Frequently asked questions:

1. Are e-mail, texting and instant messages destroying the English language, killing the art of conversation, and rupturing social relationships?
2. How can I use email, texting, and IM to enhance my communications skills, cement business and personal relationships, and increase profitability, while at the same time protecting my privacy?

The first question is often raised by alarmists who don’t trust digital texts and are anxious to find something wrong with the new technologies of communication, and its answer seems to be, “No.” English survives, conversation thrives online as well as off, and on balance, digital communication seems to be enhancing human interaction, not detracting from it. The second question is more likely to be asked by those who want to trust the new media and are anxious to learn how it might be useful for them, while making sure these new ways of doing things with words won’t blow up in their face. The answers to the second question are too complex to be rendered in a sound bite. But as we see in the chapters that follow, both questions reveal a lot about how digital communications are changing our lives, and how we’re responding to those changes.

Now that writing has established itself as the way to do business in the modern world – not just the business of trade and commerce, but that of governance, education, culture and the arts, we find ourselves facing new textual challenges posed by the computer, that upstart successor to the pencil, the printing press and the typewriter. Our day-to-day experiences with reading and writing on line require us to learn how to trust not just the familiar texts that computers reproduce for us so quickly and efficiently, but all sorts of new and unfamiliar kinds of computer-generated texts as well, ones whose value and reliability go unquestioned by their enthusiastic practitioners, but which prompt serious objections from the vociferous technophobes who still long for an imaginary “good old days,” a golden age that never really was, when texts were simpler and more reliable. For the rest of us, these new genres – email, instant messaging, texting, and blogging, to name only some – pose a continual challenge as we look for ways to evaluate the digital words that we read, and to make credible the digital texts we write.

While much of the impact of the current revolution in processing the written word expands horizons, presenting us with new information and new ways of packaging that information, it is also important to remember that like the telephone, the computer is a technology that sometimes lets us roam free and sometimes keeps us on a leash. For
example, despite advances in wireless networking that allow us to take a laptop and curl up, more or less, on the couch or on the rug, as we were wont to do with a good book, computers are generally useless at the beach or in the bath. But more than one acquaintance of mine checks the morning email in bed the way the idle rich were shown to peruse their paper missives along with morning coffee on a tray in old Hollywood films, and a few even turn to their laptop, with its warm batteries, to read themselves to sleep in those same beds on a chill winter night. But they’re not reading novels or self-help books online, they’re chatting, watching videos, and catching up on the news.

Advances in telephony connect the caller and the called in ever-expanding ways and locations. In particular, the mobile phone brings private conversations into public spaces and permits the outside world to intrude on our most intimate moments. Advances in writing technologies are also redefining public and private, connecting writers and readers in new ways and places as well, facilitating communication while at the same time letting not just well-defined audiences but also a fluctuating set of anonymous observers read our screens and record our keystrokes. The computer, like the writing technologies that preceded it, is revising how we think of public and private writing.

The mobile phone lets us carry along with us two-way access to everyone we know, plus a raft of strangers. With it, we are present to all who care to call, and whether they are near or far, friend or stranger, we are free to intrude on anyone else who has a phone as well. No activity is safe from interruption. Campaigning in the 2008 presidential primaries, Rudy Giuliani, who as mayor of New York City was a strong supporter of gun control, took a cell phone call from his wife while he was addressing the National Rifle Association. But what was most amusing about the incident – possibly staged to defuse the tension – was just how ordinary it seemed to everyone in the audience. After all, phones go off in restaurants and bathrooms, at lectures and funerals, on crowded city streets and in remote wilderness hideaways, and no one at the NRA rally took aim at the candidate for this particular gaffe.

The increasing miniaturization of the mobile phone is speeding us toward the Star Trek reality where anyone can speak with anyone using a two-way communicator that doubles as a piece of jewelry. No dial, no buttons to press, no hello’s necessary. Just tap and talk. An audience awaits. In a similar fashion, writing on screen makes everyone an author. And finding readers presents no problem for our newest writers. Any scribbler with a computer, a wi-fi card, and a place to sit at Starbuck’s has immediate access to the universe of plugged-in readers, many of them eager to devour all manner of digital text they would never touch in printed form. Writers using conventional technologies may spend their lives desperately seeking an audience, but on the web, if you write it, they will come. All a cyber-author needs to do is upload a bit of text and there’s an instant readership – a small niche audience or a vast and very general one – eager to consume every virtual word.

