

Online styles affect teen writing

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Anybody who's ever watched a teenager with a cell phone or computer knows one thing. They spend a lot of time pressing keys.

But are they actually writing anything?

That depends on who you ask.

The teens, themselves, don't seem to think so, according to a report released today by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The study, *Writing, Technology and Teens*, found that 87 percent of teens communicate through text messaging, instant messages, e-mail and social networking sites.

But a majority of them — 60 percent — don't believe their texting ways actually count as "writing."

"To teenagers, that's not writing. That's a conversation," said Amanda Lenhart, a Pew senior research specialist.

While experts generally agree that writing skills are as important today as ever, they have wildly different views on the value of the time teens spend firing off those quick messages to friends.

Some see it as a sign that young people are interested in the written word and simply need to be encouraged to expand their endeavors into more serious topics.

"I think it's quite exciting to see so much writing going on in any form," said Richard Sterling, chairman of the advisory board of the National Commission on Writing. "It leads people to other parts of the spectrum."

Others say the tech-flavored style — heavy on horrid punctuation and shortcuts such as "LOL," for laugh out loud — encourages bad habits while contributing nothing to improved writing skills.

To think otherwise would be the same as suggesting that 18th Century telegraph operators were improving their own writing skills, said Michael Bugeja, director of Iowa State University's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication.

"I don't even want to hear such nonsense," Bugeja said.