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Study: Rumors of Written-Word Death Greatly Exaggerated

By [Eliot Van Buskirk](#) December 29, 2009 | 3:42 pm | Categories: [Media](#), [Miscellaneous](#), [People](#), [Social Media](#)

Conventional wisdom holds that YouTube, videogames, cable TV and iPods have turned us away from the written word. Glowing streams of visual delights replaced paper and longhand letters shrank to bite-sized Facebook status updates, the theory held.

Conventional wisdom, in this case, is wrong.

A large-scale study by the University of San Diego and other research universities revealed what some of us have long suspected: We're reading far more words than we used to as we adopt new technologies.

"Reading, which was in decline due to the growth of television, tripled from 1980 to 2008, because it is the overwhelmingly preferred way to receive words on the Internet," found a [University of San Diego study](#) (.pdf) published this month by Roger E. Bohn and James E. Short of the University of San Diego.

Americans consumed 3.6 billion terabytes of information last year, averaging 11.8 hours of information consumption per day. Video and videogames constituted 55 percent of those bytes, but on average, Americans read 36 percent of the 100,500 words they consume each day, according to the San Diego study, which analyzed more than 20 data sources. The study doesn't cover writing, but a simple glance at Facebook feeds reveals that we're almost certainly writing more than we used to, as well.

Admittedly, posting "OMG best pizza ever C U l8r" to a mix of strangers, friends and acquaintances is not the same as carrying on a [lengthy epistolary relationship](#).

"The Internet is about the **death of the written word** as a means of exchange and a store of value," writes Sam Vaknin, Ph.D., in a typical criticism. "As a method of conveying information, written words are inefficient and ambiguous.... Sounds and images are far superior ... thus, textual minimalism is replacing books and periodicals."

However, that "textual minimalism" sure adds up fast — especially considering that a decent percentage of status updates include links to longer blog posts and articles. No matter how you slice it, this San Diego study found text to be a bigger part of our lives than it was 30 years ago, when much of the internet was a mere [gleam in Al Gore's eye](#).

In addition, longer formats continue to be popular, despite increases in textual minimalism, competing sources of information and the general shrinkage of print magazines and newspapers — see [Ars Technica's 23-page review of Mac OS X 10.6](#) (1,447 Diggs, 142 on Reddit), or Glenn Greenwald's lengthy opinion pieces ([430 comments](#)), neither of which would likely have been published by a print publication.

Meanwhile, Amazon, which seems to sell everything under the sun — including videogames, cameras and television sets — announced on Saturday that the Amazon Kindle, an eBook reader, became "the **most gifted item ever** in [Amazon] history" during this year's holiday season.

The most gifted item during next year's holiday season could well be [Apple's "iSlate" tablet](#), assuming [rumors of its impending 2010 release](#) are true. Say what you will about the literacy level of tweets or texts, but the position that literacy is on the decline is untenable when the most-hyped device of next year is said to be [designed with free](#) and paid-for electronic text — [especially magazines](#) — in mind.

If you're reading thousands of words a day on a variety of devices, paper included, you need as much help as you can get in deciding which words to read. Ironically, the same technologies derided by some for contributing to a lack of literacy — Facebook and Twitter — are full of recommendations of things to read.

Technology may have truncated and warped the written word in some cases, while increasing competition for our time. But as borne out by this new data, technology hasn't found a substitute for the written word as a means of conveying certain types of information. And, in fact, it has made reading and writing even more essential parts of everyday life.

Don't agree? Well, argue in the comments where you can read and write all you like.

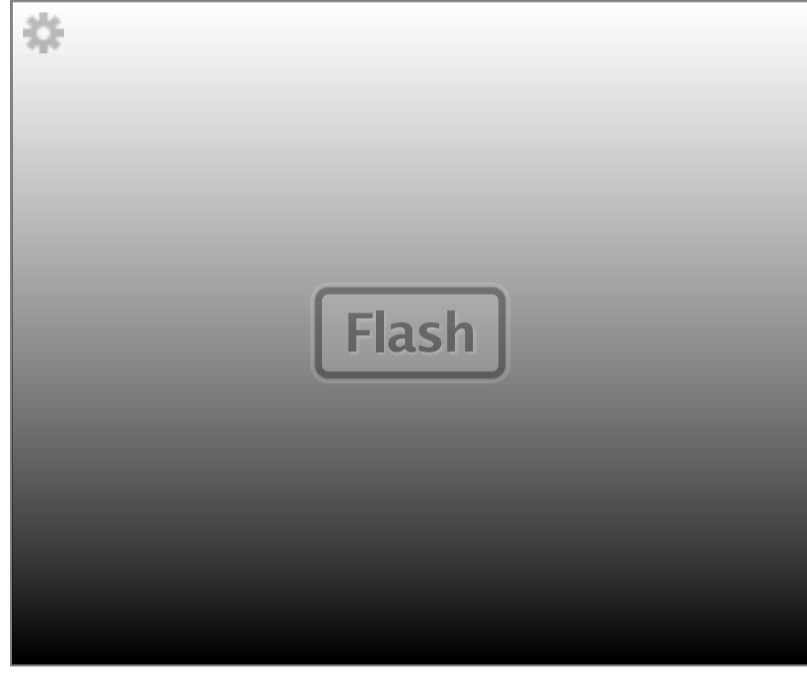
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Posted by: [benc](#) | 12/29/09 | 5:51 pm