**Virtual genres**

And they will read just about anything, from the latest attempt at the great American novel to a shopping list. Today all my students are on Facebook, and many have MySpace accounts as well, but ten years ago, when people first began putting up personal home pages, only two of the students I surveyed had an online presence, one of them because it was assigned in a computer technology class, and the other – let’s call him
George – because it seemed to him that it might be fun. On his page George posted pictures of his family and his cat; a list of his favorite songs; a link to a pro basketball team that he liked – the kinds of things that users of older technologies might have put in a scrapbook intended for personal use only. It seemed to me at the time that no one but a doting parent would read such a web page. When I asked George about this, he answered, “You’d be surprised.” His own relatives didn’t use computers yet, but his hit counter showed about a dozen connected readers a day clicking on the trivia of his life. Those were early days, and many early personal web sites had a “look-what-I-can-do” quality about them: red print on a purple background; marching ants; animated banners; raucous sounds; and broken links. But what goes into the popular Facebook and MySpace pages of the present are essentially updated variations on George’s cat photos and playlists.

The personal web page is no longer a novelty, and it remains a creative force alongside the more uniform Facebook and MySpace templates. While many of these pages still have an exhibitionist quality about them, their content often runs a lot deeper than “here are my favorite top ten lists this week.” As a genre, this sort of page encompasses a wide range of material from the very local – the latest snapshots of the kids, for the growing numbers of web-enabled grandparents – to things that might actually interest both a broad and a targeted readership: reviews of movies, music groups, and TV shows; opinion essays; artistic and literary dabbling; job résumés; and lists, lists, and more lists, all of them clickable. And then there are the corporate pages, like tide.com, which we discussed earlier, whose goal is to portray the company positively and enhance profitability.

As the web page evolved into a genre, a variety of self-identified experts began creating an aesthetic of do’s and don’ts for individuals who wanted to design their own. Programs like Frontpage and Dreamweaver promised to idiot-proof the process of creating a web page by providing users who didn’t want to learn HTML programming with templates and prefabricated modules into which they could drop their own content. And of course there are books on the subject: even the most accomplished computer users resort to traditional printed books to show them how to use the presumably user-friendly web design software they have just installed, because the “help” utility that comes with almost every kind of software simply doesn’t help enough. But all of this – the innovation, the formulation of standards, the how-to-do-it instructions, and the pre-fab formats for those who can’t or won’t try DIY – is part and parcel of genre development.

It isn’t often that new writing genres evolve. The last major literary genre to develop before the computer revolution was the novel, which came on the scene in the seventeenth century (though some scholars date it earlier or later). It too was facilitated by a new technology. The novel might exist without the printing press, but it clearly became the dominant western literary form in part because improved press technologies enabled the mass production of reading matter. Books and readers increased in a supply-demand spiral from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in the West. This reflected changes in the status and life style of the middle class. There was more that had to be read at work, and more leisure time for reading at home. The printing press provided reading materials in quantities sufficient to address both needs. And in doing so, this new technology of literacy helped reading and writing become more of a daily event.

Like the novel, the newspaper is a technology-dependent genre. While the news was propagated both in manuscript and print formats in the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries, newspapers and magazines, like novels, owe their improved circulation to the hand-operated press, and moreso to the automated printing presses introduced in the nineteenth century. But while the novel has so far resisted the migration to computers, newspaper circulation in the United States has been in decline for many years, and as more and more people get their information from screens instead of paper, newspapers have been quick to digitize in the hopes of improving readership and the advertising revenue that keeps these digital “papers” afloat.

:) when you say that, pardner – email and the taming of the electronic frontier

Besides the web page, computers have spawned a number of other new genres: email, which is neither phone call nor letter; instant messaging, which goes a step beyond email; and the latest, the blog, a kind of web page on steroids. We’ve had the rare opportunity of watching these genres form in our own lifetime – it’s a little bit like being present at the birth of stars. Like stars, each new genre emerged from an initial chaotic state and coalesced over time, developing its own structures, conventions and standards as its community of users grew and began both to organize and regulate itself. Email was one of the first digital genres, and it has had a tremendous impact on our communication practices.

While many readers of this book wouldn’t dream of starting the day without email and a latte, the early days of email were rough and uncivilized, a virtual electronic frontier where not just fancy coffee, but any hint of food or drink was strictly banned from the computer clean room.

There wasn’t much email in the mornings either. Email in those days was still a long way from replacing the standard ways of keeping in touch, letters and phone calls, not just because it was new, but because, like the first phone calls (and, presumably, the first letters as well), it was at best a very clunky form of communication.

As I noted earlier, mainframe computers were designed to run numbers, not words, and the first computer prose was written despite, not because of, the technology. Computer keyboards resembled typewriters, only not quite. Text was all lower case, or sometimes, all upper, because some early computers didn’t allow shifting on the fly to create the occasional capital letter the way typewriters did. (To be sure, the first typewriters didn’t have shift keys either.) Worse, digital text was almost impossible to revise, so typos went uncorrected. And there were plenty of typos, since even the best touch typists were tripped up by the computer’s not-quite-familiar key arrangements. Given the technical limits of computers back in the 1960s, it’s no surprise that spelling didn’t count for much in informal documents like the messages that programmers sent to one another while they waited for their programs to compile, or that the conventions of grammar and punctuation were only loosely observed.

