

Building a Frame of Reference:

This assignment is designed to help you expand your arsenal for reading, writing, and discussion. I've kept the accountability portion deliberately reasonable, and here's why: I want you to actually do this. I don't want you to agonize and stress over it and then just write some nonsense to get the points or to succumb to the temptation to cheat; this is more for you than for me. I've also left a lot of room for customization, so that you can focus on things that you are interested in.

Each of these things will help you better understand the world—the world you are about to inherit. So, throw yourself into it and learn something new. This is the stuff that grants you access to bigger conversations than you are accustomed to.

1. Go to the **TED** website
 - a. Choose five of these to watch. Whatever sounds interesting to you.
 - b. Each one must be from a different category.
 - c. For each one, write a brief synopsis of the content and its effect on your thinking or understanding.
 - d. **One for week one.**
 - e. **One more for week two.**
 - f. **And yet another for week three. But don't forget to include your reaction.**
 - g. **One more for week four.**
 - h. **Last one for week five**

2. Watch a **movie** that is considered a "classic"
 - a. **Use the AFI "Top 100" list.**
 - b. Go outside of your comfort zone here—try something in black and white, maybe.
 - c. Write a brief summary of the movie and **why you think it is considered a "classic."**
 - i. Don't cheat on this—I'm asking you to watch a movie. Watch it with a friend or family member. Talk about it.

3. Choose one **full-length ISSUE-BASED documentary** on a topic of your choosing to watch. ("Issue-based" means it's not something that is just drama or mystery—so no Tiger King or Ted Bundy Tapes; it's got to be something that relates to a big issue in society or the world. Email us to ask if you aren't sure.)
 - a. Summarize the content of the documentary.
 - b. React: What did you learn from it? What questions do you still have about it?

4. Go to this website: <https://www.happinesslab.fm/> and locate and **listen** to the following episodes: "The Unhappy Millionaire," and "A Silver Lining."
 - a. Take notes as you listen to each episode.
 - b. After you finish each one:
 - i. Sum up the main idea of the episode in one sentence.
 - ii. Write a full paragraph in which you react to the main idea. Include how it might relate to your life, or to the lives of people in the society and world in which you live.

5. There are two articles and one interview that follow about the ever-changing English language.
 - a. **For each article**, complete the following:
 - i. **Read each article, underlining/highlighting any words or references you don't understand.** After finishing, look these up (and **write them down**) and see if they now make sense in context.
 - ii. **Write down three interesting points they make.** (These should be specific, not general like: "The author thinks the English language isn't being ruined," but they can be bullet points.)
 - iii. **Summarize their main point in one sentence** and react to it in a few sentences: To what extent do you agree or disagree and why?
 - b. **After reading all three, write a short essay** (2-3 paragraphs, 1-2 pages) in which you respond to the following:
 - i. **The English language is always changing, and with the proliferation of texting and social media, it is perhaps changing faster now than ever: Are these modern linguistic changes a good or bad thing?**
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Today's Kids Are, Like, Killing The English Language.

As a father of two pre-teen boys, I have in the last year or so become a huge fan of the word "duh." This is a word much maligned by educators, linguistic brahmins and purists, but they are all quite wrong.

Duh has elegance. Duh has shades of meaning, even sophistication. Duh and its perfectly paired linguistic partner, "yeah right," are the ideal terms to usher in the millennium and the information age, and to highlight the differences from the stolid old 20th century.

Even my sons might stop me at this point and quash my hyperbole with a quickly dispensed, "Yeah, right, Dad." But hear me out: I have become convinced that duh and yeah right have arisen to fill a void in the language because the world has changed. Fewer questions these days can effectively be answered with yes or no, while at the same time, a tidal surge of hype and mindless blather threatens to overwhelm old-fashioned conversation. Duh and yeah right are the cure.

Good old yes and no were fine for their time -- the archaic, black and white era of late industrialism that I was born into in the 1950's. The yes-or-no combo was hard and fast and most of all simple: It belonged to the Manichean red-or-dead mentality of the cold war, to manufacturing, to "Father Knows Best" and "It's a Wonderful Life."

The information-age future that my 11-year-old twins own is more complicated than yes or no. It's more subtle and supple, more loaded with content and hype and media manipulation than my childhood -- or any adult's, living or dead -- ever was.

And duh, whatever else it may be, is drenched with content. Between them, duh and yeah-right are capable of dividing all language and thought into an exquisitely differentiated universe. Every statement and every question can be positioned on a gray scale of understatement or overstatement, stupidity or insightfulness, information saturation or yawning emptiness.

And in an era when plain speech has become endangered by the pressures of political correctness, duh and yeah right are matchless tools of savvy, winking sarcasm and skepticism: caustic without being confrontational, incisive without being quite specific.

With duh, you can convey a response, throw in a whole basket full of auxiliary commentary about the question or the statement you're responding to, and insult the speaker all at once! As in this hypothetical exchange:

Parent: "Good morning, son, it's a beautiful day."

Eleven-year-old boy: "Duh."

And there is a kind of esthetic balance as well. Yeah-right is the yin to duh's yang, the antithesis to duh's emphatic thesis. Where duh is assertive and edgy, a perfect tool for undercutting mindless understatement or insulting repetition, yeah right is laid back, a surfer's cool kind of response to anything overwrought or oversold.

