

overinterpret: they infer emotional meaning from minor cues that are more subtle than the older folks ever dreamed of sending. This level of nuance conveyed through choices in punctuation and capitalization is so varied and interesting that it deserves its own chapter, and we'll get to that next.

But in a discussion of generations and cohorts, here's the sharpest line dividing internet writers: Who is the imaginary authority in your head when you choose how to punctuate a text message? Is it the prescriptive norm of an offline authority, like your former English teacher or a dictionary? Or is it the collective wisdom of your online peers, the anticipation of their emotional reaction to your typographical tone of voice? The difference between how people communicate in the internet era boils down to a fundamental question of attitude: Is your informal writing oriented towards the set of norms belonging to the online world or the offline one?

Chapter 4

Typographical Tone of Voice

Does. Not. Compute." "Your call has been forwarded to an automated voice messaging system." "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that." The words themselves are often pronounced right, but a robotic voice is flat: there's no rising or falling in pitch, speeding up or slowing down, getting louder or softer, emphasizing some words more than others, or undercurrents of growling or giggling, to indicate what the robot's thinking or feeling.

We don't want to sound like robots to our internet friends. (Even robots themselves are sounding less stereotypically robotic.) Traditionally, bridging that gap between writing and emotions has been the task of novelists and poets—writing that line that makes a character sympathetic rather than annoying, or providing that flash of insight which perfectly expresses a feeling that's gone unnamed for too long. Artistic writing about feelings isn't easy, but in a way it has lower stakes. If you write bad poetry or stiff characters, you can work to

just wondered if you wanted to chat sometime
this week
maybe tuesday?

This is efficient in a digital medium, where scrolling down is easy and unbounded: not a waste of pixels the way it might be a waste of paper. Linebreaks come for free: they don't take up any more bytes than a period and a space, and they add a lot in readability. Both "new line" and "send message" take a single keystroke, often the same enter key, so the muscle memory is easy. Plus, it helps the conversation flow better if you hit "send" after every utterance rather than waiting and sending a whole essay: the reader can start thinking of a reply sooner. Even in more formal genres online, such as news articles, paragraphs have gotten shorter and are separated by a blank line rather than a space-saving indent as they are on paper.

For people whose linguistic norms are oriented towards the offline world, the most neutral way of separating one utterance from the next is with a dash or a string of dots. After all, you definitely wouldn't want to send each of these phrases as a separate email, let alone as a separate text in the days when we were billed per message. You'd take up four times the space on a postcard if you started a new line every time! Here's the same example in the punctuation style of the offline-oriented:

hey...how's it going.....just wondered if you wanted to
chat sometime this week.....maybe tuesday....?

This, too, has a logic to it: while some kinds of punctuation are traditionally reserved for joining full clauses (periods) and others for

improve your craft or shove it in the bottom of a drawer and decide to become a linguist instead (oh hi). But if you can't socialize well via text, in this era, you might start feeling like an abandoned drawer-manuscript yourself, suffering a dire lack of human companionship.

How is J. Q. Notapoet, our average internet person, supposed to express these all-important nuances using informal internet writing? Formal writing gets help along the way: you can take time to revise it and enlist other people to edit. But informal writing happens in near-real time: not only does this make it hard to go through multiple drafts, but you also need to express your emotions in writing while you're still in the grip of them. Even the most professional of writers can't use all their handy tools and tricks when the other person can see that you've started typing into the chat box. (In other words, J.Q.'s literary cousin, Poetry McWritersBlock, needs the same casual expressive options as everyone else when it comes to everyday use.)

To start, we need to establish a baseline, a normal kind of communication from which any deviation has an emotional impact. In speech, our baseline is the utterance—a burst of language bounded by pauses or interruptions. Sometimes an utterance corresponds to a full sentence; sometimes it doesn't. Most of the time an utterance is a string of words, but sometimes we even cut ourselves off in the middle of one (for example—). Talking exclusively in complete sentences sounds stilted in all but the most formal of prepared speeches. (Sentence fragments! How useful!) We use utterances in casual writing as well. For people whose linguistic norms are oriented to the internet, the most neutral way of indicating an utterance is with a new line or message break. Each text or chat message in a conversation automatically indicates a separate utterance. Here's an example:

hey
how's it going

dependent clauses (commas), ellipses and dashes are deemed acceptable for joining both sorts, even in the most conservative styles. So if you're writing informally and you don't want to bother deciding whether your string of words is a full sentence or merely a clausal fragment, one way to split the difference is to punctuate ambiguously—to use an ellipsis or dash. Sure, classically speaking, the ellipsis indicates omitted text or a trailing off, but that's fine: in speech we sometimes trail our sentences off for casual effect. And sure, classically speaking, the ellipsis gets three dots in the middle of a sentence and four dots at the end and gets a slightly different spacing from simply three periods, but that's the kind of rule that copyeditors care about, not composers of casual emails who have no dedicated ellipsis character on their keyboards. Informal writers who are oriented towards offline norms, like the 1970s Beatles postcards we saw in the previous chapter, sprinkle in dots and dashes to show they're not standing on ceremony by committing to formal, clause-typing punctuation. It's exactly the same motivation younger folks have for separating utterances by linebreaks or message breaks. The same reason, in fact, that Jane Austen sprinkled her original manuscripts with what seems to the modern reader to be an absurdly high number of commas, or that Emily Dickinson's poetry contains a metric ton of dashes, if you can get ahold of an edition where they haven't been edited out. Pause marking is really intuitive, and it always has been.

The problems start when you combine multiple sets of norms. A message like this, say, from an older relative to a teenager, or a boomer boss to a millennial employee, reads quite differently depending on what you think of as neutral.

hey.
 how's it going....
 just wondered if you wanted to chat sometime this
 week.....maybe tuesday....?

For some, it reads as a compromise between the new text messaging linebreak style and the older dot dot dot. But if you're solidly in the linebreak camp, you see those extra dots or even just a single period where a linebreak or message break would have sufficed, and assume that anything that takes more effort than necessary is a potential message. The dots must be indicating something left unsaid: "how's it going [there's something I'm not telling you]." From a peer, something left unsaid might indicate flirtation. But from an older relative, that would be weird. What other kinds of hidden messages are left? The most common assumptions are either passive aggression or sheer confusion.

The passive-aggressive potential of the single period started being reported in thinkpieces in 2013, in a list at *New York* magazine and then later the same year as a full article in the *New Republic*, before popping up in a handful of other publications in subsequent years. The string of dots got a thinkpiece in 2018, though it has been popping up in comment threads since at least 2006, while its cousins, the hyphen and string of commas, have been less extensively reported but have occasioned long comment threads on blogs and internet forums. Despite the fears mongered by headlines, it's not the case that the passive-aggressive meaning has completely killed all other uses of the period. The linguist Tyler Schnoebelen, who's definitely younger than the peak dot-dot-dot generation, did a study of periods in his own 157,305 sent and received text messages. He found that, true, periods were rare in short, informal messages—ones less than seventeen characters or containing lol, u, haha, yup, ok, or gonna. But they were still often found in messages longer than seventy-two characters or containing words like told, feels, feel, felt, feelings, date, sad, seems, and talk. The added weight of the period is a natural way to talk about weighty matters.

So how is a person to tell whether a given period is supposed to

Le so gu thi ml sp chi @n linç edi lan dee enc exp "lol, iron in a fully lolaz E who mes the f is ch thing who

be passive-aggressive, sad, or merely formal? The jumble of meanings associated with the period became clear to me when I started interpreting it as a marker of typographical tone of voice. Just as a question mark can indicate a rising intonation even without a question (Like so?), the period can indicate a falling intonation even when it's not serving to end a statement (Like. So.). When I put on a newscaster voice, I deliver every sentence with falling intonation. Solemnly. Portentously. But in an ordinary conversation, we don't speak in full sentences, and we especially don't round them all off with a distinct fall. ("And now over to: The Weather.") Instead, we speak in utterances, and our intonation is neither rising nor falling: by default, it's flat or trailing off, like a dot dot or an unpunctuated linebreak.

