

THE RIGHT REGISTER

As the English language evolves to accommodate the internet, it's important to know how to write in different contexts, says **Nicola Davies**

Do you cringe when otherwise intelligent adults send you text messages that read, 'Ur so gr8!?' Maybe you were the one pressing the send button? Admit it! You have 'lol'ed' and 'brb'ed' with the rest of us. Language has changed significantly over the years and, as a result, so has our written communication. Much of this change can be attributed to the internet age, where short-form communication is king. For example, did you ever think you would be writing a story in 140 characters, along with other Twitter users? I certainly didn't! In fact, I'm starting to wonder why I had to sit through all of those English classes when everything I learnt about grammar, punctuation, syntax and spelling now seems irrelevant. Maybe you are on the flip side of the coin and feel like people are trying to lord it over you when they cling to the old ways of writing – why can't people just move with the times instead of trying to make a point with every correct spelling or appropriately placed comma?

Whichever side of the fence you find yourself writing on, you will have witnessed the evolution of the English language. Indeed, throughout our lives the English language has made some imperceptible changes that we have naturally adapted to – just look how far we have come since Shakespeare. As the internet era thrives, however, no change to the English language seems impossible. Modern English no longer refers to the English language adopted since the Great Vowel Shift during the 1500s, but instead encapsulates 'net lingua' – the language of the internet. This language became particularly notable in 2010 when Christopher Poole, founder of the image-based bulletin board, 4chan, was called into the court room to testify during the trial of a man accused of hacking into US politician Sarah Palin's email account. The reason Mr Poole was asked to testify? Merely to define a catalogue of internet slang that could not be deciphered by the lawyers – *rickroll*, *lurker*, *troll*, and *caps* were among the net lingua he was asked to clarify.

As the English language continues to evolve, it is important for writers to keep abreast of the different linguistic registers and the distinct approaches to communication within these diverse fields. As writers, although we uphold high standards of English, it is important to accept that clear and appropriate communication requires different approaches in different media. For example, formal print writing requires correct grammar and

syntax, but social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook are more personal and chatty. Without such distinctions, we could end up with serious news items being presented in internet slang or JK Rowling writing a prequel to Harry Potter in 140 characters per chapter. It doesn't sound great, does it? Although we do need to embrace internet lingo where appropriate, we also need to remain focused on the value of the English language within the texts we produce for our readers. This isn't always easy when bombarded with the current internet jargon that is taking over the world. So here is a writer's SOS guide to the different media-driven approaches for presenting the English language via the written word.

Academic English

At one end of the spectrum we have academic English. Yes, it's an actual language; look it up if you don't believe me. Academic language tends to be objective and based on evidence rather than personal opinions or preferences. For example, rather than writing, 'I think the first English dictionary was written in 1755,' you would write: 'According to The British Library, the first English language dictionary was written in 1755 by Samuel Johnson.' See the difference? There is no subjectivity involved in the latter and the reader can track down the evidence themselves. Such an objective style is the vehicle for logical argument; this is not the medium for self-expression.

Sentences are just as long as they need to be; in other words, they are concise. There can also be a level of caution behind the words, depending on the evidence you have to support your claims. For example, words such as 'might', 'possibly', 'predicted', and 'hypothesised' are used extensively. It is usually written in passive voice and with vocabulary that can go over the heads of non-academic readers. There is the presumption that the reader already has some level of knowledge on the topic area.

Business English

This is the language used to write business correspondence, including emails – even that email pitch you sent just yesterday. This is necessarily formal in tone and aimed at selling something – your story, skills, or expertise. Correct