphasis to the message, but the emoticon in particular makes a world of a difference. The first example could be read as a friendly nudge or teasing, while the second, without the emoticon, is a highly authoritative, commanding message. The emoticon isn't relaying a full-on smile but it is tempering the tone of the message.

In a [recent study on e-mails](#) a very high number of [emoticons](#) were found not to represent a facial expression in business correspondence at all. Instead they are used as a hedge – a device used to give flavour to certain types of message. And they work in both directions. They can soften requests, rejections or complaints but also strengthen other types of messages such as wishes, appraisals and promises.

The creative ways we use our keyboard to somehow inscribe signals into our writing cannot be simplified to neat lists with assigned meanings. Written non-verbal cues are like capsules of meaning which only get

activated in specific contexts. To understand them we usually need to know who is sending the message, to whom and why. The full stop might be angry for someone in one situation or another, but when my husband texts:

Forever.

I like to think that it means something else for us.

If we write online, we need to keep reminding ourselves that the way we do it has not yet been conventionalised, and we need to consider the wide scale of meanings and possible interpretations of our words and symbols. We're all working it out as we go along.

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