Both the dot-dot-dotters and the linebreakers have instinctively brought us back to an idea from the very beginning of punctuation. The first kind of punctuation marks indicated breaks between utterances, and medieval scribes were the ones who first used them. One important medieval punctuation mark was the *punctus*, a dot which was placed in the location of the modern comma for a short breath, midway through the line for a medium breath, and up around the position of the apostrophe for a long breath. Before that, ancient Greek and Roman writing had all the formatting of a wordsearch puzzle grid, with no punctuation, paragraphs, or even spaces between words, in all caps (carvings) or all lowercase (ink). Like a wordsearch, the reader had to figure out where one word stopped and another began—and also like a wordsearch, they often did this by muttering under their breath. (Mercifully, unlike a wordsearch, the words didn't appear diagonally and there weren't additional distractor letters.)

With the rise of the printing press and dictionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, spelling and punctuation became more complicated and standardized. Scribes had spelled and punctuated idiosyncratically, but printers could—and did—change things

while typesetting to match everything else they were printing. People may never have wholly followed these elaborate guidelines in their personal correspondence—Austen, Dickinson, and the Beatles certainly didn't, and the handwritten notes of famous writers are among the most analyzed. But when a printing press was the easiest means of reaching a large audience, edited and formal punctuation became the main kind that people saw. The internet made our personal punctuation preferences public, and brought with it a different set of priorities: writing needs to be intuitive, easy to create, and practically as fast as thinking or speaking. We drew these requirements together to create a system of typographical tone of voice.

Strong Feeling

WHEN YOU WRITE IN ALL CAPS IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE SHOUTING.

All caps to indicate strong feeling may be the most famous example of typographical tone of voice. But there are several kinds of strong feelings. Linguist Maria Heath asked a cross-section of internet users to rate the difference in emotion between a message in all caps and the same message in standard capitalization. She found that all caps made people judge happy messages as even happier (IT'S MY BIRTHDAY!!! feels happier than "It's my birthday!!!") but didn't make sad messages any sadder ("i miss u" is just as sad as I MISS U). When it came to anger, the results were mixed: sometimes caps increased the anger rating and sometimes it didn't, a result which Heath attributed to the difference between "hot" anger (FIGHT ME) and "cold" anger ("fight me"). A single capped word, on the other hand, is simply EMPHATIC. Looking at examples of all-capped words on Twitter, Heath found that the most common

single ones included NOT, ALL, YOU, and SO, as well as advertising words like WIN and FREE: the same kinds of words that are often emphasized in spoken conversations (or commercials). When we want to emphasize something in speech, we often pronounce it louder, faster, or higher in pitch—or all three at once. All caps is a typographic way of conveying the same set of cues.

Emphatic caps feel like the quintessential example of internet tone of voice, and sure enough, they've been around since the very early days online: linguist Ben Zimmer found people in old Usenet groups explaining that all caps meant yelling as far back as 1984. What's more intriguing is that capitals were available for emphasis long before the internet as well. The linguist John McWhorter dates shouty caps back to pianist and writer Philippa Schuyler in the 1940s, while author L. M. Montgomery has a character use both capitals and italics for emphasis in her fictional diary entries of the 1920s, which another character criticizes as "Early Victorian"—meaning old-fashionedly melodramatic, even back then. Going yet further back, a newspaper in 1856 described a line of dialogue with the phrase "This time he shouted it out in capital letters."

Back in the heyday of personal letter-writing, all caps were just one part of a broader emotional ecosystem for expressing strong feeling, along with italics, underlining, larger letters, red ink, and other decorative formatting options. The emotional use wasn't even the most prominent option: all capitals were widely used to avoid the idiosyncrasy of joined handwriting, such as in comic strips, on forms ("Please fill out your name in block capitals"), or in official documents by lawyers, architects, and engineers. Similarly, several of the postcards that I looked at for the previous chapter were written in block capitals, especially in the address field. Typewriters and early computer terminals made illegible handwriting less of a problem, but they also introduced a new one: they wouldn't let you type

italics and underlines and font sizes (for that matter, many social media sites still don't). This created a vacuum into which the pre-existing but relatively uncommon shouty caps expanded.

This brings us to a puzzle. Early internet guides like the Jargon File, *Wired Style*, and website FAQs mentioned all caps, but not to facilitate shouting, the way that ***bolding asterisks*** or *italicizing underscores* were recommended to compensate for the lack of other formatting that can indicate emphasis, or a smiley face was recommended to facilitate sarcasm and joking around. No, they were generally trying to *discourage* it, meaning that a fair percentage of eighties and nineties computer users were writing their routine correspondence in all caps.* Where did the idea that it was ever okay to type a full message in block capitals come from? After all, people have been handwriting in lowercase for over a thousand years, and even the melodramatic early Victorians didn't capitalize *everything*. Why would anyone suddenly switch to all caps on a computer?

Part of the blame may go to Morse code, that dashing dot-dash system used for sending telegrams. Morse code represents every letter as a combination of dots and dashes, suitable for transmitting as long or short taps along an electrical line: A is dot dash, B is dash dot dot dot, and the rest of the twenty-six letters can all be represented as combinations of up to four dots and/or dashes. But if we wanted to include lowercase letters, we'd need a fifth and a sixth dot or dash, because we'd be representing fifty-two symbols, and telegraph operators would have to memorize twice as many codes. Unsurprisingly, people decided it wasn't worth it—if all caps was good enough for the Romans, it would be good enough for telegrams.

*The nineties version of "oh my god, my boss doesn't realize that periods are passive-aggressive" was "oh my god, my boss doesn't realize that all caps is shouting."

Early computers were very similar. Some used teletype machines—the mechanical descendants of telegraph operators—as a way to transmit or print out information. The classic first command that you learn when you start to code is something like PRINT(“HELLO WORLD”), which causes the computer to display HELLO WORLD onscreen. It doesn’t make the computer print out on paper HELLO WORLD, but at one point it did—back before screens, when we commanded computers by keying words into a teletype machine and received their replies printed out onto rolls of paper. Even once computers had screens, storage space was still expensive, as precious as the brain cells of a telegraph operator, so many of them, such as the Apple II, displayed everything in just one case—all caps. Relicts of this setup are still in place on some commercial computer systems: teletypes are uncommon, but your grocery store receipt, bank statement, or airplane ticket might very well appear from a roll of shiny paper, printed in all caps.

By the time computers did start supporting lowercase characters, we were faced with two competing standards: one group of people assumed that all caps is just how you write on a computer, while another group insisted that it stood for yelling. Ultimately, the emotional meaning won out. The shift in function happened in parallel with a shift in name: according to the millions of books scanned in Google Books, the terms “all caps” and “all uppercase” started rising sharply in the early 1990s. By contrast, in the earlier part of the century, the preferred terms were “block letters” or “block capitals.” People tended to use “all caps” to talk about the loud kind, while block capitals more often referred to the official kind, on signs and on forms. But the addition of all caps for tone of voice didn’t eliminate the official kind of capitals, which remain common on EXIT signs and CAUTION tape and CHAPTER ONE headings: they may be emphatic, but they aren’t interpreted as especially loud.

Rather, our interpretation seems to flip depending on whether we read the text as formal or informal: HOME in a website’s menu bar is a mere graphic design choice, while HOME in a message like “ugh I want to go HOME” is typographical tone of voice.

Another way to do emphasis online is by repeatingggggg letterrrrrss, especially for emotive words like “yayyy” or “nooo.” Just like shouty capitals, the origins of this practice predate the internet by maanyyy years. I searched the Corpus of Historical American English for sequences of at least three of the same letter (to eliminate common English words like “book” and “keep”). The corpus contains texts from 1810 to 2009, but to my surprise, there were hardly any results in the first half of the corpus. The few earlier examples were mostly just typos, like “committee,” or numerals, like “XXXIII.” Here’s the oldest real example I could find, a character pretending to be a candy-seller in a novel published in 1848:

“Confectionary, confectionary,” he cried, bursting into a louder tone of voice, which rang forth clear and deep-toned, as a bell. “Confectionary!” and then he added with grotesque modulations of his voice, “Confecctunarry!”

