F in Grammar? Maybe It’s Your Phone’s Fault

Texting and tweeting are getting teens in trouble when they have to write in the real world

BY ALESSANDRA POTENZA

I saw your notice for a Office manager,” the woman in her 20s had written, “the very position that I believe I could fill well I have a background in education and a Bachelors’ degree in Kinesiology.”

When Gena Babineaux, who works at the YMCA of Greater Houston, read the woman’s job application, she knew she wouldn’t be calling her in for an interview.

In the more than 2,000 applications submitted by young people this past summer, Babineaux encountered mountains of misspellings, missing punctuation, spacing mistakes, and abbreviations that are fine in text messages but not in formal writing. To her, these kinds of errors show laziness and lack of care. If she finds them on a résumé or cover letter, she tosses the application aside and moves on to other candidates.

“If you want the job, you need to make sure that everything is done properly,” she says.

Babineaux isn’t the only one who
doesn't like what she's reading. English teachers, college admissions officers, and employers are all finding a lot more grammar and writing mistakes than they used to. The problem seems to be increasing in the age of texting, tweeting, and Facebook.

"If you are constantly using a particular slang term, or a particular shortcut or abbreviation," says Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Internet & American Life Project in Washington, D.C., "it may not be surprising that that ends up creeping into your [school] work."

A 2008 study of teenage grammar use in the digital age found that 64 percent of teenagers used informal writing styles typical of electronic communication in their schoolwork. Fifty percent used informal capitalization, 38 percent used abbreviations like LOL, and 25 percent used emoticons. And that was five years ago. Since then, texting has exploded, with young people leading the way.

**Spell-check's Perils**

Teachers say the informal language of texting is showing up more and more in class. "IM-ing language . . . has become part of what [students] think is the standard vocabulary," says Karra Shimabukuro, an English teacher at Manteo High School, in Manteo, North Carolina. She says words at the beginning of sentences and personal names are rarely capitalized; numbers are used instead of letters, and "u" often substitutes for "you."

In college admissions offices, a pattern of mistakes on applications can make a school think twice about making an offer. Kelly Walter, the admissions director at Boston University, once read an application referencing three different colleges within a few paragraphs: Boston University, Boston College, and Villanova. The student had cut and pasted from several applications and hadn't bothered to proofread.

Patrick Herring, the admissions director at the University of Florida, blames technology not only for proofreading blunders—spell check can give writers a false sense that all their mistakes will be caught—but also for fostering a lax attitude about writing.

"I think a natural outgrowth of those kinds of instant communications is the impatience, the lack of care, the inattention to detail," he says.

**What Would Chaucer Say?**

Some language experts point out that English is always evolving. Social media's influence, they say, is only the latest wrinkle.

"Ever since the days of Chaucer, people have been complaining that the language was going down the tubes, that 'Oh, English isn't what it was. It's been corrupted,' " says Patricia O'Connor, a blogger at Grammarphobia.

"And the truth is, English is a living language." O'Connor argues that evolving grammar is perfectly natural and that teenagers don't make mistakes because of technology. "The mistake is just more visible," she says.

Though teenagers seem to know that social media is exerting too much influence on their writing, they also think that technology has had some positive effects. "Now there are more ways to communicate," says Catherine Burzynski, 17, a senior at Lake Brantley High School in Altamonte Springs, Florida.

Texting, emailing, blogging, and social networking are all powered by the written word. But many young people don’t seem to know when they need to turn to Webster’s for help (see box).

Shimabukuro, the English teacher, doesn’t see technology as the enemy. On the contrary, she texts with her students on weekends, and when she grades papers she cares more about ideas and critical thinking than about grammar.

"You're not going to go from an 'A' paper to an 'F' because you had spelling or grammar issues," she says, unless the mistakes make understanding the text difficult.

Others may not be as forgiving. College admissions officers and employers say teens should learn to use standard English when writing in class or filling out college or job applications. As O’Connor, the blogger, points out, there’s one thing that never changes about language: "People are going to judge you by what you write."