Considering the circumstances under which they were produced and read, the first electronic messages were quick and dirty, short and not always particularly sweet. The format of email, such as it was, was informal too: there were no greetings or farewells – messages just began and ended. When names were used, it was first-name only. The idea was to get in and out fast, take up as little bandwidth as possible, and get on with one’s life.

At least that was the image that the early emailers wanted to project: theirs was a shoot from the hips prose that identified them as a new breed of men (and they were,
mostly, men) on the cutting edge of a technology that was about to remake the world using language dressed just like they were, in t-shirts, jeans, and sandals. Walt Whitman, the nineteenth-century American poet who celebrated just this kind of unbuttoned language, would have been proud to see the early emailers rejecting “school-marmish” letter-writing rules in favor of an imaginary frontier style which branded them as mavericks, thinly disguising what they really were, slide-rule toting nerds taking their revenge on the refined, Eastern literary world at last.

But there is another side to the story of early email: the pinstriped, corporate communications side where letter-writing rules mattered, where vice presidents and account executives, not rogue programmers, sent polite and well-punctuated email memos announcing meetings or discussing projects over company intranets, clusters of computers that had been linked together for the use of employees only. These white-collar emailers favored conventional spelling and usage; they keyed in the customary forms of letter-writing like the salutation and the polite close; they kept to the memo format so faithfully that our sophisticated email programs still begin every message with to: cc: and subject: fields; and they revered the do-and-don’t authority of rulebooks.

Unfortunately, there’s not much except people’s memories to tell us just how many of the emails of the 1960s took the law into their own hands, stylistically speaking, and how many were indistinguishable in tone and form from conventionally-typed interoffice correspondence. Access to mainframes was limited and expensive – it would be a good twenty years before the personal computer turned email into a mass medium. Besides, email, like the early phone call, was considered a fleeting and impermanent form of communication. It wasn’t typically printed out or even saved on computer tapes, those being reserved for the most important data (floppy disks, a more personal and portable form of storage, would come later, but email programs are still configured in a way that makes saving emails to an archive less than user-friendly).

But even if many of the first emails were pressed and starched, not wrinkled and lawless, the perception grew up that email was the new voice of the electronic frontier. No matter if you commuted to the wild, wild West of Cupertino, Redmond, and Austin, or to the wilds of Rte. 128, just west of Boston, the renegade image of email prevailed. This was a genre whose convention was to flout convention, and emailers could earn their spurs by intentionally misspelling, omitting commas, and choosing vocabulary that was more rough-hewn than business-like.

Then a combination of developments – analogous to the coming of the railroads – turned Silicon Gulch into Silicon Valley, and thus began the closing of the electronic frontier, at least so far as email was concerned. Favorably-priced and easy-to-use personal computers tempted more people to jump into wordprocessing, and it wasn’t long before these newcomers discovered email. A new breed of dudes and city-slickers came to cyberspace with their conservative textual conventions intact, and they proceeded to set up housekeeping on the internet.

Immediately, feuds began to break out between the experienced computer users and the newbies, the contemptuous label given to those who had just begun to use WordStar or Volkswriter, who knew the importance of effective business correspondence, and who, discovering Eudora or other early email clients, wanted to do email right. While it wasn’t exactly cow punchers vs. sheep ranchers, the lawless email pros quickly found themselves outnumbered by eager newcomers anxious to obey the
laws of the new writing community that they were joining, so they wouldn’t look like amateurs.

It did no good to explain to these newbies that the electronic frontier preferred its own rough justice to the rules of Strunk and White. For them, bad spelling, like dirty fingernails and casual dress, had no place in the computerized corporate office. On top of this, crusading newspaper op-eds lambasted click-and-send, spell-as-you-go email for destroying the English language and lamented the fact that computers were turning the nation’s youth into mindless hooligans who would rather email than write a book report for school.

Critics quickly warned that the speed and easy availability of email encouraged haste, made people lazy with their words, and was – paradoxically – both completely impersonal and overly informal. Such complaints persist today. A recent report issued by the National Commission on Writing quotes one government official complaining,

> E-mail is one of the leading causes of miscommunication. . . . The sender is composing on the spot. You might do a spell-check, but you can’t do a “thought-check.” It’s like blurtin something without thinking it through, or considering how it’s going to be understood by the recipient.

Another critic cited in the report dismisses e-mail as “just a higher order of Instant Messaging,” despite the fact that IM’s popularity is more recent than email’s:

> The use of e-mail has had a negative effect on writing clarity. . . . Punctuation has disappeared. Nobody uses a period. There’s no capitalization anymore. It’s more like a stream of consciousness and often hard to follow.