“By Jove, how this reminds me of the little fellow in London. I’ll go the complete candy-seller. I might as well.”

“Ladies and gentlemen! Here’s your fine candy, lozenges, apples, oranges, cakes and tarts! Heeere’s your chance!”

The “grotesque modulations” of this 1840s faux confectioner were an anomaly, ahead of their time. The author respells the elongated “confectionary” with a “u,” rather than preserve the component letters like a modern writer would do. Even now-commonplace

elongations of sounds like “ahhh,” “oooh,” “hmmm,” “ssshh,” and “brrr” don’t start showing up in this historical corpus until the decade before and after 1900, whereupon they increase steadily for the next hundred years, displacing word-like versions such as “ahem” and “hush.” Rare, one-off elongations of full words like “confectu-narry,” “evvveryone,” and “damnnn” follow in substantial numbers a few decades behind, starting to rise in the 1950s and 60s and really getting popular in the 1990s and 2000s. The period when lengthening became popular lines up with the rise of recorded speech, such as phonographs, records, cassettes, and CDs. It might be coincidence, but it might also be that when we started being able to play and replay recorded speech, we started paying more attention to representing it precisely. At any rate, it’s clear that the goal of repeated letters is to represent speech in writing because the early examples show up in fictional dialogue, especially in play scripts and novels.

Repeating letters is an expressive tool that’s been growing for over a century in informal writing, not just on the internet. And it isn’t haphazard. One study looked at the most commonly lengthened words on Twitter and found that they still tend to be sentiment words. The top twenty most lengthened words are a cornucopia of emotions: nice, ugh, lmao, lmfao, ah, love, crazy, yeah, sheesh, damn, shit, really, oh, yay, wow, good, ow, mad, hey, and please. Several studies have found that this expressive lengthening, as linguist Tyler Schnoebelen named it, is sensitive to social context: people lengthen more in private texts or chat messages than in public posts.

People are also sensitive to linguistic cues. In a study I did with the linguist Jeffrey Lamontagne, we found that while people generally lengthen the rightmost letter in a word, they’ll also lengthen the rightmost letter in a smaller unit of sound. For example, in the word “dream” the “ea” together indicates the vowel sound, so people will lengthen this word as either “dreaaam” or “dreammm.” But in the

word “both,” the two middle letters “ot” are not a unit (the “t” belongs with the “h” instead), so people lengthen it as “bothhhh” or maybe “boooth,” but never “bottth.” But people aren’t completely tied to phonological feasibility. They often write things like “stahpppp” or “omgggg,” but it’s not physically possible to hold ppppp or ggggg for more than an instant. Even more improbably, people sometimes “lengthen” silent letters, writing “dumbbb” or “sameee.” What’s cool about expressive lengthening is that, although it started as a very literal representation of longer sounds, it’s ended up creating a form of emotional expression that now has no possible spoken equivalent, making it more akin to its typographical cousins, all caps and italics.

On the whole, indicators of strong feeling have remained remarkably stable since the early days of the internet, and for much of the past hundred years. Catullus or Chaucer would have been at a loss, but L. M. Montgomery from the 1920s would have had no particular difficulty telling when a modern text message wanted to express excitement or emphasis. Perhaps this stability is because we don’t feel as creative when we’re in the grips of strong emotion, or perhaps it’s because strong feelings are SO CLEARLY IMPORTANT that we had to figure out SOMETHING.

A Kinder, Gentler Internet

Internet researchers who looked at the flamewars, shouty caps, and misunderstood sarcasm of early electronic communication might have been justified in wondering if the internet was doomed to remain a place of shouting or alienation, with nothing softer in between. But the coldness of the early internet was a temporary learning curve rather than a permanent state. A study from 1999 by Susan Brennan and Justina Ohaeri analyzed how groups of people collaboratively

retold a story, either speaking in person or chatting via instant messenger. In the spoken version, everyone talked approximately the same amount, and they all used polite hedges like "kind of" and "thingy" rather than baldly stating their own opinion as if it was the only possible option. In the written version, there were fewer polite hedges overall, which looks at first as if people are simply blunter when typing: bring on the flamewars! But when the researchers drilled down and looked at the individuals, they found something quite different. Both the number of words typed and the politeness level of the typists varied widely, but the people who typed the most words also produced a significantly higher ratio of polite ones.

In other words, people who were more fluent at typing used their increased facility to be more polite, just as polite as they would have been while talking. Of course, bringing people into the lab and paying them a couple bucks to tell a story is hardly the kind of scenario designed to foster rude behavior, but this study gives me hope. Even without being consciously aware of it, people were aiming to be polite just as soon as they had the typing skills to do so. The way we convey our tone of voice changes when we're typing versus speaking, but the internet doesn't have to be a rude or shouty place.

At a larger scale, we've all had a lot of practice at typing since 1999. Twenty years of experience tends to transform even the slowest "hunt and peck" into two-finger idiosyncratic typing that can be quite rapid, especially when your motivation is having a conversation rather than typing up a boring report. My experience here is common for Full Internet People: I did a formal touch-typing program so that I could type up my own essays for school, but I only really got super fast at typing when I was trying to keep up with friends on instant messaging.

As we've become better typists, we've also increased our ability to produce and appreciate the nuances of informal written language

that allow us to be kind, humorous, or polite online. The politeness literature offers a couple main strategies for being nice. One is to make an extra effort, using hedges, honorifics, or simply more words: "Doctor, could I possibly trouble you to open the window?" versus "Open the window!" Another is to indicate solidarity, using endearments or in-group vocabulary to indicate that you're on the same side and don't have to stand on ceremony: "Honey/mate/dude/tuv/bro, d'you wanna open that window?" Both of these show up online. Many internet acronyms make polite hedges accessible even to slower typists, such as "btw" (by the way), "iirc" (if I recall correctly), "imo" (in my opinion), and "afaik" (as far as I know), but writing them as acronyms rather than in full is also in-group vocabulary, saying, in effect, "We're all internet people here. I trust you to get this."

Research on politeness in internet communities finds that many elements of it mirror politeness offline. It's well established that politeness decreases with power—you're more polite to your boss than to your underling. One group of researchers looked at polite words like "thanks" or "nice job" and indirect politeness strategies like "sorry" or "by the way..." in messages exchanged between volunteer editors on Wikipedia and in questions asked on the Q&A website Stack Exchange. Just like offline power relationships, the more powerful Wikipedia administrators and those with a high "karma" rating on Stack Exchange tended to be less polite than regular users. Furthermore, both offline and online politeness is situational: controlling for karma level, the text of questions asked on Stack Exchange was more polite than the text of the answers. Online politeness also has real effects: Wikipedia administrators were more polite before they'd been elected as admins, back when they were simply normal editors—more polite, in fact, than their fellow editors who'd run for adminship and lost.

The exclamation mark is frequently repurposed to indicate

to increase my gravitas. After all, why should I tolerate an inequitable distribution of the typographical emotional labor?

The situation with multiple exclamation marks is less stable. Hyperbolic adjectives lose their force through overuse ("awesome" is no longer the same as "awe-inspiring"), and hyperbolic punctuation seems to do the same. Multiple exclamation marks were considered part of an early internet slang known as leetspeak, which featured numbers and other special characters substituting for similar-looking letters, such as l337 for "leet," or "l 4m l33t h4x0r!" for "I am an elite hacker!" and incorporated common typos such as "teh" for "the" and "pwn" for "own." The common typo for the exclamation mark was the number 1, since English keyboards typically place these two symbols on the same key. The typo !!!!!1! was then parodied by writing out "one" and "eleven" as full words: !!!one!!eleventy!! Leetspeak and multiple exclamation marks were genuine indicators of computer proficiency and excitement, respectively, in the netspeak of the 1980s and 90s, but both gradually became ironic through continued use. A 2005 paper about leetspeak and online gamer slang characterized statements like "OMG, D@T is teh Rox0rz!!!!11oneeleven" (oh my god, that rocks!!!!) as used by "newbs and wannabes." Ouch. But then, after a period of dormancy, multiple exclamation marks re-emerged as a marker of genuine enthusiasm, according to a trend piece from 2018 ("Sounds good!!!!"). History suggests that they won't stay sincere forever.

