
UCF Forum

1-28-2015

Leave Them (Texting) Kidz Alone

Melody Bowdon
University of Central Florida



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STARS Citation

Bowdon, Melody (2015). Leave them (texting) kidz alone. UCF Today, 2015-01-28. Retrieved from <https://today.ucf.edu/leave-texting-kidz-alone/>

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Leave Them (Texting) Kidz Alone

By Melody Bowdon

UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, January 28, 2015

By trade, I am a professor of writing and rhetoric. In layman's terms, this makes me an English teacher. These are deeply dreaded words for many people. When I identify my profession to new acquaintances, I get a range of responses: obviously, some people don't find it that interesting—it's not like I'm an astronaut or plastic surgeon, and everyone has known her or his fair share of English teachers. Others, though, have very strong reactions, letting me know that they *hate* English or have never been "good at it."

Such an exchange is usually followed by awkward silence, when the person seems suddenly nervous to speak in my presence for fear of making some kind of grammatical mistake. And though I'm sure, of course, that every mechanic, psychologist, stylist, and mortgage broker also has awkward chats about her or his line of work, in the past couple of years I've noticed a new thread in these conversations.

In small talk, professional meetings, and the news, I hear more and more about how the use of social media—and, in particular, the habit of rapid-fire texting—is damaging students' ability to write and, perhaps even more horrifically, corrupting rules about commas and capitalization, the very bedrock of civilized society, and yada yada. (Yes, this phrase *is* in *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Look it up.) Young people, the argument goes, are less concerned than they should be about correct use of language in general because the casual tone and the shortening strategies needed to text and tweet are undermining their communication abilities.

But (yes, I started a sentence with *but*) despite the fact that a properly turned semicolon thrills me as much as the next punctuation geek, I simply don't believe that emerging and evolving applications of language, and their attending changes in usage, are in fact a threat to the planet. I believe that one of the most miraculous and magical aspects of human language is its dynamic power to change and grow based on the needs and goals of its users, and I deeply appreciate that even humble and technically incorrect uses of language can effectively convey complex and powerful ideas.

This does not mean, of course, that I'm retiring my figurative red pen or that I've tossed all the rules out the window in my work as a teacher and a writer. And it does not mean that I think it's OK for any student to emerge from a public education in the United States without the benefit of a strong command of written and spoken language, not only English but ideally one or more others as well.

English teacher and freelance writer salaries notwithstanding, ours is a culture that values and rewards effective communication, and we all rely on a world full of documents as we make our way through everyday professional and personal life. The people who create those documents and apply their contents need to be skilled with language.

But it makes me happy when my mother (who, like me, hasn't been a teenager in quite a while, who taught me much of what I know about grammar and punctuation) sends me a short "love u 2" text. And as much as I truly fear being run over by a texting skateboarder on campus (this is a real thing), I enjoy watching students stay connected with their friends and classmates in a variety of ways throughout their days, and I don't care if their notes to each other are grammatically correct.

I know, of course, that even as I write this column, English teachers across the land are struggling to shut down Snapchats and keep their students focused on reading Shakespeare and maybe learning a bit of old-school email etiquette, and I value those goals. What I think matters more, though, is that we demonstrate as individuals and as a culture that we value the ideas of young people of all backgrounds and experiences, and

that we embrace and promote their skills of assessing varied personal and professional situations and making language choices that advance their personal goals and, ideally, contribute to the communities in which they live.

To do this, we must support innovative and inclusive public education and be open to ways in which the kids of today will subvert and re-appropriate emerging communication tools, and we have to accept that the occasional modifier might get dangled in the process.

Melody Bowdon is executive director of UCF's Karen L. Smith Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and is a professor of writing and rhetoric. She can be reached at melody@ucf.edu.