

Textese: Rules Without Rules?



David Crystal (left), a leading linguist and author of *Language and the Internet*, has long argued that language is inherently adaptive, evolving to meet the needs of its users. He emphasizes that digital communication doesn't erode language but expands its expressive possibilities, often through principles of economy which streamlines words and structures for speed and convenience. Similarly, John McWhorter (right), linguist and cultural commentator, describes texting as 'fingered speech,' a new hybrid form closer to spoken language than formal writing. He sees texting not as sloppy or incorrect but as a creative response to technological constraints and social immediacy.

Textese, the abbreviated, emoji-laden language of texting, might seem chaotic at first glance, but it operates under a set of informal conventions that make it intelligible. These conventions include dropping vowels ("pls" for 'please'), using numerals for sounds ("l8r" for 'later'), and replacing words with emojis (🍕 for 'pizza'). While punctuation and capitalization often disappear, word order generally remains intact, and context fills in the gaps. In other words, Textese has a kind of 'grammar of economy,' prioritizing speed and efficiency over traditional norms.

David Crystal, in *Language and the Internet*, argues that such adaptations are not linguistic decay but natural evolution. Language, he notes, always bends toward economy (efficiency) when technology accelerates communication. Similarly, John McWhorter emphasizes that texting is not "writing gone wrong" but a new hybrid form closer to spoken language than formal prose. Dropping auxiliary verbs or articles ("c u @ lib" instead of "I will see you at the library") reflects speech patterns compressed for digital speed.

Far from being random, Textese illustrates a principle Crystal calls "expressive efficiency": users trim what's predictable and keep what's essential. McWhorter adds that this shift shows language's adaptability, not decline. Textese is a response to cultural and technological forces where immediacy and connection matter more than rigid rules. In short, it's not without rule or grammar; it's rule-light, but guided by shared norms which are in constant flux according to everyday usage.

To see how economy, creativity, and context interact in real communication (just as Crystal and McWhorter describe) these puzzles ask you to decode and create Textese. They work in two directions:

- Decoding: Take messages written in Textese and expand them back into standard English.
- Encoding: Translate standard English passages into Textese using abbreviations, phonetic spellings, and emojis.

1. twz d 👍 of x, twz d 👎 of x
2. w8ing 4 go .
3. zen & T @ f 🚗 mn10nc
4. 0.5a leag 0.5a leag 0.5a leag onwrd All in T 🏞️ o 🦴 Rd T 600 "^ T LB! "Chrg 4T 📱" he
sd In2 T 🏞️ o 🦴 Rd T 600
5. YY UR, YY UB, ICUR YY4me
6. LEmtry, my dEr wtson.
7. 2rds dvrge ina 🌲 & i, i took th1 les travld by & tht hs mde al th difernc
8. 4scr + 7yrs ago r 🙄🙄🙄🙄 brr 4th on this cn10nt a nu nAshn cnCvd in 🗽 + ddc8d 2 th
prop tht (evRE1) r crE8d =
9. 📴 CTRL-S r gr8sh 🙌 . Long liv r nobl 🙌. 📴 CTRL-S th. 🙌!
10. Wn life gvs u 🍋 mk 🍋🍷
11. The pen is mightier than the sword
12. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step
13. All animals are created equal, although some are created more equal than others
14. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself
15. Don't count your chickens before they hatch
16. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must
be in want of a wife
17. One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind
18. Imagination is more important than knowledge
19. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country
20. We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year!