Another way to be polite is to directly evoke the gesture of delivering words with a cheery smile, lest your recipient think you're forcing them out between clenched teeth. One example we've seen of this in the previous chapter is the way "lol" takes on the polite function of laughter as a social lubricant, rather than its purely humorous function. Smileys can have a similar effect, as we can see in a study by the linguist Erika Darics on emoticons in work communication.

warmth or sincerity, rather than just excitement. After all, to be excited to meet someone or help someone is also to be sincere about it. This change is well under way: a 2006 study by Carol Waseleski found that in emails, exclamation marks were infrequently used to indicate excitement, occurring only 9.5 percent of the time with either strong language, like "These damn programs are out of touch with reality!" or effusive thanks, like "Thank you so much for your comments—they are very, very helpful and the list of resources is wonderful!" In comparison, exclamation marks indicated friendliness 32 percent of the time ("See you there!" "I hope this helps!") and emphasized statements of fact another 29.5 percent of the time ("There's still time to register!").

An article in the satire newspaper *The Onion* comically exaggerates the quasi-obligatory nature of the sincerity exclamation point:

In a diabolical omission of the utmost cruelty, stone-hearted ice witch Leslie Schiller sent her friend a callous thank-you email devoid of even a single exclamation point, sources confirmed Monday. "Hey, I had a great time last night," wrote the cold-blooded crone, invoking the chill of a thousand winters with her sparsely punctuated missive.

To solve this problem, Stone-Hearted Ice Witches might consider installing Emotional Labor, a Gmail add-on that promises to "brighten up the tone of any email"—largely by adding exclamation marks at the end of every sentence. I confess, I have recently been getting a kick out of deliberately replying to emails from people who don't use exclamation marks without using any in return, rather than using one every other sentence, as is my usual practice for professional correspondence. At first, it felt stiff—was I now a cold-blooded crone?—but after a while, I started enjoying how it seemed

Lé sc gu th: mi sp ch @r lin: ed lan de ent exi "lo iror in c full! lolc i wht met the is ci thin whc 1907

[insert witty phrase here]’ to emphasize/categorize something I just said. Dorky? Yes. Absolutely. But all my Twitter friends ‘get’ it and that makes it fun.”

By the mid-2010s, spoken “hashtag” to indicate metacommentary had spread to people who weren’t even online yet, with parents reporting that they were hearing it from their seven- or eight-year-old kids. One linguist parent was delighted by her kid saying “hashtag mom joke,” but another parent was jokingly unimpressed by her own kid’s use of “hashtag”:

My daughter just finished a sentence with ‘hashtag awkward!’

8 years. It’s been a good run. But the orphanage will suit her much better.

At first glance, this kind of repurposing might seem like a purely internet invention, and it is, insofar as people weren’t peppering their speech with code snippets or hashtags before we had any such thing. But English has a long history of verbalizing punctuation: think of “that’s the facts, period” or “these quote-unquote experts.” Or to take two examples from the 1890s, that dangerously modern decade: “He would not flinch one comma of the law” and “There was a very big question mark in [her] voice.” Spoken “hashtag” is just the latest in a long list of creative strategies to say without saying, add context, control the flow of information, or indicate that something is of more or less importance. In speech we also have options like the stage whisper, silly voices, putting on an accent, and speaking from behind your hand or with a different posture. Who hasn’t reproduced a line from a song or movie while imitating its original intonation? Inconceivable!

Not all creative typography crosses over into the mouths of babes.

Some simply serves to reinforce the social ties of a particular community. In spoken Japanese, for example, people associate lengthening at the end of a word or phrase with sounding cute or playful. But in written Japanese, each symbol stands for a syllable rather than an individual sound the way a letter does. And people generally aren’t trying to indicate that the whole syllable is being repeated. So while English writers lengthen by repeating a letter, writers of Japanese add a different symbol entirely: the wave dash ~ (or the slightly narrower tilde ~, depending on what the keyboard supports). The Japanese word for “yes” is written はい and pronounced “hai.” If you want to write the equivalent of “yesss” or “hiiii” using tilde lengthening, you’d write “yes~~,” “hai~~,” or “はい~~~~.” The word-final tilde to indicate lengthening became popular throughout Southeast Asia, in Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and even nearby languages written with Latin script, like Tagalog and Singlish. But since English already had a way of indicating length, the lengthening tilde became associated in English with bilingualism in one of these languages, being a fan of Japanese cultural exports like anime or manga, or even just the secondary association with cute sparkles and ignoring length altogether.

Another repurposed technical tool for adding playful commentary is the exclamation:compound used to refer to different versions of a particular person, such as past!me or CAPSLOCK!Harry.* Exclamation:compounds take us into a fascinating corner of technological history. Back before we were all on one thoroughly interwoven internet, in order to send someone an email you had to specify exactly which path of connected computers it should take. Alex in the math department at Princeton might be princeton!math!alex—so

*Referring to Harry Potter in the fifth book, where he spends a lot of time yelling in capslock.

L: sc gl th: mi sp ch @r lin: ed lan de: enc: ex: "lo iror in c full: lolc / wht met the is cl thin whc 1907

your computer sends it to the big Princeton server, which passes it to the "math" computer, which contains an "Alex" account. This system was easily extended to personal descriptions. Just as you could keep track of your various friends named Alex depending on their interests (Alex the mathematician versus Alex the artist), you could also distinguish them based on their computer paths (art:alex versus math:alex).*

Technically speaking, this system was rather clumsy. Who wants to memorize paths of networked computers just to send a message? By the time most people started going online, internet architecture had gotten more densely webbed and invisible to its users, so all you needed to do was specify a username at a domain, and hidden technology would route it through an appropriate path. But fans of the 1990s hit TV show *The X-Files* had started chatting with each other on Usenet discussion boards during the heyday of bang:path email addresses, so they also began referring to different versions of the main characters as Action!Mulder and Action!Scully, to differentiate them from the scenes where the characters were just standing around talking. *The X-Files* eventually went off the air, fan communities moved from Usenet to LiveJournal to Tumblr, and email addresses gained their user@domain.com format, but fans persisted in the social convention of referring to versions of people and characters as angst!Draco or future!me, even though many fans of Harry Potter and more recent stories had never even seen a bang:path email address.

Some expressive typography emerged into the mainstream, like spoken hashtag and sparkly punctuation. Other kinds remained a marker of a particular community, like joke code, lengthening tildes,

*This system isn't so dissimilar from that which gave us many common sur-names, such as Alex (the) Smith or Alex (who lives by the) Wood.

exclamation:compounds, and others not catalogued here or even invented yet. But regardless, the repurposing of technical tools as social in-jokes goes a long way towards making the internet feel not chilly and impersonal, not shouty, not even just politely cheerful, but like a place where we can belong.

Meaning in Absence

Sarcasm, online as well as off, involves saying the opposite of what you mean in a way that still conveys your true opinion: "Well, isn't that just terrific!" in response to bad news, or "Thanks, Sherlock!" in response to a very obvious deduction. In writing, it's harder to make your true intention shine through without the full range of eloquent pause, verbal inflection, arched eyebrow, and wry lip we can employ in person. Irony is subtle and contextual, the ultimate in-joke.