[National Commission 2005, 10]

But the Luddites have no need to fear that email signals anything as momentous as the death of civilization, or even the end of book reports as we know them. Second-generation emailers, who quickly became the majority, were concerned with the niceties of format, style, and usage, and guides to “netiquette” began to overrun the web. Netiquette was the new term coined to describe the Emily Post-style discussions of proper email. Here’s part of one newspaper reporter’s list of the do’s and don’ts of the new genre:

- Don’t shout. Whenever you type in capital letters, it’s considered “shouting” on line because it’s exceptionally hard to read, just like real shouting is hard to listen to. . . . You wouldn’t think of shouting, flying off the handle or repeating everything everyone says in polite company, now would you? Yet some of you never think twice about doing just those things – and more – on line.
- Keep your missives short, to the point, and tightly directed.
- [Don’t] fire off a hasty note . . . . The rule to follow: engage brain, THEN engage fingers. [Here the reporter unabashedly violates her own rule against writing all caps, showing that even on the internet, rules are made to be broken.]
— [Don’t] quote the other person’s entire message — especially if your response is merely “I agree.”
— Don’t . . . stuff the bottom of [your] messages with everything from cute quotes to every phone number [you] have. These “signature files” . . . can get annoying . . . when there’s a two-word message followed by a huge chunk of clutter.
— Do pay attention to posterity. The messages you post . . . are often saved by the people that receive them . . . . Do you really want someone five years from now reading your note to your mistress? Or your description of your drunken frat party? . . . Don’t put it on line if you wouldn’t want to see it on television or in the newspaper.

[Newman 1996]

Manners weren’t all that mattered on email. Spelling counted, too. Suddenly the electronic frontiersmen were doffing their buckskin and worrying about such niceties as whether email can even be a verb; whether a plural form, emails, is permissible; whether on line should be one word or two; and whether internet and Word Wide Web are capitalized (and if so, does that mean web page must become Web page?).

The “correct” spelling of the word email itself was up for grabs, with lexicographers at Merriam-Webster and the American Heritage Dictionary opting for the hyphenated e-mail, while the Oxford English Dictionary chose solid email for the noun and hyphenated e-mail for the verb, without explaining this apparent inconsistency.

One clear sign that convention was taming the web appeared in 1996, when the technology journal Wired, known for its radical and free-wheeling prose, published Wired Style, a guide for writing in the digital age. The manual’s introduction, taking a cue from the likes of Walt Whitman, celebrates “not the clear-but-oh-so-conventional voice of standard written English . . . . [but] the voice of people who write the way they talk” (Hale 1996). But despite protestations that its judgments are based on “actual usage, not rigid rules,” Wired Style presents what is essentially a list of rules, a set of do’s and don’ts that have little to do with write-like-you-talk and everything to do with write-like-I-want-you-to-write (or is that as-I-want-you-to-write?). These are only some examples of the magazine’s hipper-than-thou diktats that could just as easily come from Strunk and White’s Elements of Style, Fowler’s Modern English Usage, or any of the other style bibles that insecure writers have come to rely on:

**Darpa** (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency): Pronounced “dar-pah” and spelled with an initial cap. Neither Darpa nor Arpa takes an article.

DARPA is the U.S. government agency credited with establishing the internet as a way for people engaged in military research at universities, labs, and military installations around the country to share their work quickly and securely. It’s not clear why Wired Style uses only an initial capital for the acronym. Merriam-Webster prefers the more common all-caps DARPA that is customary with acronyms, and Wired Style itself spells other acronyms all-caps as well, as the entry for ENIAC shows:
ENIAC: Pronounce it “ee-knee-ack” but don’t say “the ENIAC computer”; it’s redundant. Some claim that the “C” in ENIAC originally stood for calculator, but go with computer.

In its entry for plug-and-play, Wired Style opts for formal usage over informal. After all, Wired isn’t Rolling Stone, and writing isn’t rock ‘n’ roll: “plug-and-play: If you must use it, at least don’t say plug-n-play.” So much for writing the way one talks, or even talking the way one talks. In contrast to such categorical rules, the entry for readme begins by acknowledging that linguistic variations will occur when people write the way they talk. But when such variants rear their ugly heads, read the editor’s lips: fahgeddabowdit. Wired Style will choose the best form to use – after all, that’s what style manuals are for:

readme: A file containing vital information about a software program or file. Some companies use README, others Readme, and others Read Me! Keep it simple: readme.

Wired Style urges writers to treat data as a singular, rejecting the advice of other usage guides that English data must be plural because the word is plural in Latin (the Latin singular, for a single bit of information, is datum). But even as the manual makes this liberal recommendation, Wired Style stresses the importance of getting things right:

Should you ever use the singular of data – that is, datum? Once there was a day when datum was singular and data was plural. That day is past. Datum is beyond vestigial. Combine data with a singular verb. And you didn’t ask, but get this right: Data travels over wires or lines, not through them.

But get this right? So much for the light touch. Despite their claims to the contrary, neither capitalists nor style manuals are ever laissez-faire. To be sure, Wired Style occasionally prefers one variant over another but less frequently, instead of dictating the correct form, the guide allows readers to choose:

mouses or mice? What’s the plural of that small, rolling, pointing device invented by Douglas Engelbart in 1964? We prefer mouses. Mice is just too suggestive of furry little critters. Both terms are common, so take your pick. We actually emailed Engelbart to see what he’d say. His answer? “Haven’t given the matter much thought.”

