

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MIGNON Grammar Girl here. Today's topic is text messaging. Karel from Toronto, Canada asked if I
FOGARTY: think text messaging is affecting how people write in formal situations. Well, I know it is for some people because Mia tells me so in this next message.

MIA: Hi, Grammar Girl. This is Mia in New York. I want to express my pet peeve and that is the use of symbols in text. I'll be reading along, enjoying what I'm reading, usually a technical document, absorbing the concepts. And suddenly, I hit, wam, up against an ampersand instead of the word "and."

It's just not right. These are symbols. They're supposed to be used in advertising and billboards and headlines, but my many, many coworkers who are, I think, probably all addicted to text messaging insist on using them instead of writing out the full word. How much harder is it to write three normal letters instead of finding that ampersand above the seven on your keyboard? Anyway, that's my pet peeve. Bye.

MIGNON Thanks, Mia. Whenever I'm thinking about language roles, I consider whether a specific
FOGARTY: situation is formal or informal. For example, people have asked me if it's OK to start a sentence with a conjunction like "and" or "but," and my answer is that it's OK in informal settings, but should be avoided in formal settings. A formal setting is something like a cover letter for a job application, a letter to a client, or a book report for school. An informal setting is something like an email to a friend, something you'd say in casual conversation, or a text message.

Some things fall in the middle. You just have to use your own judgment. Is a text message to your boss a formal or informal communication? Only you can decide. It depends on the nature of your relationship with your boss and your corporate culture. But I always suggest that when in doubt, assume it's formal.

The solution for Mia's problem and Karel's concerns is not to do away with text messaging abbreviations, but for writers to be aware of the purpose of their writing. Karel even pointed out that although his teenagers spend most of their waking hours texting, they're still quite good at writing formal English. In her book *Grammar Snobs are Great Big Meanies*, June Casagrande made a great point. Text messaging abbreviations place the needs of the writer

before the needs of the reader, unlike many other language developments, such as punctuation, which are meant to assist the reader.

I checked with Mr. Manners, and he said it's rude to use text messaging abbreviations when the person on the receiving end won't understand them, but that it may also be rude not to use them when you're sending a message to someone who you know will understand the abbreviations and who's reading your message on a tiny cell phone screen. If you write everything out, the recipient will have to do a lot more scrolling to read your message. Again, the underlying theme is consider your specific situation.

One place I think that people have got it really wrong is New Zealand. It seems like a lovely country, and I'd like to go there someday, but back in November a few listeners wrote to ask me what I thought about students being allowed to use text messaging abbreviations on their national exams. Honestly, at the time I thought it was a joke. I even ran across several news stories about the policy, but I just assumed that someone had fooled the media. But after I did my research for this episode, it appears that the story is actually true.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority says it doesn't dock students for using abbreviations on parts of the exam outside of those that specifically test writing skills, and that this would include standard text messaging abbreviations. The Authority came out a few days after all the initial press and said that although abbreviations are allowed, they're strongly discouraged, making it unclear to me whether students would be graded down for the practice or not.

Anyway, I apologize for not initially believing the story. I'm now officially scandalized, precisely because I consider a national exam to be a prime example of a formal situation. I think the policy sends a really confusing message to students about when it's appropriate to use informal language. If students can use abbreviations on their national exams, they could reasonably assume that it's OK to use them in a cover letter for a job application, but I doubt most hiring managers would agree.

So now that we've established that it's bad to use texting abbreviations in formal settings, it's time to get to the fun and talk about informal settings. I'm not a big texter, but I've started using Twitter, a web tool that lets me write posts about what I'm doing at any given time. For example, if you had checked at 4:30 this afternoon, you would have seen that I was writing about text messaging this week.

A box in the sidebar at my website displays my most recent post. And if you use Twitter too, you can follow me directly. My username is GrammarGirl.

The thing about Twitter is that the posts are limited to only 140 characters. Sometimes I find it really challenging to get my point across and still use proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation. But I'm Grammar Girl, so I have to. I was spending a lot of time trying to decide what was acceptable and what wasn't, and then I realized I needed a Twitter style guide.

Adam from Phoenix also asked me to help put together some Twitter guidelines, and fellow Twitterer Cathleen Ritt came up with the name for the style guide, Strunk and Twite. I understand that some people aren't going to like the idea of rules for Twittering or texting, and really these are just guidelines that I wrote for myself. But if other people find them useful, I'm happy to help. I'm going to hit on just some of the major topics in the podcast, and then I'll post the entire style guide at the *Grammar Girl* blog, and of course, as posts on Twitter.

The first main rule I decided on is that it's OK to use sentence fragments. Remember that this is an informal setting, and using Twitter is like having a conversation because you're answering the question, what are you doing? It would be fine in casual conversation to respond, writing an episode, so it's fine on Twitter too. Cutting out "I am" saves four characters, and as I use Twitter more, I'm also starting to find posts that start with "I am" tiresome.

Finally, style guides point out that some fragments can stand alone, and skilled writers can use sentence fragments for emphasis in formal writing, although this technique should be used sparingly. The only time it's not OK to use fragments on Twitter is when they would be confusing. For example, "I'm going to write my show today" is different from "Going to write my show today." People could read the fragment to mean I'm traveling, as in going somewhere.

My next big decision was whether or not to allow shortened spellings of words such as N-I-T-E for night and T-H-R-U for through. When the effective cost of each letter is so high, it's tempting to use the shortened versions. And I even discovered that there have been movements through the years to formalize simplified spellings.

For example, according to a CBS News story, Andrew Carnegie helped create the Simplified Spelling Board to promote a retooling of written English. And President Theodore Roosevelt tried to force the government to use simplified spelling in its publications. Benjamin Franklin advocated dropping the letters c, j, q, w, x, and y from the alphabet, although he has a j in his

own name.

Nevertheless, I just can't do it. I think it's fine for normal Twitterers to use these shortened spellings, but I'm willing to bet that some people would be horrified if I used them, so I won't.

The final rule I'm going to mention here is that if I can't say it properly in 140 characters, then I need to seriously consider whether it's something that should be posted on Twitter. 140 characters is the rule of the game. And deep down, grammarians love rules.

That's all. This week Brad, Michael, and Karen each win a copy of my audiobook *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips to Clean Up Your Writing*. Don't forget to sign up for the free email newsletter at qdnw.com. You'll get a free grammar tip every couple of weeks. And check out the Money Girl podcast. This week she's talking about 15-year mortgages versus 30-year mortgages.