People noticed this problem long before the internet, and many had attempted to remedy it, a history chronicled in the book *Shady Characters* by Keith Houston. There was Henry Denham, a British printer who used a mirrored question mark (ꞥ) to distinguish rhetorical questions in 1575, and John Wilkins, a British natural philosopher, who proposed an inverted exclamation mark (¡) to indicate irony in 1668. After them, there were three centuries of French writers proposing variously shaped "*points d'ironie*"—Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted the need for one in 1781, Alcanter de Brahm in 1899 proposed another version of ꞥ, and Hervé Bazin in 1966 proposed the Greek letter ψ with a dot below. In more recent years, a backwards-slanting italics known as "ironics" or "sartalics" was attributed to several American newspaper columnists in the latter half of the twentieth century, the upside-down exclamation mark (¡) was again proposed in 2004, this time by a former writer for *The Onion*,

and in 2010, a swirl with a dot in the middle was patented under the name SarcMark and sold for noncommercial use at the bargain (\$) price of \$1.99.

All to no avail.

The problem with adopting new irony punctuation is that if the people reading you don't understand it, you're no better off than without it. Pointing out after the fact that you're using a new sarcasm punctuation mark is about as much fun as explaining the joke. It's even worse if the people receiving your sarcastic messages have to pay two bucks and install a new font just so they can have your joke explained.

Mock </sarcasm> code or #sarcasm hashtags require no explanation, fee, or font installation, and have indeed caught on to some extent, but both can be a trifle obvious. After all, the point of sarcasm is the double meaning, the innuendo, the sous-entendu. If we wanted to make all our messages completely lucid, we already have a very effective tool for that, and it's called Not Being Sarcastic. Rather than a single bright flag to festoon all our ironic sentences, we needed a range of ways to gently hint that there was more meaning than one might assume at first glance.

Fortunately, the range of expressive punctuation had expanded enough to do just that. Some ironic indicators that play around with typographical signals of authority predated the internet, like "scare quotes" and Satirical Brand Names and Legalese™. Ironic Capitals may be Very Old Indeed, such as this 1926 quote from *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

"Thank you, Pooh," answered Eeyore. "You're a real friend," said he. "Not like Some," he said.

The ironic punctuation mark that the social internet can truly claim as its own is the ~sarcasm tilde. It derives, in broad terms, from the

enthusiastic ~*sparkles*~ that had decorated status updates on AOL and MSN Messenger or profile pages on MySpace or Xanga. Excavating how it became ironic is a walk through the history of this social corner. We begin on Urban Dictionary, that user-contributed slang website which is probably where you end up when you finally admit defeat and google some new acronym you can't quite figure out.

But to use Urban Dictionary for data, we must first acknowledge its limitations. Entries on Urban Dictionary do pass through the bar of volunteer editor checks, keeping out spam and complete nonsense, but there's no "citation needed" on Urban Dictionary the way there is on Wikipedia, despite both being user-edited projects. This openness is both Urban Dictionary's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. A word can be added years before it hits the kind of mainstream sources required by a conventional dictionary, when it might be popular only with a single friend group. But other words are added that never gain popularity or were jokes from the beginning. This means we can't use Urban Dictionary to prove that a term is genuinely being used: just look up practically any first name and you'll get the same sorts of entries, either highly flattering or highly insulting, all presumably targeted at specific, unknown people whose friends apparently wanted to tell them, "Look, it's in the dictionary that you're like that!"

Looking up a word that we've already seen, as many of us do from time to time, avoids this problem because we can weigh the definitions against the context we already have. But here, too, there's an important caveat to make: many definitions are overtly racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive. It's not just people pranking their friends: the entries for names of celebrities that are black, female, or both show levels of vitriol that would put a YouTube comments section to shame. The same goes for slang that is associated with young women or African Americans: for example, in the entries for "bae,"

although several definitions accurately note its connections to “babe” and “before anyone else,” many also seem to take a perverse delight in mentioning that *bæ* is the Danish word for “poop.” There seems to be a correlation between how genuinely popular a word is and how much Urban Dictionary’s definition writers despise it and the people who use it.

For the sarcasm tilde, I’m interested in an Urban Dictionary strategy that goes a level deeper still. In this case, we already know both the item and its meaning, and all we’re looking for is the automatically generated, unfakable datestamp for when the two first became associated. As long as we also bear in mind that the site was founded in 1999 and took a few years to accumulate a base level of entries, Urban Dictionary can offer a unique perspective on tracking the history of slang that entered English after the early 2000s, several years before social media sites became popular. What’s key here is that Urban Dictionary includes entries for a wide range of special characters, making it especially useful for tracking down rising meanings of symbols that had long been in use for other purposes.

As a proof of concept, let’s compare the Urban Dictionary timelines for two relatively known quantities: passive-aggressive uses of “lol” and the period symbol. In 2003, a user defined the symbol as “Ends a fucking sentence.” But in 2009, another user defined it as “the new cool way to emphasize (usually moody-ass) sarcasm.” We can see how disdain maps onto popularity: in 2003, the disdain is for the reader, for looking up a punctuation mark with no slang meaning, while in 2009, the disdain has shifted to the user of the slang. Once present, the sarcasm meaning showed up again in definitions from other users, suggesting that the trend was gaining hold. It took a solid couple years before *New York* magazine ran a thinkpiece about the rising passive-aggressive potential of the period in 2013.

In contrast, “lol,” which we know from the previous chapter arose in the 1980s and was dubiously sincere by 2001, contains no such shift: from its earliest entries, users note that it officially stands for “laughing out loud” but “nobody laughs out loud when they say it.”

For the tilde ~ symbol, there were several Urban Dictionary entries for it before 2008, such as “used at the end of words to make them longer” in 2007, but none of them mention sarcasm. The first time an Urban Dictionary entry mentioned sarcasm was in 2008 (giving the example “OMG that’s soo cool~”), followed by two more entries mentioning sarcasm in 2009. There’s our timeline. But for meaning, what’s interesting about the evolution of the ~sarcasm tilde~ was that you could figure it out without Urban Dictionary at all.

In fact, we have evidence that several people did. Two LiveJournal threads from 2010 and 2012 discussed this new use of the tilde, in contexts like “Well, isn’t that ~special” or “Every character on that show has a ~tragic past~.” Both threads were started by people asking about the meaning of this new use of the tilde that they’d been seeing, and yet both askers correctly deciphered its meaning in their original questions. One said, “It seems to designate some sort of irony or disagreement with what is said,” and the other, “what I am guessing is the equivalent of scare quotes.” In the discussion threads that followed, a few people still primarily recognized the tilde as “approximately” (as in ~20) or as the cheerful decorative ~*~sparkles~*~ or Japanese cute lengthening~~~ of previous years, but many also recognized them as sarcastic. How is it that sparkle sarcasm achieved such an edge over six centuries of philosophical proposals? And why did it succeed so quickly where *‡* and *‡* and fellow symbols had all failed?

The trick lies not just in ease of typing, but in layers of meaning. Sparkle sarcasm derives from sparkle enthusiasm, and it does so by

the following semiconscious calculation: "You might have used this word seriously here, but I know you wouldn't use it excitedly. And yet you've added sparkles anyway, and they're definitely not a serious thing. So if you're not sincere, and you're not truly excited, then it must be ironic excitement." Like "lol," sparkles are an anti-seriousness marker, leaving space for the precise nature of the anti-seriousness to be determined by context. The previous meaning and the calculation step are what made sparkle sarcasm, along with "scare quotes" and Ironic Capitals, survive where official proposals failed—they're ambiguous and context-dependent, like irony itself.

Why the tilde in particular? After all, asterisks are also a crucial part of the ~*~sparkle ecosystem~*~. But the solitary asterisk had long been committed to other meanings, like *bold* and *narrates own actions in the third person*—neither of which are relevant on the irony-to-enthusiasm scale. More intriguingly, the tilde might have been helped by its visual resemblance to a particular type of sarcastic inflection. The posters on the 2010 LiveJournal thread consistently describe it as "a sarcastic sing-songy voice." I share this intuition, but "sing-song" is not exactly the terminology of proper linguistics. So I tried to pin it down more specifically, and nearly fell off my chair in excitement when it dawned on me: when you say a word like "sooooo" with a sing-song sarcastic inflection, the pitch of your voice literally rises, then falls, then rises slightly again. In other words, your intonation makes the shape of a tilde.

