

# Writing Online

**M**ost writers like to believe their writing will last a while, even if it's merely a matter of weeks. For instance, you may have saved copies of the essays you wrote this semester, maybe sharing a few with friends and family, relishing the praise your teacher lavished upon you. Maybe you've considered entering one of your essays in a contest or used one as a college admissions essay. Perhaps you have a place where you collect such essays and skim through them once in a while, which is a stark and sometimes painful reminder of how far you've come in your writing.

All of this suggests a deliberate, often slow process: gathering ideas, pounding out sentences, printing a hard copy, waiting for the paper to be graded, perhaps revising and waiting again. Writing for an *online* audience, however, streamlines and often changes this process. You compose, you post, and the message is transmitted to one person or blasted to potentially millions of people, who may respond within seconds. Speed is expected and prized. In fact, one of the original online messaging tools was called IM, short for *instant messaging*. How much of this speedy communication constitutes good writing is questionable. How much of it will last is unclear.

On the other hand, we're inspired and encouraged by the way writers have adapted to this new medium. If you've ever posted or commented on a blog, updated your status on an online social network, or written on a microblogging site that limits your posts to a certain number of characters, you're already aware that your online writing can be shaped by the technology you're using. Here's a little secret: some adults are concerned that today's students are forgetting how to write "correctly" because of an over-reliance on text message abbreviations, emoticons, and acronyms. Are those concerns valid? Sure. But

we suspect that most student writers know the difference between how communication is encoded in a text message and how a similar message might be delivered in more formal writing.

The goal of this chapter is to help you think about ways your online writing can be more effective. Until recently, technology-based writing for many students was a nonschool activity. People kept in touch with friends and family through text messages, status updates, instant messages, and email, but writing for school rarely involved those kinds of communication. Well, times are changing. Increasingly, teachers are making use of Internet platforms such as listservs, social networks, and blogs in their classes. Regardless of how expert you may feel using particular technology platforms, you need to be able to adapt your writing depending on the situation you're in and the purpose you're trying to fulfill.

Good writers consider their audience when writing. This is also true for the kinds of writing you do online or through text messages. For example, if you're sending a text message to a family member or commenting on a friend's status update, you can throw in some abbreviations or emoticons and the person on the other end is likely to know exactly what you mean and how you feel about it. You know some people well enough that you have consciously or unconsciously agreed on some language shortcuts and codes that save time and carry your messages efficiently. Others outside your social circle might not understand the shortcuts, but that's OK because you're not writing to or for them.

As long as people communicate with each other, they will create their own variations in the language they use with each other. That's natural. But as we said, these types of technology-based communications are becoming more common in schools and workplaces. You need to know how to use them clearly and purposefully in those settings and not just default to text-speak any time you're using technology.

For example, let's say a teacher asks you to read an article or blog post and to comment about it online. Obviously, your teacher wants to see your thoughts expressed in academically appropriate language. If you write your response using the kinds of shortcuts that make perfect sense to your friends or family, it's possible that your teacher won't know what the heck you're talking about.

In the future, you may be asked to post updates on projects in a social network or wiki as a part of your job or volunteer work. Again, you want your writing to sound professional and to create a positive, clear impression of your thoughts, so you do not want to use those shortcuts just because the writing happens to be online.

In this chapter we will explore how to write effectively using common Internet platforms such as blogs, microblogs, social networks and communities, and wikis.

## How is Online Writing Different?

Good writing is good writing, correct? Just because you intend to post the writing online instead of turning it in for a class doesn't mean that you can get sloppy with grammar and neglect to proofread—right? We hope you agree, but we do want to acknowledge some key differences.

1) Online writing tends to be more informal and conversational.

As you can tell from reading this text, we don't take issue with informality. For example, in the last sentence, we could have written, "As you can *discern* from reading," but *discern*, a perfectly fine word, strikes us as a bit stuffy here. The decision over tone and word choice is intertwined with purpose and audience—and yes, technology. Know your purpose and recognize your audience, and the informality will work for you.

2) Online writing is sometimes anonymous.

Because of this anonymity, the tone is often meaner and cruder. People feel free to engage in personal attacks or make offensive statements they would never dare to utter when speaking face to face. Not only are such Internet attacks cowardly, but we're confident that such writing achieves little. The attackers are like a pack of yapping dogs. They make a lot of noise, but there's no thinking in the barking. We urge you not to add to the din, even if you're allowed to be anonymous. A more measured response will ultimately hold more power than a rambling rant.

3) Online writing is interactive.

This is true communication with a real audience. With nearly every assignment, teachers try to simulate such authenticity, but with online writing, there's no need to pretend. It's an exciting time to be a writer, to have the capacity to connect with audiences beyond your immediate world.

### Journal Topic

Pretend today is your birthday and that you're feeling reflective about growing up. Furthermore, you want to post your feelings online. Write a paragraph on how *this* birthday is different than previous ones.