Any adult that uses "text speak" beyond the letter "u" for the word "you", needs to grow up and realize how ignorant and completely stupid they sound. I HATE it when I see adults using numbers in place of words. I understand it in the early days of texting because you were sometimes charged per character, but an adult that does it today is most likely an immature trash that deserves to look as dumb as they sound. A grown adult that does this, in my opinion, is equated and lumped into the same trash pile that contains the likes of Paris Hilton, any Kardashians, or any other similar brain dead trash of the human race. That is all.

Posted by: [fabmonk](#) | 12/29/09 | 6:22 pm

This really doesn't surprise me. In many ways the internet has greatly increased the opportunity to both access and provide the written word. Just from my own limited use of twitter, blogging and the multitude of news, news-blogs, special interest websites, has shown this. I blog, something I would never have done without the ability given by the internet. This year I undertook, along with 170000 other people, the NaNoWriMo (National Writing Month) challenge, which generated in excess of a billion words, not counting the commentaries, forums, discussions, blog posts and other written media that accompanied it. I have made friends with numerous bloggers and writers through this challenge and through twitter, discovering vast expanses of the written word, all out there for people to discover and read and share. This, in turn, along with the accessibility of commercial websites like Amazon, AbeBooks and GoodReads, has meant that my book buying and reading has increased tremendously. YouTube and Flickr and other media websites have their place, but even when looking at short films, whether on news websites or on media enablers, the written word exists to provide commentary, context and discussion. Finally, the common refrain is that a picture can replace a thousand words, but the reality is that a picture without context is simply that. Pictures, films, music, etc are simply that without context, and the written word still is the best conveyor of context, from which we can derive a more balanced and clearer understanding of what we are seeing.

Posted by: [wb1954](#) | 12/29/09 | 6:28 pm

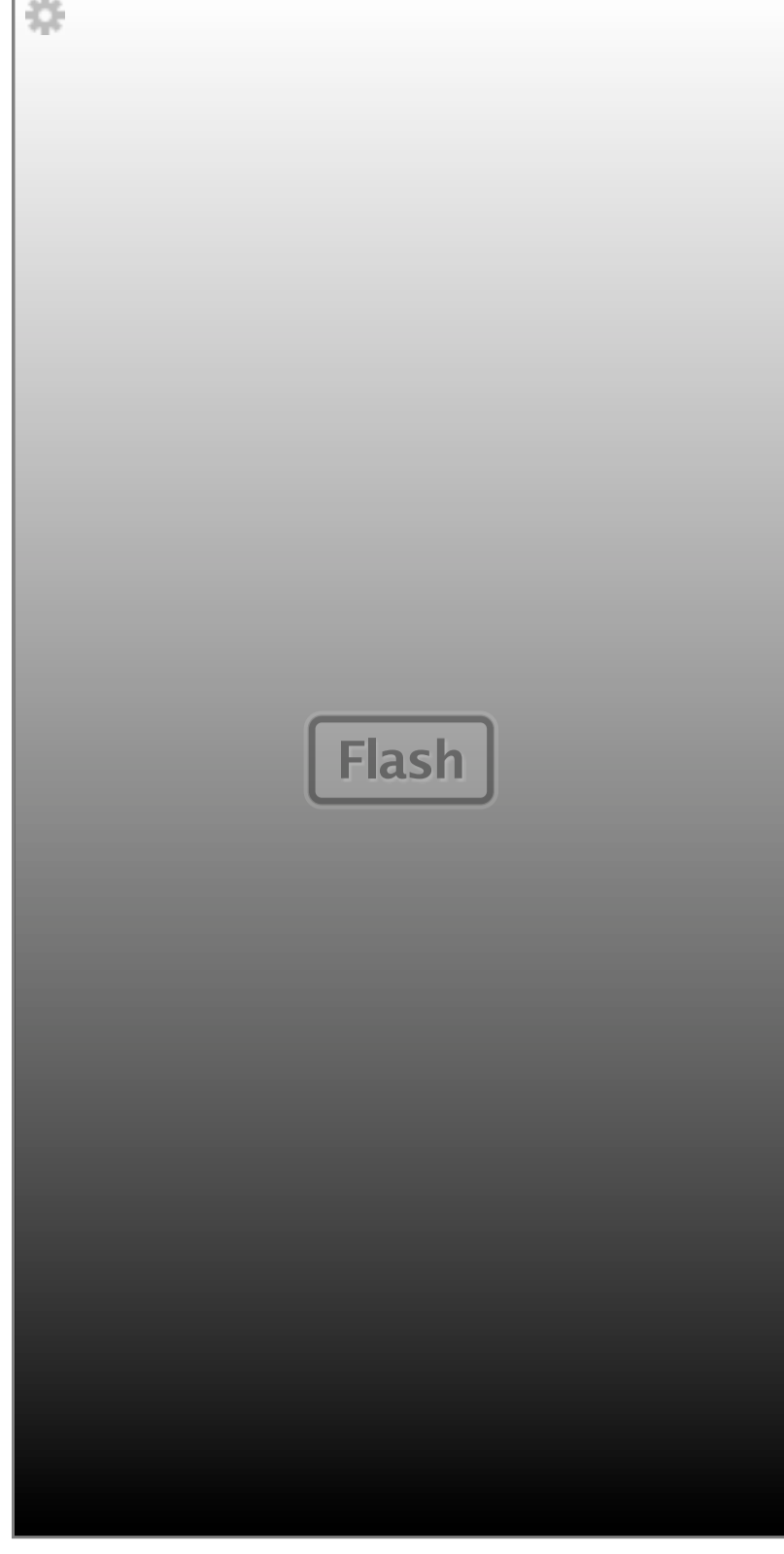
While reading and writing may have increased, what hasn't increased is the teaching of how to write. We teach only how to read. One needs to know how to get their thesis and antithesis and how to use pros and cons to support their writing. Read the comments regarding an article in the news and you know what I mean. STFU and A**h@le really do not provide the best defense of any argument. And while maybe "text speak" is lame, it originated with corporations teaching their employees how to make shortened notations. How to write needs to be taught in the first year of high school. When you know how to write, it makes learning so much easier because it also teaches you how to read.

