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Will texting pupils make Shakespeare roll over?

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The notion that text-messaging is destroying the writing skills of American students gets two distinct reactions from linguists.

Jacque Ream's response: OMG (Oh my God).

"We have a whole generation being raised without communications skills," says Ream, a teacher and author of the book "K.I.S.S.: Keep It Short and Simple."

That kind of talk leaves Derek Denis LOL (laughing out loud).

"We didn't find any negative impact on writing," says Denis, a University of Toronto researcher who studied the writing habits of text-messaging teens.

The explosion of text-messaging - in which cell-phone users type and send short "real-time" messages to other phones or computers - has kicked off a growing debate about what the practice will mean to writing and communication.

Confined to limited space and small numeric keypads, people who send text messages have created a lingo that is intriguing researchers.

On the one side is the Seattle-based Ream, who argues that text-messaging and the Internet are destroying the way youngsters read, think, write and spell. Text-messaging in particular, she argues, reduces written communication to shorthand and cliches.

To support that claim, she points to a recent National Center for Education Statistics study that suggested only one in four high school seniors is a proficient writer.

"Kids are typing shorthand jargon that isn't even a complete thought," she says.

On the other side is Denis. He and fellow Toronto linguist Sali Tagliamonte examined the instant messages and spoken communication of 72 people ages 15-20 and found that messaging represented "an expansive new linguistic renaissance."

Denis and Tagliamonte found teens had a surprisingly lucid command of language and moved easily from the spoken word to text-messaging to formal written papers.

"I wasn't really surprised by the findings," Denis says. "I text-message, and I know that I also know how to speak and write."

Cleveland Heights High School senior Phil Torres agrees.

"I don't think it bothers my writing at all, and my friends and I text frequently," says Torres, who will study journalism at Bowling Green State University this fall.

Whatever the case, text-messaging is ubiquitous. In June 2001, cell-phone users sent 30 million text messages in the United States. A year later, that number had jumped to nearly 1 billion.

It has also created a small but burgeoning cottage industry of books about the subject. In addition to Ream's book, American University linguist Naomi Baron has just published "Always On: Language in an

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Author says texting and testing are destroying kids' writing style

Somewhere out there is the mind that will produce the next great American novel.

If, however, that would-be author is under the age of 18, the words he or she writes may be more of "SOZ" and "TGGTG" than beautiful, flowing prose.

"We have a whole generation being raised without communication skills," says Jacquie Ream, former teacher and author of "K.I.S.S. Keep It Short and Simple" (Book Publishers Network). She contends text messaging and the Internet are destroying the way our kids read, think and write.

A recent National Center for Education Statistics study reports only one out of four high school seniors is a proficient writer. A College Board survey of the nation's blue-chip companies found only two thirds of employees are capable writers.

"These kids aren't learning to spell. They're learning acronyms and short hand," says Ream. "Text messaging is destroying one line at a time." They're learning acronyms and short hand," says Ream. "Text messaging is destroying the written word. The students aren't writing letters, they're typing into their cell phones one line at a time. Feelings aren't communicated with words when you're texting; emotions are sideways smiley faces. Kids are typing shorthand jargon that isn't even a complete thought."

Reading may not be the problem. Nielsen/NetRatings reports the average 12-to-17-year-old visits more than 1,400 web pages a month. Ask that average teenager what they read and they may be able to tell you. Ask the average teenager what their opinion is on that blog or article and you may find them fumbling for thoughts that are their own.

"Critical thinking skills are not taught today. Teachers are forced to use what little classroom time they have to teach to the standardized tests. The kids learn how to regurgitate information to parrot it back for the correct answer, but they can't process the thought and build on it."

School system money is often tied into the standardized testing results. Many teachers complain of being pressured to spend so much time teaching the test that they don't have the time to guide the children into true, thought-provoking learning.

"There's a whole generation that can't come up with new ideas," says Ream. And even if they did have a breakthrough thought or opinion of their own, they couldn't share it with the rest of us."

This generation, however, isn't a complete 'write-off.' Ream says the parents can make a big difference in the way their children communicate. She suggests reading the same book your teenager is reading - then trying to open a dinner table conversation

about the plot of that novel.

Ream says writing is a skill that can be learned. Her book "K.I.S.S. (Keep It Short and Simple)" lays out a formula she says makes writing easier: teach your kids to organize their thoughts on paper, compare the subject with others to show how the ideas are similar, contrast the subject with others to show how the concept is different and interrelate - write the essay to show how the subject relates to the reader.

Every generation has great minds with great thoughts that can guide the rest of us. If teenagers aren't taught to groom their opinions and ideas so that they can write effectively, society will lose out on a generation of creativity.

"If we let these kids get caught up in technology, if we let politicians get caught up in testing, it's America as a whole that loses out on great words, thoughts and novels that will never be written."

Jacquie Ream has been a teacher, a working director, a daycare owner and is now the author of "K.I.S.S.: Keep It Short and Simple." She has devoted her life to guiding others how to clearly and concisely share their thoughts and ideas on paper. She has a BA in English and a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Washington. www.reamink.com.