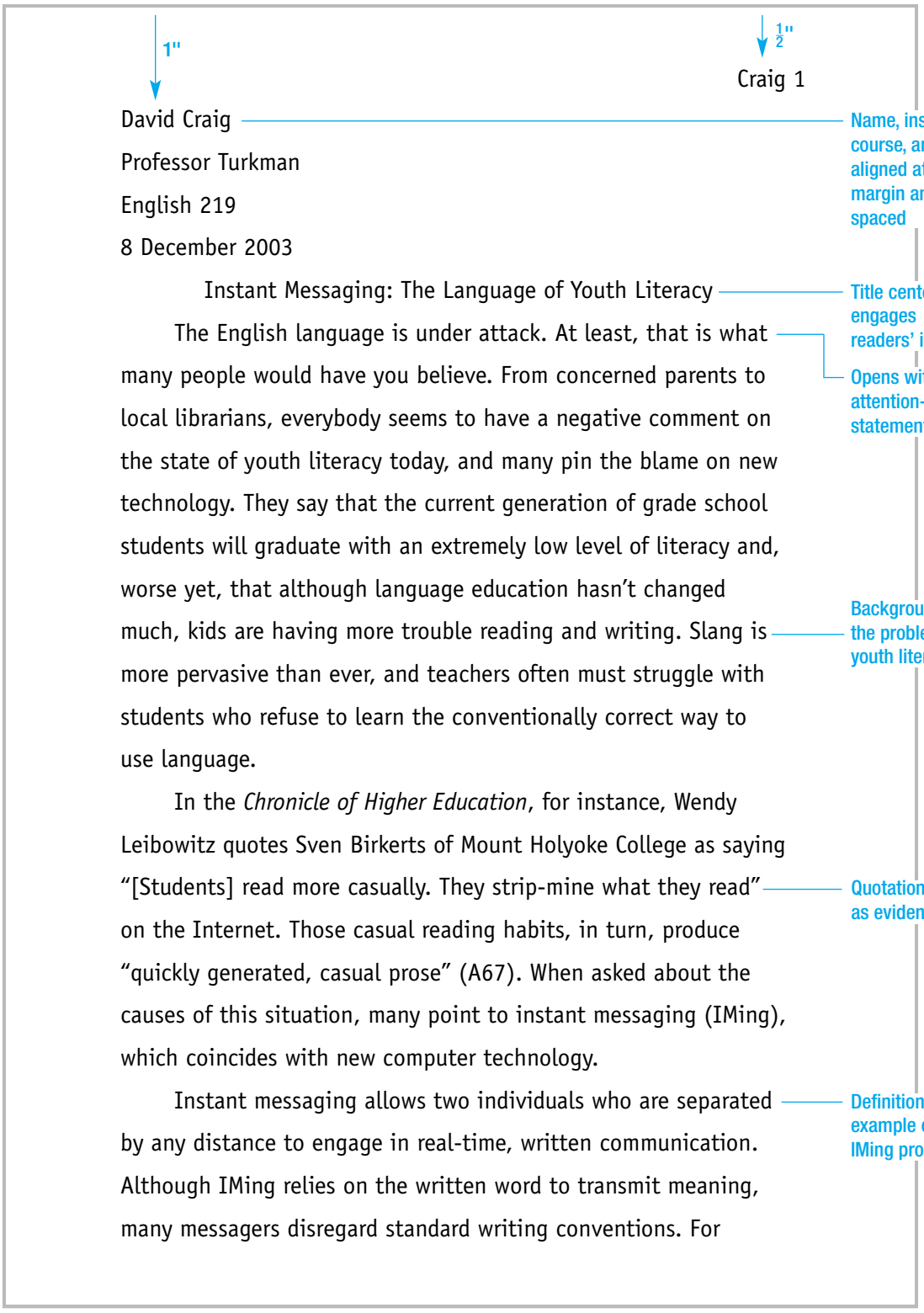
David Craig's Research Essay (MLA Style)



Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

Last name and page number in upper right-hand corner

1"

example, here is a snippet from an IM conversation between two teenage girls:[1]

Explanatory note; see 18c

Teen One: sorry im talkinto like 10 ppl at a time

Teen Two: u izzyful person

Teen Two: kwel

Teen One: hey i g2g

As this brief conversation shows, participants must use words to communicate via IMing, but their words do not have to be in standard English.

