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## The New Texting Anxiety: Unraveling the Difference Between OK and OK!

We've become addicted to exclamation points in emails and texts, and going cold turkey freaks people out

By *Katherine Bindley*

Aug. 13, 2018 11:27 a.m. ET

John Witkowski was trying to make some progress on a work project one day this summer when he fired off more than two dozen emails. The 30-year-old tax accountant from Cleveland ended each message with: "Thanks in advance for your help with this project."

The notes caught the attention of his manager, who instant-messaged him:

"She was like, 'You're not your normal, cheery, bubbly self,' " Mr. Witkowski said. " 'You're not using exclamation points.' " She told him she felt his emails came off as more demanding than usual.

"I didn't really know how to react," he said.

Exclamation points are stressing people out. Years of rampant use have both diluted the punctuation mark's meaning and inflated its significance. It's especially bad in the workplace, where an exclamation point can suggest anything from actual excitement or gratitude, to general friendliness, to reassurance that 2 p.m. works for a meeting, to...I'm not mad about the other day. I swear, it's fine!



Hannah Wagle, left, worried when her boss, Portia Stewart, replied to a text without using an exclamation point. PHOTO: GREG KINDRED

There are various types of exclamation-point anxiety. Using the punctuation mark when other people don't can lead to self-consciousness. The absence of an exclamation point can send some recipients into a tizzy. Others have had enough and would like things to go back to the way they used to be when there wasn't so much hinging on this tiny little torture device. It's just too much!

After being called out by his manager, Mr. Witkowski decided he would no longer mimic the exclamation-point use of others in his emails—which he previously did to not seem rude.

“I was like, maybe I should be more standardized in what I use and just stick with periods and commas,” he said. His long-term strategy is to “give people that baseline expectation of no exclamation points.”

Mel DeCandia, 24, is a summer associate at a law firm who lives in Westfield, N.J. Early on, she wanted everyone to be aware of her excitement about working there. When emailing a higher-up about her first assignment, the note was long and full of exclamation points.

“I definitely never used more than one per sentence, but I probably used three or four,” she said. “It was really overzealous.”

She came to regret them after the response she got, which was, “Thx.”

While everyone seems to be emoting more these days, previous research has shown that women used exclamation points more than men. One 2006 study published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* said they often used them to convey friendliness. In a 1993 “Seinfeld” episode, Elaine argued with a boyfriend when he failed to use an exclamation point in a note.

Ms. DeCandia said she was probably more worried about how she comes off in written communications as a young woman in a male-dominated field. After the “Thx” email, she went cold turkey on exclamation points at work. She said it has been freeing.

“When I stopped using exclamation points, I somehow also stopped worrying about what people thought I was saying in my emails,” she said.

An absent exclamation point once caused Hannah Wagle, 24, to fear she was getting fired. She had texted her boss one day to say she was sick and working from home. Her boss replied with, “That’s fine.”

“The period kind of stared me in the face and told me that my career had just ended,” said Ms. Wagle, who writes for a veterinarian trade publication. “I called my boyfriend and I was like, ‘This is it. I just lost my job.’”

Her boyfriend wasn’t much help in calming her down, so she reached out to a co-worker to gauge their boss’s mood. The co-worker said everything seemed OK, but she used a period. More worry!

Ms. Wagle’s boss, Portia Stewart, understands how her message may have been misinterpreted: She normally includes exclamation points and thinks they create “a safer place.” But in the response to Ms. Wagle, she was heading to a meeting and was brief.

“Email communication is so flat,” said Ms. Stewart, 41, who pointed to the lack of body language and voice intonation. “You can tend toward angry accidentally.”

A 2016 study of 126 undergraduates by Binghamton University-State University of New York found that ending sentences with periods in a text was interpreted as abrupt and insincere. Since email and texts have become substitutes for spoken conversation, people started using punctuation for emphasis and tone instead of just as a way to mark the end of a sentence, according to Dr. Celia Klin, a professor of psychology who researches psycholinguistics and co-authored the study.

Because it is so easy to misunderstand each other without cues like tone of voice, facial expressions and pauses, “We needed to replace that,” she said.

Andrew Carlsen, 41, a multimedia producer in Washington, has noticed how the overuse of exclamation points at his office is affecting his own writing.

“There is definitely peer pressure to use more than I feel is maybe always appropriate,” he said. “If I’m explaining something and there’s four different thoughts, and every one of them is followed by an exclamation point, I’m just like, this is ridiculous. But then it’s like, which one do I remove?”

Mr. Carlsen recalled a “happy birthday” group email chain among co-workers a few months ago: Between the subject and the body of the email, someone had used 14 exclamation points.



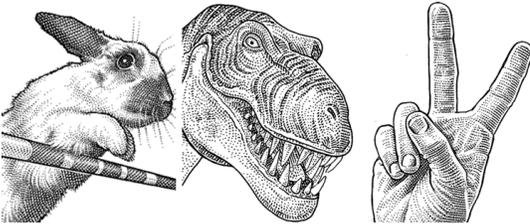
Entertainment lawyer Michael Lawrence said he uses lots of exclamation points when communicating with clients in the music industry but not with fellow attorneys. PHOTO: STEPHEN CARDONE / NYHEADSHOTS.COM

“I just thought, that’s a lot,” he said.

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Michael Lawrence, 41, an entertainment lawyer who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., leads a double life when it comes to his punctuation marks. When communicating with clients in the music industry, he uses lots of exclamation points; with fellow attorneys, he doesn’t. What he would like is something between an exclamation point and a period.

“Sometimes the punctuation mark that I’m using doesn’t really express what I want to convey,” he said. “The exclamation point seems over the top, but at the same time, the period just seems like kind of a curt response, or an unempathetic ending.”

In these instances, he finds there’s no great solution.

“My options are limited,” he said. “You have to spell out in actual words what you were trying to convey.”

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