Despite the editor’s recommendation, actual usage indicates that people are avoiding the plural of this word altogether because mice, the normal plural of mouse, seems inappropriate when applied to computer pointing devices, while mouses, whether or not it’s the “preferred” term, strikes most people as downright wrong. If the inventor of the mouse considers worrying about its plural unnecessary, perhaps Wired Style should take the hint.
Most emailers don’t check with the style manual before clicking the send button, but the proliferation of email usage guides provides an indirect indication that writers of electronic messages do want to be correct. There are two even stronger indicators that email has gone from wild and woolly to domesticated and conventional. Every college writing textbook now includes a section on electronic writing, focusing not so much on how to do it, since college students are assumed to have already mastered the technical side of email, but how to do it right. And for a number of years now all the off-the-shelf email programs have offered spell-checkers. Some of these mail programs even boast grammar-checkers as well, a sure sign that the emailers, long criticized for their inventive spelling and loose adherence to standard usage, are either preoccupied with correctness, or wish to give the impression that they are.

Even those writers who don’t fanatically revise and polish their emails, and who don’t spell-check before sending, avoid the free-wheeling, rough and ready, stripped-down email style in which correspondents get right down to business and then move on. So salutations and sign offs, once thought unnecessary in emails since the email header names both the sender and the addressee, are now more common, even in informal email, because their absence suggests an abruptness that many writers and readers find impolite. And like the phone call, emailers, when they write person to person, often include some chit-chat along with the business at hand to preserve the personal touch necessary to maintain the social connection between writer and reader.

While the first electronic mail may have resembled the telegram more than anything else, its users recognized the uniqueness of the genre and eventually positioned it somewhere between the phone call and the letter. Electronic mail has some of the immediacy of a phone call, yet it is written, like a conventional letter, and delivered to a
virtual mailbox, from which the addressee can retrieve and open it, discard it, or ignore it, so it makes sense to consider it a form of mail as well.

Electronic mail lacks two key features of the phone call and the letter: readers can’t hear – and therefore recognize – an emailer’s voice. And the writer can’t sign an email to certify it in the same way that writers put their John Hancock to the bottom of a letter. Most people don’t worry about the absence of these authenticators, perhaps because they find emailing so much easier and less stressful than either letter writing or dialing up. People still use the phone – as the popularity of mobile phones attests. But voice-to-voice communication is not always the medium of choice: people sitting at their computer, with a phone nearby, often email instead of calling, and increasing numbers of cell phone users are indicating a preference for texting, not calling.

As for writing letters, according to U.S. Postmaster General John E. Potter, while total mail volume has increased dramatically since 1999, there has been a decline in first class mail (Longley 2005). The increased volume of mail consists almost entirely of catalogues and credit-card offers, and the decrease in first class mail can be attributed directly to the popularity of email. With the increasing number of bills received and paid online, many Americans are finding, to the post office’s dismay, that a book of “forever” stamps lasts longer than ever.

Unfortunately, like the important letter that cries for attention amidst an ocean of junk mail, the personal email is quickly being displaced by spam. Like its virtual counterpart, junk email has become a fact of life as well, along with the escalating spiral of junk mail filters and hacks to subvert those filters. I regularly purge my electronic mailbox of catalogue ads, as well as the get rich quick schemes from Nigeria (a scam that began in the days of snail mail but ported nicely over to the electronic side), offers of cheap drugs and mortgages, political rants, attempts to get me to reveal bank account information, and the inevitable obscenities that have managed to elude my junk filters.

Spam may be inconvenient or annoying, and it may bilk the overly-trusting reader out of some serious cash. But some email can actually inflict physical damage. Communication technology, while generally less dangerous than other sorts of technological development (enriched uranium, asbestos, the automobile), always brings with it a certain amount of risk. The telephone can be a vehicle for crank and harassing phone calls, though caller ID and the do-not-call list have gone a long way toward eliminating these downsides of having a phone. Portable and mobile phones expose callers to small amounts of microwave radiation, raising concerns about telephone-induced cancer.

There is as yet no scientific link between brain tumors and these phones, but even so, phones can bring about death and destruction. Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 movie “Dial M for Murder,” based on the play by Frederick Knott, may be the most famous fictional example of a telephone call triggering a death, although the wrong person is killed, but more recently we’ve seen that real-life terrorists who prefer not to martyr themselves can use cell phones to set off the bombs they leave by the roadside, at the mall, or on a crowded bus.
As Ted Kaczynski’s exploits demonstrated, the U.S. mail can be a potent vehicle for mayhem as well. Fortunately letter bombs are few and far between, and even at the height of the more recent anthrax scare, when ordinary people donned latex gloves to open their bills and copycats sent missives with flour and talc to stir things up, only a few letters actually contained the deadly white spores.