The full-fledged state of sparkle sarcasm was described by a *BuzzFeed* reporter in 2015 as "somewhere between sarcasm and a sort of mild and self-deprecatory embarrassment over the usage of a word or phrase." In theory, sparkle sarcasm has as many possible typographical variations as sparkle enthusiasm. But in practice, it tends to veer more towards the subdued side: a pair of ~tildes~, or ~*~sparkle emoji~*~ or ~*asterisk plus tilde*~*, but

often simply an initial ~tilde. There may not be quite as much space for ~*~true sparkle exuberance*~* in deadpan snark.

A still more deadpan kind of irony is created in the lack of punctuation and capitalization altogether, what I call minimalist typography. How do you search for this sort of thing, the inverse of all caps and multiple exclamation marks? All caps or block capitals is lucky to have a few established names, and has had decades to attract interest from internet advice manuals. For minimalist typography, this is not yet the case. There's no entry for it in *Urban Dictionary* or the *Jargon File*, and it's the only one I've needed to propose a name for. So instead, I turned to two sources: people complaining and people analyzing. Let's start with the complaints, to establish a timeline.

As we saw above, computers based on teletype machines in the 1960s and 70s supported only uppercase letters. But a little later, in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the popular computer operating system Unix was case-sensitive—very sensitive. If your username was "foobar," and you tried to log in as "FooBar," then you might as well be a different person. If the way to open up the internet browser was to type "netscape" and you told the computer "Netscape," then you might as well have typed in "firefox" or "chrome" (neither of which existed yet). All of these case-sensitive Unix usernames and commands were in lowercase, so Unix users got in the habit of keeping such technical vocabulary in lowercase, even at the beginning of a sentence. After all, if you type "foobar" you should've used "netscape" even in social messages, then the newbie reading your post is far less likely to get confused and type the wrong capitalization into the terminal.

At the same time as computer users influenced by teletype machines and Apple IIs continued typing in all caps for a while after other users had decided that caps meant shouting, Unix hackers became known for the inverse—the type of people who would type in all lowercase all the time. (As well as the type who would explain

with great earnestness that a hacker is just a person who likes figuring things out about computers, and the Hollywood cybervillains are actually *crackers*.) For the general, non-Unix-coding population, minimalist typography also gradually became something associated with technology: email addresses and urls were generally all lowercase, and usernames often followed this trend as well.

But in the opinions of a whole decade of people posting on internet forums, the greatest cybervillains may well have been the people committing crimes against standard capitalization. From "Netiquette" guides in the 1990s to forum posts into the mid-2000s, a hot topic for griping was other internet users who typed in all lowercase. Both those who liked it and those who didn't spoke about it in terms of ease of use: "lazy" or "constantly hitting shift puts a lot of strain on the ol' hands." The complaints themselves don't matter: disdain for a bit of language is no more relevant to linguistics than a personal distaste for broccoli is relevant to food science. Rather, like how a food historian might use a historical figure's diatribe against broccoli to establish that broccoli was indeed being eaten in a particular place at a particular time, the linguistic forms that people complain about can tell us which linguistic forms were becoming popular when. No one bothers with tirades against vegetables they've never heard of or words they've never encountered.

What's curious here is that after 2006, there was a marked decrease in people complaining about when people don't capitalize. Okay, we might think, maybe they just got used to lowercasing, the way that people have chilled out about emoticons or internet acronyms since they first became popular. But then, a few years later, a new under-capitalizing supervillain began ravaging cyberspace. This time, the people complaining weren't forum posters. They were publications that cater to young people, like *Teen Vogue*, *BuzzFeed*, and the *Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper. And the crime as-

sociated with lowercasing wasn't laziness but passive aggression. Trend pieces about passive-aggressive texting started around 2013 and really got going in 2015 and 2016. These pieces pointed out that this same minimalist typography was liable to make your friends wonder why you're mad at them. Typing in lowercase was no longer an issue of laziness or efficiency: it became a way of indicating attitude.

So what happened between 2006 and 2013? The rise of smartphones—phones with large touchscreens, internet access, and on-screen keyboards that were much better at predictive text than the previous generation of non-touchscreen, many-buttoned cellphones—neatly correlates with the exact time span we're interested in. The first iPhone came out in 2007, and American smartphone sales first surpassed sales of non-smart cellphones in 2011, with the same shift happening globally in 2013.

A predictive keyboard automatically adds capitals at the beginning of messages and after a period, and it only predicts words in its dictionary. Suddenly, instead of lowercasing taking less effort, it often took more. I did an informal poll on Twitter in 2016, asking, "When you write on your phone, do you ever undo the autocapitalization for the sake of aesthetic?" and the results were very clear: of the five hundred-plus people who replied, over half said that they do so all the time, with another third saying "sometimes" and only 14 percent saying "never." Several people, unprompted, even commented that they'd gone into their phone settings and turned off autocapitalization permanently—a far cry from the "lazy" stereotype of the pre-2006 lowercaser. In the words of Dolly Parton, "It costs a lot of money to look this cheap." Of course, the people who reply to a random Twitter poll one day are probably not a balanced sample of internet residents, so we should take those percentages with a grain of salt. But it's clear a substantial number of people choose minimalist

typography deliberately, to create a specific effect. If people are going to all this effort, what is it that they're signaling?

The social significance of minimalist typography is too broad a question for a corpus or a dictionary. It operates on a sentence level or a whole utterance level, so you can't just search for words that aren't capitalized: you'll filter through scores of entirely unremarkable uncapitalized and unpunctuated words from the middles of formal sentences. Moreover, we know that there was an earlier stage where people didn't bother with capitals and punctuation for reasons of economy, not to convey a particular tone of voice. Some internet users may still be lowercasing for this earlier reason. To answer this question, what we need is a view into the minds of the people who were typing this way.

Based on the locations of these early trend pieces, it seems that minimalist typography is a younger-people thing. But there's a catch—when it comes to analyzing youth language: your intuitions about it are inversely proportional to your ability to write about it. I can assert things with confidence about the slang of the 1990s and 2000s, but as the 2010s continue, I'm already feeling myself slipping out of touch, even as my platform to write about it grows larger. The point at which you're a native speaker with the sharpest intuitions, the most deeply embedded into your particular youth subculture, with friends your age who think it would be a lark to let you analyze their posts or texts, is also the point when you're likely to be writing your very first research paper or conference presentation, if you're lucky. You know what's cool, but no one knows who you are or why they should be reading you.

Some linguists work on youth language by involving their undergraduate students; others by partnering with local schools. I do it via the internet. I started a blog called *All Things Linguistic* when I was still in grad school, and I made it on Tumblr because I was familiar

with the platform from previous meme blogs. Initially, the blog was a way of not getting too high up the ivory tower. I started posting tips for students I was teaching, links to articles I was reading, and fun linguistic things that I came across in my everyday life. As I realized that I enjoyed this public-facing writing more than the academic kind, and began writing about linguistics for a general audience full-time, the blog and social media became a line back into academia rather than just my window out of it. It became the way that I found out about conferences to attend and papers to read.

The blog is also a crucial way that I bridge some of the gaps in internet linguistics citations. I started to keep a file of posts under a tag I named "language on the interwebz" in the very first week of the blog, long before I realized that I'd be writing this book or how important it would become to my research. As of this writing, it contains nearly three hundred posts, my third-largest tag after general linguistics and "linguist humour" (tagged with Canadian -our, thank you!). Some of the posts are my own open questions, some of them are links to academic or popular articles, some of them are reblogs of other internet users reflecting on their language use. Sometimes, browsing Tumblr leads me to come across junior scholars sharing their research; periodically, I post a call for people to send me their class papers and honors theses and conference handouts about internet linguistics; increasingly, people know me by reputation and come right up to tell me about relevant projects at conferences or in my inbox. Some of these papers have also informed other sections of this book; others I didn't end up citing at all, but I've never met one that didn't give me fresh perspective into which communities the authors as speakers find interesting enough to investigate, which examples they pick as representative of the whole, or how to approach data collection in new communities. In this way, I'm building on a tradition in internet linguistics. David Crystal, in his 2011 book

Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide, includes a call to action, saying, “The one thing Internet language needs, more than anything else, is good descriptions.” When I see this quote cited as motivation in many student papers, it seems to me that the next step is surely to fold those papers back into the literature. In the internet era, an observation need not appear even in an academic journal to be citable.