Overview of the criticism of IMing

Instant messaging, according to many, threatens youth literacy because it creates and compounds undesirable reading and writing habits and discourages students from learning standard literacy skills. Passionate or not, however, the critics' arguments

Explicit thesis stated

don't hold up. In fact, instant messaging seems to be a beneficial force in the development of youth literacy because it promotes regular contact with words, the use of a written medium for communication, and the development of an alternative form of literacy. Perhaps most important, IMing can actually help students learn conventional English. Before turning to the pros and cons of IMing, however, I wish to look more closely at two background issues: the current state of literacy and the prevalence of IMing.

Writer considers argument that youth literacy is in decline

Regardless of one's views on IMing, the issue of youth literacy does demand attention because standardized test scores for language assessments, such as the verbal section of the College

[1] This transcript of an IM conversation was collected on 20 Nov. 2003. The teenagers' names are concealed to protect privacy.

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

Board's SAT, have declined in recent years. This trend is illustrated in a chart distributed by the College Board as part of its 2002 analysis of aggregate SAT data (see Fig. 1).

Figure explained in text and cited in parenthetical reference

The trend lines, which I added to the original chart, illustrate a significant pattern that may lead to the conclusion that youth literacy is on the decline. These lines display the seven-year paths (from 1995 to 2002) of math and verbal scores, respectively. Within this time period, the average SAT math score jumped more than ten points. The average verbal score, however, actually dropped a few points--and appears to be headed toward a further decline in the future. Corroborating this evidence is a report from

Discussion of Figure 1

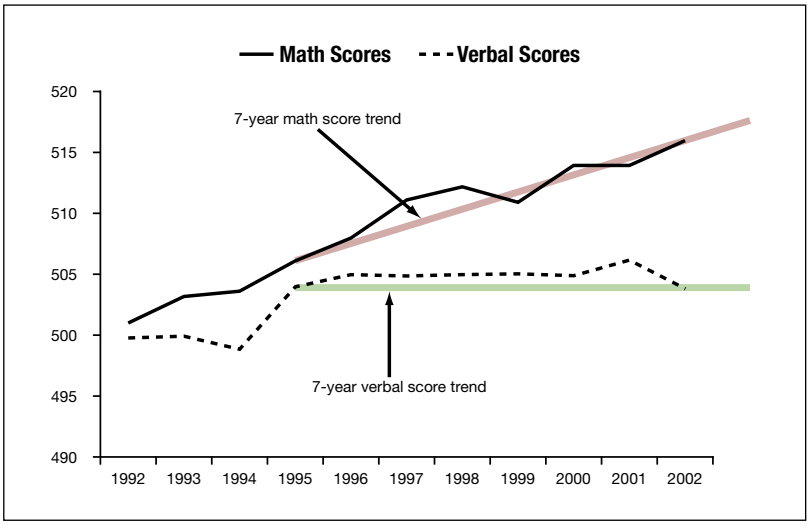


Fig. 1. Comparison of SAT math and verbal scores (1992-2002). Trend lines added. Source: Kristin Carnahan and Chiara Coletti, *Ten-Year Trend in SAT Scores Indicates Increased Emphasis on Math Is Yielding Results; Reading and Writing Are Causes for Concern;* New York: College Board, 2002; print; 9.

Figure labeled, titled, and credited to source; inserted at appropriate point in text

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

Government source cited for statistical evidence

the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. According to this agency's study, the percentage of twelfth graders whose writing ability was "at or above the basic level" of performance dropped from 78 to 74 percent between 1998 and 2002 (Persky, Daane, and Jin 21).

Writer acknowledges part of critics' argument; transition to next point

Based on the preceding statistics, parents and educators appear to be right about the decline in youth literacy. And this trend is occurring while IM usage is on the rise. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 54 percent of American

Statistical evidence cited

youths aged twelve to seventeen have used IMing (qtd. in Lenhart and Lewis 20). This figure translates to a pool of some thirteen million young instant messagers. Of this group, Pew reports, half send instant messages every time they go online, with 46 percent spending between thirty and sixty minutes messaging and another 21 percent spending more than an hour. The most conservative estimate indicates that American youths spend, at a minimum, nearly three million hours per day on IMing. What's more, they seem to be using a new vocabulary, and this is one of the things that bothers critics. In order to have an effect on youth literacy, however, this new vocabulary must actually exist, so I set out to determine if it did.

In the interest of establishing the existence of IM language,

Writer's field research introduced

I analyzed 11,341 lines of text from IM conversations between youths in my target demographic: US residents aged twelve to seventeen. Young messagers voluntarily sent me chat logs, but they were unaware of the exact nature of my research. Once all of the logs had been gathered, I went through them, recording the

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number of times IM language was used in place of conventional words and phrases. Then I generated graphs to display how often these replacements were used.