As for email, unfortunately it’s now all too common for messages from friends as well as strangers to deliver electronic viruses which can jam up a computer, render it useless, steal passwords, or convert their new electronic home to a springboard from which to infiltrate or disable other machines. The computer virus has become a genre of software unto itself, and whole industries have sprung up to counter the virus threat. Some computer users install weekly upgrades to antivirus software to protect their data from these poison pill emails.

But the deluge of spam and the threat of computer viruses haven’t dampened enthusiasm for email. Even though making contact with an addressee can be almost instantaneous, many emailers find the medium less demanding and less confrontational than either calls or letters. It’s more polite, they maintain, to ignore an email than to hang up on a caller or let the machine get it, much easier to defer action until one is ready to reply. Or to blame deliberate inaction on the technology. In addition, since most email users have deleted important emails by accident, or lost them in disk crashes, some emailers brazenly say, “I never got your email,” or “I think I deleted it,” or “Somehow it wound up in my junk folder and I never noticed it,” when in fact all they did was ignore the email in question.
Telling little white lies about lost messages may be no worse than the old ploy of telling a creditor that the check is in the mail. But there are some email gaffes that can make us wish for the good old days when typing or writing on clay tablets really slowed the process down. Email can be sent with just a click, and once it’s sent, there’s no way to undo it, no going back to the way things were just a moment before. Clicking before I should have, I’ve done all of the following, with predictable results: sent off a nasty email before my temper cooled; inadvertently copied an email to a large group of people who shouldn’t be seeing it at all; or forwarded an email without editing out the one sentence in the original message that was not intended for the new addressee.

Email has come full-circle in one sense. The epistolary novel, begun in the eighteenth century with Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, consisted of exchanges of letters among the characters. At least two recent novels consisting entirely of email exchanges bring the epistolary novel into the computer age, and there are novels based on instant message exchanges and text messages as well.

**Anecdote: IM me tonight . . .**

A decade ago my daughter went off to summer camp in Wisconsin. The campers boarded the buses in the parking lot of a Chicago bowling alley, and while some were already deep into conversation with one another, others crowded around the open bus windows and waved to parents and siblings who would soon be left behind. One father, clearly having second thoughts about sending his little girl almost two hours away from home, jumped up and down frantically trying to get her attention. When she finally tore herself away from her friends long enough to notice her distraught dad, he shouted one last request, “Fax me tonight, sweetheart!” This is one high-tech family, the rest of the parents thought to ourselves.

The next year, that all too rare fax gave way to email sent by any camper who wanted to use the camp’s new computer lab of an evening. Then cell phones were added to the mix. Now the campers bring their own laptops and use the camp’s wireless network day or night to communicate with one another and with those parents who are educable enough to learn instant messaging.

Instant messaging, or IM, which got its start around 1996, is the newest and perhaps the fastest growing genre of digital communication. Some experts see it eclipsing email in the near future. According to one estimate, two years ago there were 860 million people around the world IM-ing, almost 8 times more than had used this technology just four years earlier (Biever 2005). According to figures gathered by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 87% of all American teenagers use the internet, up from 73% in 2000. 75% of on-line American teens used Instant Messaging (Hitlin and Rainie 2005; Lenhart et al, 2001). Today that figure is probably closer to 99%, and a second Pew study reveals that 42% of on-line adults use IM at work, with one-fourth of them preferring IM to email (Shiu and Lenhart 2004).

IM permits users to have real-time written conversations with ‘buddies,’ or to use a more adult-sounding word, *contacts*, from a user-controlled list. Before IM introduced the buddy system, internet conversations revolved around “chat rooms” that brought people together around common interests, but since chatters could hide their true
identities, these digital salons were magnets for strangers pretending to be friends. Sexual predators masqueraded as teens in teen chat rooms, a situation which alarmed parents and police (though sexual predation on line is apparently much less common than popularly supposed).

**Anecdote: The author tries a chat**

My own children were proprietary about instant messaging because, though it was created by adults, at the time it hadn’t really spread to the adult world. But one day, knowing that I was interested in communication technologies, my son agreed to give me a quick lesson in IM basics and got me my own screen name, a fairly transparent one that didn’t hide who I was. But when I practiced my new skill by IM-ing his sister, who was off at college, she immediately became suspicious. “Who is this, really?” she asked in response to my invitation to chat. I tried to assure her it was really me, but she remained skeptical. Even when she accepted the fact that I was who I claimed to be, she commented, “This is too weird,” insisting that I sign off and send her an email, a more “traditional” technology best suited for the older generation. Adults, particularly parents, just weren’t welcome in the IM space that she regarded as her private digital sandbox.

And she wasn’t wrong in her assumption that the instant message belonged to her generation: according to Ashley Pierson (2003), by 2002, 60 million college students were IM-ing. Pierson, then a student at Iowa State, admitted IM-ing her roommate while both were in the same room. Lately the kids have become a little more tolerant about letting the old folks on line, though they still prefer to IM their friends, not their parents.