For minimalist typography, there are two linguistics master’s theses that are particularly relevant, a 2015 thesis by Harley Grant and a 2016 thesis by Molly Ruhl, both about Tumblr. Tumblr is understudied compared to Twitter (or rather, Twitter is overstudied compared to every other social network) because Twitter makes it very easy for researchers to collect a large, random assortment of tweets and search through them by date posted. Tumblr is easier to study than Facebook or Snapchat, because at least the posts are generally public, but it doesn’t have any means of pulling out a random sample. You either need to be an active participant-observer and study whatever happens to be posted or shared by the people you follow, or you need to pick a particular subcommunity to analyze. Both of these methods mean that you need to already have a sense of which communities might be linguistically interesting.

Tumblr is of particular interest for the period when minimalist punctuation was developing, in the years between 2006 and 2013, because its user base was young (nearly half were between ages sixteen and twenty-four in 2013), oriented towards the internet as a source of community (in comparison to Instagram and Snapchat, popular for connecting with existing friendship networks), and self-reflexive about their own language use. In her thesis, Grant cites several metacommentary posts about the linguistic style of Tumblr from 2012, which are also self-referential examples of typographical minimalism. The most popular such post, with over half a million likes and reblogs, begins as follows:

when did tumblr collectively decide not to use
punctuation like when did this happen why is
this a thing

it just looks so smooth I mean look at
this sentence flow like a jungle river

The popularity of this and similar posts both confirms that the posters were describing a phenomenon widely recognized by fellow users and helped acculturate new users into the norms of the platform, such as signaling that a question is rhetorical or ironic by asking it without a question mark. Ruhl cites another self-referential, widely shared, multiauthored post, this time from 2016. At first glance, it seems like it’s primarily an example of different kinds of emphasis, but those examples are interspersed in a neutral, minimalist carrier sentence:

i think it's really Cool how there are so many ways
to express emphasis™ on tumblr and they're all
c o m p l e t e l y different it's #wild

#E m p h a s i s™

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE

The hashtagged, initial-capped, space-stretched, trademarked #E m p h a s i s™ is a break in the system: it’s got too many things going on at once to be interpretable as more than a joke. But the reply, all-capped WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, is simultaneously emphatic and minimalist: it signals strong feeling from the all caps and a rhetorical question from the question syntax without a question mark.

Tumblr users were particularly self-reflexive about minimalist typography, but it wasn’t just a Tumblr thing: it also started flourishing

on Twitter around the same period. The minimalism brings in a poetic effect in this surreal tweet by absurdist comedian Jonny Sun in 2014 (who we saw in Chapter 2 being hospitable with typos).

"i just want to go home" said the astronaut.

"so come home" said ground control.

" s o c o m e h o m e " said the voice from the stars.

If sparkle punctuation is overt artistic ornamentation, then minimalist punctuation is an open canvas, inviting you to fill in the gaps. In less than 140 characters, this tweet tells a story about the conflict between longing for the familiar and the unknown, about our dual identities as earthlings and as stardust. Sun's tweet also showcases an example of using the expanded Unicode character set to convey tone of voice, in this case using fullwidth characters to make the letters appear wider and with more space around them, as if they're echoing from between the stars. This eerie, melodic, compelling narrative has inspired other Twitter users to create more than fifty original paintings and drawings.

I asked Jonny Sun when he started using this distinctive style, and he said 2012—the same year that many people were noticing it on Tumblr—but no, he'd never been a Tumblr user. Sun cited instead a soft/weird aesthetic that people were using on Twitter at the time, as well as a callback to the 1990s tendency to lowercase everything on instant messaging. Like how sparkle sarcasm can be derived from sparkle enthusiasm by a calculation, the aesthetic and ironic effects of minimalist typography are derived from knowledge of its earlier connotations (laziness, antiauthoritarianism) and the explicit choice to embrace them in an age of autocapitalization. Glitchy, pixelated, and badly photoshopped internet art came back into popularity in

an age of high-definition cameras and smooth Instagram filters, and so did the written equivalent: stylized verbal incoherence mirroring emotional incoherence.

In my quest to seek out internet linguistic papers on minimalist typography, I inadvertently produced a useful example myself. One of the places where I asked about student papers was in a Facebook linguistics meme group in 2018, since I'd noticed that the linguistics meme energy had been shifting from Tumblr to Facebook groups (more about memes in Chapter 7). Someone commented that they'd been about to send me something that I'd actually written myself before they put two and two together and realized we were the same person. I replied, without thinking too much about it, "my Brand is Strong"—a few people acknowledged the humor, and that was that.

Later, I got to thinking about it. I realized that I'd replied from my phone, but I'd had to go to extra effort in order to do so. If I hadn't been able to override my phone's default formatting—if I'd had to type "My brand is strong." rather than "my Brand is Strong"—my irony could have been read as sincere arrogance. I can't see that phrase with default capitalization and not want to wipe that smarmy grin off someone's face: there's no way I'm going to let it issue from my own. Of course, I could have typed something else that was sincere and non-smarmy using formal typography. But the irony gains me something here: with ironic capitals on the "brand" part, I align myself with internet people, all facing the same weird pressures of social media on our self-presentation. With minimalist lowercase at the beginning, I make myself approachable: like a self-deprecating joke at the beginning of a public speech, I remove myself from the position of being able to lecture others about their writing style by preemptively adopting features that someone else might lecture me for. At one level, I acknowledge that it's true, the

other person has heard of me, but at the same time, I defuse the awkwardness of that moment by signaling that I don't take myself too seriously: it's okay, I've got an ordinary internet user's ironic ambivalence towards the idea of a personal brand.

Irony, paradoxically, creates space for sincerity. If you and I can have the same web of complex attitudes towards one thing, then maybe we can also share more straightforward attitudes towards others. In this thread, irony did just that: the original poster replied again sincerely, thanking me for taking young people's slang seriously. At first glance, it might seem like I hadn't done that at all: 'Wasn't the whole point of my reply that it was ironic? But at a deeper level, what I was taking seriously was aligning myself with the internet fluent, demonstrating such fluency myself, and signaling that I understood how vital it is to be able to convey a typographical tone of voice.

In that moment, this thread was the fulfillment of a dream belonging to centuries of writers, from Rousseau to *The Onion*: a successful communication of irony in writing between two complete strangers. That commenter and I are not alone: people now communicate in this ironic dance every minute of every day. We succeeded, in fact, precisely because we're not alone, because we're not solitary intellectuals writing up abstract proposals for ironic punctuation, but social people trying our damndest, paying attention to how our messages will be read, extending the grace of assuming that the other is also choosing their typography with intent. We succeeded because our linguistic norms were both oriented towards the social internet rather than the prescriptive red pen.

Irony is a linguistic trust fall. When I write or speak with a double meaning, I fall backwards, hoping that you'll be there to catch me. The risks are high: misaimed irony can gravely injure the conversation. But the rewards are high, too: the sublime joy of feeling purely

understood, the comfort of knowing someone's on your side. No wonder people through the ages kept trying so hard to write it.

If polite typography, as we saw earlier, is about making extra effort, using initial capitals and friendly exclamation marks to signal cheerful distance or genuine enthusiasm, then ironic typography is the opposite on both counts: it introduces a note of dissonance that makes the reader look harder to find the double meaning. Any variation from an expected baseline will do, whether that's lowercasing, sparkle sarcasm, asking a rhetorical question by omitting the question mark, or ironically using outdated slang (one much-reblogged post on Tumblr noted that saying something is "great" indicates that it's genuinely good, whereas something that's described as "gr8" is a guilty pleasure or appreciated sarcastically). But crucially, irony requires this baseline in the first place. It required us to develop a set of typographical resources for indicating straightforward types of voices, like shouting and enthusiasm, before we could creatively subvert them.