During the course of my study, I identified four types of IM language: phonetic replacements, acronyms, abbreviations, and inanities. An example of phonetic replacement is using *ur* for *you are*. Another popular type of IM language is the acronym; for a majority of the people in my study, the most common acronym was *lol*, a construction that means *laughing out loud*. Abbreviations are also common in IMing, but I discovered that typical IM abbreviations, such as *etc.*, are not new to the English language. Finally, I found a class of words that I call "inanities." These words include completely new words or expressions, combinations of several slang categories, or simply nonsensical variations of other words. My favorite from this category is *lolz*, an inanity that translates directly to *lol* yet includes a terminating *z* for no obvious reason.

Findings of field research presented

In the chat transcripts that I analyzed, the best display of typical IM lingo came from the conversations between two thirteen-year-old Texan girls, who are avid IM users. Figure 2 is a

Figure introduced and explained

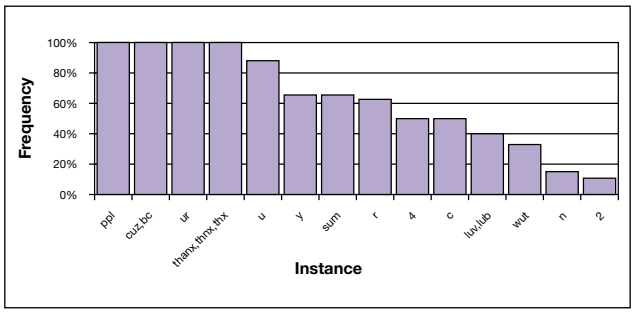


Fig. 2. Usage of phonetic replacements and abbreviations in IMing.

Figure labeled and titled

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

graph showing how often they used certain phonetic replacements and abbreviations. On the *y*-axis, frequency of replacement is plotted, a calculation that compares the number of times a word or phrase is used in IM language with the total number of times that it is communicated in any form. On the *x*-axis, specific IM words and phrases are listed.

Discussion of findings presented in Figure 2

My research shows that the Texan girls use the first ten phonetic replacements or abbreviations at least 50 percent of the time in their normal IM writing. For example, every time one of them writes *see*, there is a parallel time when *c* is used in its place. In light of this finding, it appears that the popular IM culture contains at least some elements of its own language. It also seems that much of this language is new: no formal dictionary yet identifies the most common IM words and phrases. Only in the heyday of the telegraph or on the rolls of a stenographer would you find a similar situation, but these "languages" were never a popular medium of youth communication. Instant messaging, however, is very popular among young people and continues to generate attention and debate in academic circles.

Writer returns to opposition argument

My research shows that messaging is certainly widespread, and it does seem to have its own particular vocabulary, yet these two factors alone do not mean it has a damaging influence on youth literacy. As noted earlier, however, some people claim that the new technology is a threat to the English language, as revealed in the following passage:

Signal verb introduces quotation

> Abbreviations commonly used in online instant messages are creeping into formal essays that

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

> students write for credit, said Debbie Frost, who teaches language arts and social studies to sixth-graders. . . . "You would be shocked at the writing I see. It's pretty scary. I don't get cohesive thoughts, I don't get sentences, they don't capitalize, and they have a lot of misspellings and bad grammar," she said. "With all those glaring mistakes, it's hard to see the content." ("Young Messagers")

Block quotation; quotation within a quotation

Parenthetical reference uses brief title—author unknown

Echoing Frost's concerns is Melanie Weaver, a professor at Alvernia College, who taught a tenth-grade English class as an intern. In an interview with the *New York Times*, she said, "[When t]hey would be trying to make a point in a paper, they would put a smiley face in the end [:)]. . . . If they were presenting an argument and they needed to present an opposite view, they would put a frown [:(]" (qtd. in Lee).

The critics of instant messaging are numerous. But if we look to the field of linguistics, a central concept--metalinguistics--challenges these criticisms and leads to a more reasonable conclusion--that IMing has no negative impact on a student's development of or proficiency with traditional literacy.