Instant messaging is attractive because it works in real time, like a phone call minus the long distance charges, and because it can run in a small window on the computer screen, permitting users to switch quickly between IM and other tasks, so IM conversations are typically interrupted and desultory. One thing that holds them together is the running transcript of exchanges that appears in the IM window. These transcripts can be saved for future reference, so in that sense they are more permanent than phone calls. However, looking back over a number of saved transcripts, I’ve found that while adult-generated messages seem to have a subject directing the conversation, most of the exchanges between the teens of my acquaintance seem to be relatively content-free: there’s a lot of touching base – I’m here, u there? I’m bored, u bored? – interspersed among the occasional discussion of the social schedule, for example, Let’s do the movie at 7. Empty exchanges like these are far from new, and those who worry that IM is sapping the English language of intellectual content can relax, because such little nothings are triggered by ennui, not by the technology used to express it. As the deathless dialogue created by Paddy Chayefsky for the movie “Marty” (1955) reveals, the empty back-and-forth of conversation captures an important aspect of social interaction:

Angie: What do you feel like doing tonight?

Marty: I don’t know, Ange. What do you feel like doing?

Angie: We’re back to that, huh? I say to you, ‘What do you feel like doing tonight?’ And you say back to me, ‘I dunno. What do you feel like
doing tonight?’ Then we wind up sitting around your house with a couple of cans of beer watching the *Hit Parade* on television.

[filmsite.org/mart.html]

Necessary expressions of boredom notwithstanding, instant messaging, following the lead of email, is both linguistically inventive and rebellious, and it gives users some creative control over the appearance of their messages. IM users may customize their screens, create icons called avatars to personalize their messages, and assign various sound effects to indicate messages sent or received, or buddies signing on or off. While instant messages often seem off-hand and throwaway, much thought clearly goes into the composition of IM-ers’ away messages, witty quotes or philosophical observations sent to would-be chatters when the user is away from the computer. People stick to their email sig.files for some time, but on IM there’s some pressure to come up with ever-hipper messages, as some IM-ers pride themselves on posting a new message each time they sign off.

One aspect of genre development is the creation of mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular text and to deal with those writers who violate the conventions established by the community of users. In addition to the informal self-organization that chat groups create for themselves, there’s some formal social regulation of IM interaction. Recipients of unwanted or impolite messages may “warn” IM-ers, or ban them entirely after enough offenses. Instant messages tend to be short, with rapid turn-taking, and some IM-ers favor a kind of acronymic shorthand that distinguishes the style of IM, for example, LOL, for ‘laughing out loud,’ and g2g, for ‘got to go,’ as does the liberal use of emoticons, iconographic ways to represent emotions, for example 😊, 😞, called the smiley face and the frowny face, to indicate a happy or sad state, respectively.

But many of my students associate stereotypical IM language with pre-teen wannabes, insisting instead that every word of an IM or a text be spelled out, and spelled correctly.

![Image 54. IM screen shot showing customized screen with screen names and avatars for the two participants, IM acronyms g2g, for ‘got to go,’ ttfn, ‘ta ta for now,’ and bcnu, ‘be seein’ you,’ and a smiley face emoticon (the names have been changed to preserve anonymity; screenshot by the author). Young adults tend to eschew the acronyms and smileys of this mock IM, preferring more “normal” language.](image-url)
IM is now a common grown-up activity as well as a teen one. More and more adults sign on not just at home but at work as well, often without the knowledge of their employers. While email systems have been tamed by convention-emphasizing mail programs and workplace regulations, IM is attractive in part because it has become the new outlaw genre, operating under the radar of intrusive parents and bosses. Attempts to discourage IM at work, as CitiBank initially tried to do, aren’t typically successful, and employers now find themselves worrying about the impact of IM on worker productivity. But instant messaging is starting to come out from under cover at the office as IM’ers find that its uses go far beyond chatting or arranging dates. IM, faster than email and because of the transcript, more permanent than a phone call, quickly confirms stock trades, and it offers the written equivalent of a conference call. So promising is instant messaging for the business world that one business reporter has called it “email on steroids” (Durland 2004).

Email seems to be trumping both the phone and the conference at work – the New York Times reported as long ago as 1998 that because of email, “entire days can pass without a single face-to-face meeting” (Hafner 1998) – and it may not be long before IM beats email as the communication of choice. According to one report, eighty percent of businesses use instant messaging in some fashion (Maloney 2004), and management, faced with the reality that instant messaging isn’t going away any time soon, has begun to worry about standardizing IM systems and educating employees on the appropriate business use of instant messaging.

IM has legal implications as well: like email, it is discoverable in court, and IM transcripts are covered by rules requiring that certain kinds of business data be stored for a number of years. Also like email, IM is subject to attack by viruses and worms. And instant messaging has even generated its own form of spam, called spim (Spam, the brand name, is a word blending spiced and ham, while spim is a blend of spam and IM). There are other security concerns with IM: employees may divulge company secrets carelessly because IM seems so casual a medium of exchange, or deliberately because many instant messages simply bypass company servers (Goodwin 2004).