Posted by: [mopbucket](#) | 12/29/09 | 6:29 pm

I can't stand people that use the letter "u" for the word "you". This is ambiguous and juvenile. Are they talking about a University? Is it a pronoun? Could it be that they are referring to a female sheep? HTFDIK!?

Posted by: [wb1954](#) | 12/29/09 | 7:14 pm

The comments provided thus far support what I said in my comment. benc starts out responding about the subject but ends up just spewing the same trash supposedly disliked. benc also states that "in my opinion" which, of course it benc's opinion — who else's would it be? I bet Paris Hilton knows how to write — and well! fabmonk? fabmonk doesn't know what a paragraph is and impressed by the sheer number of words used rather than considering how many times they are repeated ad nauseum. I get the picture, as you used almost a thousand words mopbucket? u is a sheepish person and UKWTF i mean. LOL Let's face it, even in the 60's, grade school photo memory books had silly things written in them like "2 good 2 be 4 forgotten".



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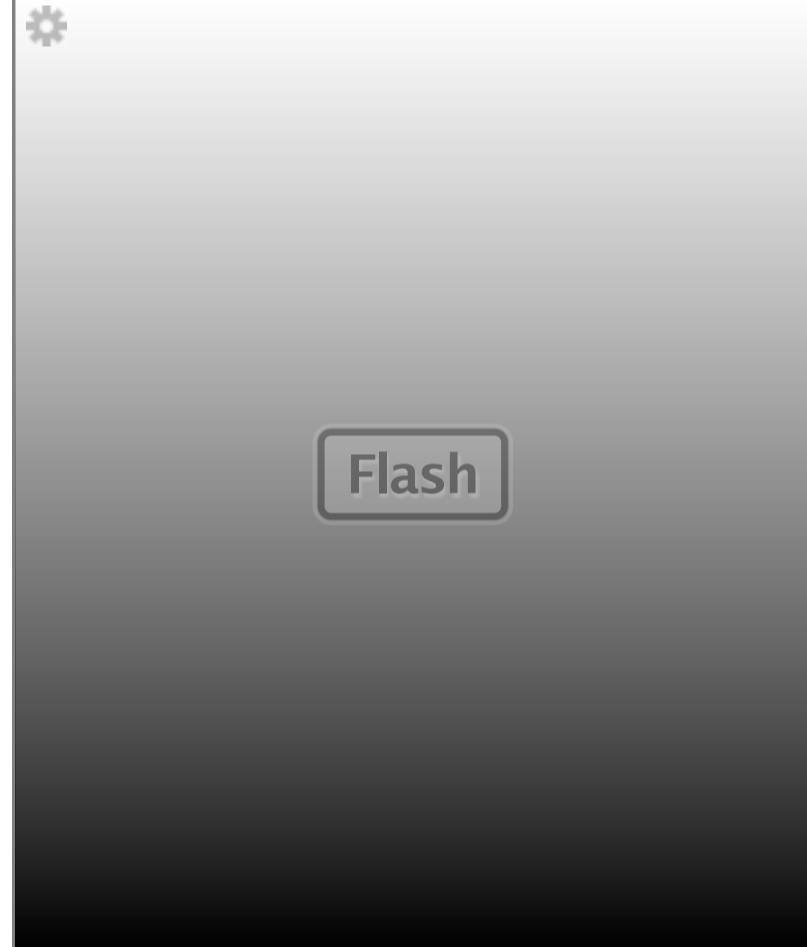
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