It's easy to analyze different types of computer-mediated communication in terms of platform, splitting up the short texts from the long blog posts. Less often do we consider the importance of time, the fact that CU L8R and #E m p h a s i s™ belong to very different eras of internetspeak. Minimalist typography is a key example of a time-based internet style: its beginnings are recorded across Tumblr and Twitter and texting within the same span of around 2012–2013. In comparison, a study conducted around a decade earlier by psychologist Jeffrey Hancock asked undergraduate students to talk about scenarios designed to induce irony, like fashion fails, in either written, computer-mediated communication or spoken, face-to-face communication. Hancock found, to his surprise, that people were just as likely to use irony in both circumstances, even though, he noted, there weren't very many typographical tools

to use in conveying it—the only one he found to report was the dot dot dot. I'd love to see this study replicated for the era of ironic typography, but it's useful as a reminder that internet language, like every other linguistic style, changes across time. Future eras may create ways of expressing meanings that are still more exquisite, making our current system of irony one day seem as blunt as a simple dot dot dot.

Looking back at the proposals for backwards question marks and upside-down exclamation marks as irony punctuation, we can see that many of them were halfway there in trying to trade on double meanings. Perhaps their problem wasn't just in trying to impose a novel symbol that would need to be explained, it was also in dreaming too small: a single punctuation mark is not enough to convey the full range of possible irony. Ironic typography is complicated because irony itself is complicated: its linguistic signals aren't as straightforward as a LOUD voice or a rising? pitch. Sometimes, the irony literature tells us, a double meaning is purely derived from context, like saying, "What a nice sunny day!" when it's pouring rain outside. Other times, irony is signaled by overstatement: "thank you very much" is more likely to be ironic than simple "thanks." But in many circumstances, irony is signaled by a constellation of features from the voice and face: smiling, laughing, raising an eyebrow, talking more slowly and intensely—the kind that ironic typography can help us with. Even in face-to-face conversations, for all their generations of practice, irony isn't always successfully transmitted: an ironist still relies on feedback like a smile, a laugh, or the continuation of the irony in order to make sure that the double meaning has truly been conveyed.

Ironic typography merely gives written irony a fighting chance: in any medium, irony requires trust. Not signaling all one's emotions with overt punctuation can be a sign of faith that someone won't

take things the wrong way, because we're already friends or we're part of the same speech community—or conversely, a way of repelling outsiders, of saying, "I don't care if you take this the wrong way." It's like how a pet name is both a sign of intimacy and a way of being rude when the presumed intimacy isn't there. It may be a sign of Stone-Hearted Ice Witchery to not punctuate a polite social email with exclamation marks, but with a truly close friend, I don't need to send a polite social follow-up email in the first place.

But even as this system of typographical tone of voice is developing so beautifully, it's also under threat. When asking about the future of technological tools, like speech to text or predictive smart replies, we need to ask not just how they can be used, but how they can be subverted; not just how designers can help users communicate their intentions, but how users can help them communicate more than the designers intended. It's all very well to be sincere when asking a voice assistant for the day's weather, but for technology that aims to help us write messages to other people, the next great challenge is not just the words we say but how we say them. It was the subversion of autocapitalization, after all, that paved the way for ironic minimalism, and the subversion of traditional handwritten means of calling attention that paved the way for #E m p h a s i s™. For typographical tone of voice, training on formal datasets from books and newspapers is not going to be enough. This kind of subtlety must be part of the future of any system that aims to facilitate writing, and it's not yet clear how to do so effectively: IBM experimented with adding Urban Dictionary data to its artificial intelligence system Watson, only to scrub it all out again when the computer started swearing at them.

It's important, in the meantime, not to overstate what's changed. Many features of internet tone of voice have been around for over three decades, if we take those 1984 Usenet posts as a starting point,

and yet if E. E. Cummings or L. M. Montgomery were to pick up a modern book or read a modern newspaper, they'd see edited prose that looks quite familiar to their 1920s eyes. In formal writing, periods are still emotionally neutral,* questions and question marks still march hand in hand, uppercase still demarcates sentence beginnings and proper names, and one must still rely on clever phrasing to communicate sarcasm. (Alas ☹)

It's not that writing has completely changed, it's that writing has forked, into formal and informal versions. But this forking didn't coincide with the invention of the internet, or even of the computer. All caps, expressive lengtheningg, ~irony punctuation~, minimalist punctuation, and capitalization paired with linebreaks all have direct ancestors in the early twentieth century, not the twenty-first. Think of the minimalist punctuation and capitalization of E. E. Cummings or the stream of consciousness used by James Joyce in the last chapter of *Ulysses*, which is 4,391 words long and punctuated only by two periods. The principle of the stream-of-consciousness writing style was that it represented the flow of thoughts in one's head better than rigidly conventionalized formal writing, so if we're looking to make our writing closer to our thoughts, perhaps it's not surprising that we'd end up sounding modernist or postmodern.

We could even trace this fork back to the beginning of grammatical typography. When grammarians decided that the scribal, pause-based punctuation needed to be reformed under the model of Latin grammar, they may have been able to change the practices of schoolteachers and editors, but they never wholly held dominion over private letters, handwritten signs, or notes left on the kitchen table. In the future, the era of writing between the invention of the printing

*Or at least, I sure hope they are, because otherwise you're halfway through a book where I've been passive-aggressive to you the whole time. SORRY.

press and the internet may come to be seen as an anomaly—an era when there arose a significant gap between how easy it was to be a writer versus a reader. An era when we collectively stopped paying attention to the informal, unedited side of writing and let typography become static and disembodied.

The internet didn't create informal writing, but it did make it more common, changing some of our previously spoken interactions into near-real-time text exchanges. At the same time, keyboards took away some of our previous repertoire for expressive writing, like multiple underlines, colored ink, fancy borders, silly doodles, and even subtle changes in someone's handwriting that might allow you to infer their mood. But the expanded system of conveying emotional nuance through text we've come up with instead is so nuanced and idiosyncratic that if I'm typing a personal sort of communication for someone—say, when I'm in the passenger's seat and a text on the driver's phone needs to be replied to right away—I find I need to inquire in great detail how exactly they want me to type. Period, exclamation mark, or simple linebreak at the end of the utterance? How much capitalization? Do any letters need to be repeated? Likewise, if I receive a message authored by someone other than the owner of the phone, I can often tell the difference. Expressive typography makes electronic communication anything but impersonal.

I, for one, think this change is fantastic. Even if this increased attention to typographical tone of voice did mean the decline of standard punctuation, I'd gladly accept the decline of standards that were arbitrary and elitist in the first place in favor of being able to better connect with my fellow humans. After all, a red pen will never love me back. Perfectly following a list of punctuation rules may grant me some kinds of power, but it won't grant me love. Love doesn't come from a list of rules—it emerges from the spaces be-

tween us, when we pay attention to each other and care about the effect that we have on each other. When we learn to write in ways that communicate our tone of voice, not just our mastery of rules, we learn to see writing not as a way of asserting our intellectual superiority, but as a way of listening to each other better. We learn to write not for power, but for love. But for all the subtle vocal modulations that typography can express, we're not just voices. We still need a way to convey the messages that we send with the rest of our bodies.

Chapter 5

Emoji and Other Internet Gestures

Our bodies are a big part of the way we communicate. If someone stamps into a room with a furrowed brow, slams the door, and proclaims, "I'M NOT ANGRY," you believe their body, not their words.

If someone is sobbing and wiping away tears as they say, "No, no, there's nothing wrong," you don't reply, "Great, glad to hear it, that's a relief, let's go dancing!" You say something like "I mean, it sure looks like something's wrong, but if you don't want to talk about it I understand."

If a good friend looks you in the eye, grins, and says, "You're the most terrible person I've ever met!" you don't think, "Oops, I guess this person isn't my friend after all." You think, "Awesome, we're such close friends that we can mock-insult each other and we both know we don't mean it!"

Likewise, a lot of our language about emotion is embodied—our