Instant messaging is dismissed by critics who see it as one step below email, which they don’t like either: in their view, it is mindless communication, if it communicates at all, and it is so careless and unregulated that it’s endangering the English language. Teachers add to this their complaint that students are using emoticons and IM acronyms and deformed spellings in their school writing, though when I began teaching more than forty years ago students were writing JM (for Jesus, Mary and Joseph) at the top of their papers, or drawing smiley faces on the last page in an effort to improve their grade, and at least the girls were passing notes that ended with TTFN and were “sealed” with SWAK across the back of the envelope. But for the hardened skeptics, there’s simply no upside to IM. At best, in their view, the new writing technology lets teens and office workers waste even more time than they already do.

IM occasionally gets some faint praise. Some reluctant fans, who acknowledge that instant messaging has carved out its own space in our writing practices, credit IM with increasing the speed and accuracy of teenage typists, which suggests that these teens are being pointed more toward careers as office clerks, not rulers of the Queen’s Navy. But IM does have a core of real supporters as well, who predict that instant messaging
will contribute greatly to business productivity, though its ability to increase either worker efficiency or corporate profits has yet to be demonstrated.

Regardless of the posturing of fans and critics, it’s clear that instant messaging has had a tremendous impact on writing practice. In less than a decade it has moved from curiosity to essential for social writing, particularly among teens and young adults, and more recently it has begun to impact business writing as well. The following guide to corporate instant messaging, broadcast on CNN, is one sure sign that despite the critics, instant messaging is a mainstream genre that is here to stay and that is already donning the trappings of conventionality:

1. Check your company’s policy on downloading IM software: Some companies offer instant messaging to all employees, but most do not yet automatically provide this kind of software. While most instant messaging software is free, you still need to download it onto your system. Many companies have strict policies about downloading additional software onto company-owned machines. This is because downloads can open up company systems to risks such as viruses. Other employers are concerned about potential lost productivity due to instant messaging. If your company does not have a formal policy about instant messaging programs, ask around to see if they are acceptable or not.

2. Use caution: Like other forms of electronic communication, instant message conversations can be monitored by employers, are saved in computer systems, and can be retrieved. Just because it seems like you are having a casual “chat,” it doesn’t mean you can let your guard down and say whatever you want. You need to be as careful about what you say in an instant message as you would in e-mail.

3. Be aware of viruses and other security risks: Most instant messaging services enable you to send files with your messages. Again, like any other form of electronic communication, be aware of the risks involved. Just like e-mail, you should never open attachments that come from someone you do not know or that are unfamiliar to you.

4. Use your status options: Instant messaging programs allow you to tell others what your “status” is. This means you can label yourself as “online,” or available to talk, or let others know when you are “busy.” Use these status options to let others know when you can and cannot chat. If you are swamped at work and need to concentrate, change your status to busy.

5. If you are out to lunch, change your status to “away” so others know you are out and not just ignoring them. Don’t feel bad about telling a friend that you have to concentrate on work rather than chatting about your weekend.

6. Be respectful of others’ time: Respecting your colleagues’ status options is as important as using yours. If you see that someone has listed their status as “busy,” honor that person’s wishes and don’t try to start an IM conversation.
6. Be responsible: The reason many companies are wary of IM programs is the tendency of employees to use them for personal rather than business purposes.

[“Six Rules” 2004]

More and more people are using instant messaging to arrange dates, transact business, or avoid doing work. Sometimes IM proves the next best thing to being there, but it can also be preferable to actually meeting. According to one survey, thirty-one percent of on-line teens use instant messaging to write something that they wouldn’t tell somebody in person; twenty percent have asked someone out using IM; and nineteen percent have used instant messaging to break up with someone (Hitlin and Rainie 2005). As we see from the following exasperated comment which appeared in a traditional, print publication, adults too turn to IM to avoid an uncomfortable face-to-face confrontation:

He dumps me on Instant Messenger. I’m not making that up. He IM’s me that he is ready to move on and wants a divorce. “You’re breaking up with me on IM?” I typed, lamely. [Allen 2005]

This is also an example – I presume – of the kind of personal use of IM at work that employers worry so much about. While it’s not uncommon for people in the same house, or even the same room, to IM one another, the likely response to an on-line break-up message like the one above makes it reasonable to assume that the writer sent it from a safe distance: another office, or better yet, another building. It’s also the kind of message that suggests not much work will get done that day.

Email, the web page, and the instant message are three new genres enabled by new word technologies, but not only do these genres show us that technological change produces textual change, they also demonstrate the ways in which the new means of writing work to expand our notion of who is a writer. In the next chapter, we’ll look at the impact of yet another new genre, the blog, on membership in the writers gild, and see how the explosion of writing made possible by computers leads to attempts to regulate the new kinds of authorship.