Transition to support of thesis and refutation of critics

Scholars of metalinguistics offer support for the claim that IMing is not damaging to those who use it. As noted earlier, one of the most prominent components of IM language is phonetic replacement, in which a word such as *everyone* becomes *every1*. This type of wordplay has a special importance in the development of an advanced literacy, and for good reason. According to David Crystal, an internationally recognized scholar of linguistics at the University

Linguistic authority cited in support of thesis

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

of Wales, as young children develop and learn how words string together to express ideas, they go through many phases of language play. The singsong rhymes and nonsensical chants of preschoolers are vital to their learning language, and a healthy appetite for such wordplay leads to a better command of language later in life (182).

Evidence to support connection between wordplay and advanced literacy

As justification for his view of the connection between language play and advanced literacy, Crystal presents an argument for metalinguistic awareness. According to Crystal, *metalinguistics* refers to the ability to "step back" and use words to analyze how language works. "If we are good at stepping back," he says, "at thinking in a more abstract way about what we hear and what we say, then we are more likely to be good at acquiring those skills which depend on just such a stepping back in order to be successful--and this means, chiefly, reading and writing. . . . [T]he greater our ability to play with language, . . . the more advanced will be our command of language as a whole" (181).

Ellipses indicate omissions in quotation

If we accept the findings of linguists such as Crystal that metalinguistic awareness leads to increased literacy, then it seems reasonable to argue that the phonetic language of IMing can also lead to increased metalinguistic awareness and, therefore, increases in overall literacy. As instant messagers develop proficiency with a variety of phonetic replacements and other types of IM words, they should increase their subconscious knowledge of metalinguistics.

Writer links Crystal's views to thesis about IMing

Metalinguistics also involves our ability to write in a variety of distinct styles and tones. Yet in the debate over instant messaging and literacy, many critics assume that *either* IMing *or* academic literacy will eventually win out in a person and that the two modes

Another refutation of critics' assumptions

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

cannot exist side by side. This assumption is, however, false. Human beings ordinarily develop a large range of language abilities, from the formal to the relaxed and from the mainstream to the subcultural. Mark Twain, for example, had an understanding of local speech that he employed when writing dialogue for *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet few people would argue that Twain's knowledge of this form of English had a negative impact on his ability to write in standard English.

Example from well-known work of literature used as support

However, just as Mark Twain used dialects carefully in dialogue, writers must pay careful attention to the kind of language they use in any setting. The owner of the language Web site *The Discouraging Word*, who is an anonymous English literature graduate at the University of Chicago, backs up this idea in an e-mail to me:

Email correspondence cited in support of claim

> What is necessary, we feel, is that students learn how to shift between different styles of writing--that, in other words, the abbreviations and shortcuts of IM should be used online . . . but that they should not be used in an essay submitted to a teacher. . . . IM might even be considered . . . a different way of reading and writing, one that requires specific and unique skills shared by certain communities.

The analytical ability that is necessary for writers to choose an appropriate tone and style in their writing is, of course, metalinguistic in nature because it involves the comparison of two or more language systems. Thus, youths who grasp multiple languages will have a greater natural understanding of metalinguistics. More

Writer synthesizes evidence for claim

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

specifically, young people who possess both IM and traditional skills stand to be better off than their peers who have been trained only in traditional or conventional systems. Far from being hurt by their online pastime, instant messagers can be aided in standard writing by their experience with IM language.

Transition to writer's final point

The fact remains, however, that youth literacy seems to be declining. What, if not IMing, is the main cause of this phenomenon? According to the College Board, which collects data on several questions from its test takers, enrollment in English composition and grammar classes has decreased in the last decade by 14 percent (Carnahan and Coletti 11). The possibility of instant messaging causing a decline in literacy seems inadequate when statistics on English education for US youths provide other evidence of the possible causes. Simply put, schools in the United States are not teaching English as much as they used to. Rather than blaming IMing alone for the decline in literacy and test scores, we must also look toward our schools' lack of focus on the teaching of standard English skills.

Alternate explanation for decline in literacy

Transition to conclusion

I found that the use of instant messaging poses virtually no threat to the development or maintenance of formal language skills among American youths aged twelve to seventeen. Diverse language skills tend to increase a person's metalinguistic awareness and, thereby, his or her ability to use language effectively to achieve a desired purpose in a particular situation. The current decline in youth literacy is not due to the rise of instant messaging. Rather, fewer young students seem to be receiving an adequate education in the use of conventional English. Unfortunately, it may always be

Concluding paragraph sums up argument and reiterates thesis

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

fashionable to blame new tools for old problems, but in the case of instant messaging, that blame is not warranted. Although IMing may expose literacy problems, it does not create them.

Source: Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook,* 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

Heading centered

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First line of each entry flush with left margin; subsequent lines indented

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