

Emoticons, emails and letter writing

Level 1 • Elementary

1 Pre-reading task

Match these emoticons with their meanings.

};-(I'm wearing glasses
;-)	I'm undecided
8-)	I'm married
0:-)	My hair is blowing in the wind
:-)(-:	I'm only joking!
:~\	The writer just made a sweet or innocent remark

2 Keywords: Antonyms

Skim the text to find the words that mean the opposite of the words below.

1. strengthen / harden (para 2) _____
2. polite / courteous (para 2) _____
3. smile (para 2) _____
4. hate (para 2) _____
5. manually (para 3) _____
6. modern (para 4) _____
7. perfect (para 5) _____
8. receive (para 5) _____
9. calmer (para 7) _____
10. extraordinary (para 9) _____
11. add (para 9) _____
12. rudeness (para 9) _____
13. sender (para 11) _____

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Have emails made us into unemotional machines?

- 1 The emoticon is 25 years old. In 1982, a Pittsburgh professor, Scott Fahlman, saw that his students' emails could not express greetings and humour. So, the smiley was born, and with it a large amount of symbols that try to put normal human emotion into the cold alphabet. A–Z might have been fine for Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Shelley, but for today's global nerd it is not good enough.
- 2 Early telegraphy had its own short forms and people soon realized that abbreviated language could sometimes cause unintentional pain and embarrassment. Therefore, symbols were used to soften remarks that might seem sarcastic or abrupt. The result was not just smileys, but frownies and symbols for confusion, love, anger and surprise.
- 3 There are 16 pages of emoticons in Andrew John's *Txt's A–Z* – my favourite is }:-(which means 'my hair is blowing in the wind'. These days many computers automatically change the frownie into ☹. In other words, ☺ and ☹ have become formal symbols in Internet vocabulary.
- 4 I agree that there is a problem with emails. I have often regretted sending a personal email or text message. The old-fashioned pen gave you time to think, as did the manual typewriter. Writing involved effort. Words and sentences were thought about before being written on paper and sent through the post.
- 5 These days, thoughts quickly change into finished but imperfect sentences. As soon as they are on screen they become real. And 'send' is always clicked too soon. There is no wait for the post to go, no time to correct what you wrote. We can't be certain that an email has arrived, so we have to call and ask: "Did you get my email ... why didn't you reply?" And then we regret sending it off so quickly. We should have read it through one more time.
- 6 How on earth did we manage in the past? Somehow we wrote about love, hurt, remorse, anger and joy without adding emoticons. We used quill, pen, pencil, ballpoint, even a typewriter, and if anything went wrong we had the telephone as backup. So why is email so lacking in feeling that it needs its own additional symbols?
- 7 The authors of a book on 'netiquette' say that, "On email people aren't quite themselves ... they are angrier, less sympathetic, less aware, more easily wounded, even more gossipy." Some have even wrecked their marriages, lost their jobs and ended up in jail.
- 8 Many of us do not know how to handle email. Do we start *Dear Sir* or *Hi gorgeous*, or do we immediately talk about business? Do we cover the screen with capital letters, exclamation marks and emoticons to try to explain what we mean? Do we end with *Yours sincerely*, *Kind regards* or *Bye!*? When you speak such simple words as *please*, *thank you* and *sorry*, they can have a hundred different meanings, but they become toneless when they lie flat on the computer screen.
- 9 The truth is that, unless you're writing routine messages and acknowledgements, email is not as good as the telephone and the letter. Compared to the telephone, email distances us. It not only removes the tone of your voice, it stops people from interrupting or replying. It is a one-way conversation, a monologue. Compared to a letter, email is faster but has none of the humanity or politeness of handwriting.
- 10 Emails are bad at conveying humour or criticism, bad news or sympathy. The form is too cold. Those who wish to communicate these things to another human being should use the telephone.

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- 11 Better still, make space on your desk, take out a sheet of paper, pick up a pen and do something you may not have done for a long time. Write a proper letter. The recipient will be amazed and delighted that you have taken the time. You will write what you meant to say, and I bet you won't use any emoticons.

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3 Comprehension check

Match the halves of the sentences.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Short forms were also used... | ... to put feeling and emotion into an email. |
| 2. If people misunderstand written abbreviations,... | ... before correcting them. |
| 3. We are not so careful... | ... in the early days of telecommunication. |
| 4. We often send emails off... | ... when we write emails. |
| 5. People use emoticons... | ... they might feel hurt, embarrassed or insulted. |
| 6. Emails are faster than letters... | ... can be misunderstood in an email. |
| 7. Even simple words like <i>please</i> and <i>thank you</i> ... | ... for sending routine messages and acknowledgements. |
| 8. The telephone is more personal and therefore better... | ... but contain less humanity. |
| 9. Emails are useful... | ... to receive letters. |
| 10. The majority of people like... | ... when you need to give bad news. |

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4 Email writing

1. Skim the article to find ways to begin and end an email and write them into the table.

openings	closings

2. Can you think of any other ways to begin or end an email? Write them into the table. Compare your answers in small groups.

5 Discussion

Complete these sentences to make them correct for you. Discuss them in your group. Don't forget to ask the others in your group for more information about their answers.

I send about _____ emails a week.
 I write roughly _____ letters a month.
 I receive about _____ emails and _____ letters a week.
 I feel _____ when I receive a letter.
 I think emoticons are _____.
 I prefer to communicate by _____.

6 Webquest

Have a look at these websites for more information on emoticons. Which emoticons do you like best?

Unusual and funny emoticons:
www.angelfire.com/hi/hahakiam/emoticon.html

A-Z of emoticons:
www.sharpened.net/glossary/emoticons.php

Emoticons that you've probably never seen before:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_common_emoticons

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KEY

1 Pre-reading task

- };-(My hair is blowing in the wind
;-) I'm only joking!
8-) I'm wearing glasses
0:-) The writer just made a sweet or innocent remark
:-)(-: I'm married
:-\ I'm undecided

2 Antonyms

1. soften
2. abrupt
3. frown
4. love
5. automatically
6. old-fashioned
7. imperfect
8. send
9. angrier
10. routine
11. remove
12. politeness
13. recipient

3 Comprehension check

1. Short forms were also used in the early days of telecommunication.
2. If people misunderstand written abbreviations, they might feel hurt, embarrassed or insulted.
3. We are not so careful when we write emails.
4. We often send emails off before correcting them.
5. People use emoticons to put feeling and emotion into an email.
6. Emails are faster than letters but contain less humanity.
7. Even simple words like *please* and *thank you* can be misunderstood in an email.
8. The telephone is more personal and therefore better when you need to give bad news.
9. Emails are useful for sending routine messages and acknowledgements.
10. The majority of people like to receive letters.

4 Email writing

openings	closings
Dear Sir	Yours sincerely
Hi gorgeous	Kind regards
	Bye