

## Emoticons, emails and letter writing

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 1 Pre-reading 1

Tick ✓ the boxes that are correct for you and compare your answers with a partner.

- ☐ I often use emoticons in my electronic communication.
- ☐ Emoticons are useful for conveying how the writer feels.
- ☐ Emoticons are useful in chat rooms, when writing personal emails and when sending text messages.
- ☐ People who use emoticons aren't serious.
- ☐ I dislike emoticons.
- ☐ What are emoticons?

#### 2 Pre-reading 2

Match these emoticons, and the expressions from the article, with their meanings.

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

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>up to scratch</i>                             | a. waste no time on unnecessary matters                                     |
| 2. <i>risk unintentional pain and embarrassment</i> | b. need for something to make it all better and easier                      |
| 3. <i>no pause for revision</i>                     | c. good enough / reaches the expectations                                   |
| 4. <i>to crave the soothing balm of...</i>          | d. there is a danger of hurting someone or making yourself look like a fool |
| 5. <i>get straight down to business</i>             | e. no checking or correcting  |

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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, noted that the electronic mail of his students lacked the necessary body language and voice tones to express greetings and humour. The smiley was born, and with it a large lexicon of symbols intended to insert normal human emotion into the frigid alphabet. A–Z might have sufficed for Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Shelley, but for today's global nerd it is not up to scratch.

Early telegraphy had its own short forms and icons. Users realized that abbreviated language risked unintentional pain and embarrassment.

- 2 Hence an apparently sarcastic or abrupt remark might be softened by a simple symbol. The result was not just smileys but frownies and various signs of perplexity, love, anger and surprise.
- 3 There are 16 pages of emoticons in Andrew John's *Txtr's A–Z* – my favourite being }:-( for 'your toupee is blowing in the wind'. An indication of the keyboard's evolution is that many computers automatically convert the frownie into ☹. In other words, ☺ and ☹ have become formal symbols in the Internet lexicon.
- 4 I confess to seeing the problem. I have seldom sent a personal email or text message which I have not afterwards, to some degree, regretted. The old-fashioned pen slowed the transition from spoken word (and intended meaning) to script. It gave time for consideration, as did the manual typewriter. Writing involved effort. A word was pondered before being put to paper, packaged and sent through the post.
- 5 In comparison, the computer keyboard is an invisible piano on which we play instantly and extempore. First thoughts race into fully-formed

words and sentences with no pause for revision, let alone perfection. As soon as they are on screen they acquire validity. Over them hovers the dreaded send button, itching to be pressed – 'send' is always pressed too soon.

- 6 There is no wait for the post to go, no time to correct what is written. Nor is there any certainty that an email has arrived, just the plaintive call: "Did you get my email ... why didn't you reply?" All is then regret. I should have read it through one more time. Hardly surprising then that we crave the soothing balm of the emoticon.
- 7 How on earth did we manage before? Somehow we communicated love, hurt, remorse, anger and joy under the bountiful guidance of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We used quill, pen, pencil, ballpoint, even typewriter, and if anything went wrong we had the telephone as backup. But why is email so lacking in feeling that it requires its own additional alphabet? How much sincerity really is conveyed by ☺?
- 8 The authors of a book on 'netiquette' come straight to the point: "On email people aren't quite themselves ... they are angrier, less sympathetic, less aware, more easily wounded, even more gossipy and duplicitous." Some have even wrecked their marriages, lost their jobs and ended up in jail.
- 9 Many of us do not know how to handle email. Do we start *Dear Sir* or *Hi gorgeous*, or get straight down to business? Do we cover the screen with capitals, exclamation marks and emoticons in a desperate effort to convey attitude? Do we sign off with *Yours sincerely*, *Kind regards* or *Byeeee!*? Even such simple words as *please*, *thank you* and *sorry* have a hundred subtle meanings when voiced but are toneless when lying flat on the screen.
- 10 The truth is that, for other than routine messages and acknowledgements, email has become an inadequate substitute for both the telephone and

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the letter. Compared to the telephone, email is a distancing device. It not only eliminates tone of voice, it prevents interruption or response. It is a one-way conversation, a monologue, with all the rudeness that can imply. Compared to a letter, email has more immediacy but carries none of the humanity, not to mention courtesy, of handwriting.

- 11 Emails ought to carry a health warning at the top: 'This note may unintentionally mislead or upset you; if in doubt reply by phone or consult a counsellor.' Emails are bad at conveying humour or criticism, bad news or sympathy. The form is too cold. Those who wish to communicate

sincerity to another human being should telephone and, if necessary, leave a voice message.

- 12 Better still, clear your desk, take out a crisp sheet of note paper, pick up a pen and do something you may not have done for ages. Write a proper letter, rewriting it if necessary. The recipient will be amazed and delighted that you have taken the time. You will have written what you meant to say, and I bet you won't have used emoticons.

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### 3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

1. The emoticon was invented by...
  - a. ... the poet, Milton.
  - b. ... a university professor.
  - c. ... an American student.
2. What are emoticons supposed to put into emails?
  - a. Pain and embarrassment.
  - b. Greetings and humour.
  - c. Human emotion.
3. The author believes it is better to...
  - a. ... write slowly.
  - b. ... think before you send your email.
  - c. ... use a manual typewriter.
4. According to the article, many of us...
  - a. ... take on too much work these days.
  - b. ... take on different personalities when we write emails.
  - c. ... always make follow up phone calls after sending emails.
5. There are...
  - a. ... strict guidelines on how to begin and end an email.
  - b. ... strict rules about using punctuation and capital letters in emails.
  - c. ... a myriad of ways to begin and end an email.
6. The author thinks that emails are...
  - a. ... not as effective as letters.
  - b. ... an improvement on letter writing.
  - c. ... a better way to get hold of someone than by telephone.

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#### 4 Vocabulary: Collocations

1. Match the words on the left with those on the right to make collocations from the text.

|                 |              |
|-----------------|--------------|
| abrupt          | guidance     |
| Internet        | conversation |
| fully-formed    | meaning      |
| plaintive       | substitute   |
| bountiful       | effort       |
| desperate       | sentence     |
| subtle          | lexicon      |
| inadequate      | remark       |
| one-way         | mislead      |
| unintentionally | call         |

2. With a partner, try to put these collocations into sentences. Look back at the article to check your answers and to see the context in which they are used.

#### 5 Discussion

Discuss the following questions in small groups.

- Do you prefer to write letters or send emails?
- When did you last send an email?
- When did you last write a letter?
- How many emails do you send/receive per week?
- How many letters do you send/receive per week?
- Do you use emoticons when you write emails?
- What do you think when you receive an email containing emoticons?

#### 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](http://www.angelfire.com/hi/hahakiam/emoticon.html)

A-Z of emoticons:

[www.sharpened.net/glossary/emoticons.php](http://www.sharpened.net/glossary/emoticons.php)

Emoticons that you've probably never seen before:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_common\\_emoticons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_common_emoticons)

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#### KEY

#### 2 Pre-reading 2

- };-( Your toupee 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

1. c
2. d
3. e
4. b
5. a

#### 3 Comprehension check

1. b
2. c
3. b
4. b
5. c
6. a

#### 4 Vocabulary: Collocations

- abrupt remark  
Internet lexicon  
fully-formed sentence  
plaintive call  
bountiful guidance  
desperate effort  
subtle meaning  
inadequate substitute  
one-way conversation  
unintentionally mislead