New York, for example, is duh territory, while Los Angeles is yeah-right. Television commercials can be rendered harmless and inert by simply saying, "yeah, right," upon their conclusion. Local television news reports are helped out with a sprinkling of well placed duhs, at moments of stunning obviousness. And almost any politician's speech cries out for heaping helpings of both at various moments.

Adolescent terms like "like," by contrast, scare me to death. While I have become convinced through observation and personal experimentation that just about any adult of even modest intelligence can figure out how to use duh and yeah right properly, like is different. Like is hard. Like is, like, dangerous.

Marcel Danesi, a professor of linguistics and semiotics at the University of Toronto who has studied the language of youth and who coined the term "pubilect" to describe the dialect of pubescence, said he believes like is in fact altering the structure of the English language, making it more fluid in construction, more like Italian or some other Romance language than good old hard-and-fast Anglo-Saxon. Insert like in the middle of a sentence, he said, and a statement can be turned into a question, a question into an exclamation, an exclamation into a quiet meditation.

Consider these hypothetical expressions: "If you're having broccoli for dinner, Mr. Johnson, I'm, like, out of here!" and "I was, like, no way!" and, perhaps most startlingly, "He was, like, duh!"

In the broccoli case, like softens the sentence. It's less harsh and confrontational than saying flatly that the serving of an unpalatable vegetable would require a fleeing of the premises.

In the second instance, like functions as a kind of a verbal quotation mark, an announcement that what follows, "no way," is to be heard differently. The quote itself can then be loaded up with any variety of intonation -- irony, sarcasm, even self-deprecation -- all depending on the delivery.

In the third example -- "He was, like, duh!" -- like becomes a crucial helping verb for duh, a verbal springboard. (Try saying the sentence without like and it becomes almost incomprehensible.)

BUT like and duh and yeah right, aside from their purely linguistic virtues, are also in many ways the perfect words to convey the sense of reflected reality that is part of the age we live in. Image

manipulation, superficiality, and shallow media culture are, for better or worse, the backdrop of adolescent life.

Adults of the yes-or-no era could perhaps grow up firm in their knowledge of what things "are," but in the Age of Duh, with images reflected back from every angle at every waking moment, kids swim in a sea of what things are "like." Distinguishing what is from what merely seems to be is a required skill of an 11-year-old today; like reflects modern life, and duh and yeah right are the tools with which such a life can be negotiated and mastered.

But there is a concealed paradox in the Age of Duh. The information overload on which it is based is built around the computer, and the computer is, of course, built around -- that's right -- the good old yes-or-no binary code: Billions of microcircuits all blinking on or off, black or white, current in or current out. Those computers were designed by minds schooled and steeped in the world of yes or no, and perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to imagine my sons' generation, shaped by the broader view of duh, finding another path: binary code with attitude. Besides, most computers I know already seem to have an attitude. Incorporating a little duh would at least give them a sense of humor.

Teens Aren't Ruining Language

People of all ages influence linguistic change, and it's always been that way.

By Adrienne LaFrance

"Don't grill, dude," was a thing the boys I knew in high school would say to each other a lot. It meant, essentially, *stop hassling me*. There was also "budge," short for "budget," which presumably was a way of saying that something was cheap, in a bad way. "Blatantly" was frequently used for emphasis. A conversation might go like this:

"I can't go out tonight."

"That's budge."

"Don't grill, dude."

"Blatantly budge."

I have not heard these terms, except ironically among old friends, since maybe 1999. I'm pretty sure that's because no one outside of a cluster of schools in my

Philadelphia-area hometown uttered them in the first place. More broadly, this was an era when agreeable circumstances were “phat,” high-maintenance friends were “spazzes,” and you might taunt someone by saying, “psyche!” (Or was it “sike”?) And then, the 1990s ended, and all that slang did what it does best: It faded.

Fad words often have a different trajectory in today’s social-network-connected, meme-ified world. Platforms like Vine and Twitter have helped spread and standardize terms that might otherwise have stayed regional. And certainly the Internet has shortened the lifespan of some slang, especially when co-opted by brands trying to speak in teen parlance. (See also: On fleek, bae, basic, et al.)

As language evolves and new terms enter the mainstream, teenagers are often blamed for debasing linguistic standards. In some cases, their preferred forms of communication—like text messaging—are attacked. But, teens don’t actually influence language as much as is often claimed. That’s one of the key findings in the latest linguistic research by Mary Kohn, an assistant professor of English at Kansas State University. How much a person’s vernacular changes over time may have as much to do with personality and social standing as it has to do with age. The extent to which teenagers are credited with (or blamed for) driving lasting change to language is, she says, “grossly overstated.” The same factors that prompt teens to experiment with new language are applicable to people at many stages of life.

“There may be strong social motivations to craft an identity towards a specific social group, and changes in social structures can prompt linguistic changes as a result,” Kohn told me. “We also have fairly linguistically-stable individuals—people who just don’t show much change over the lifespan. This may be expected for individuals who speak a prestige dialect or are in positions of power.”

That’s likely because people in positions of privilege don’t face the same social pressure to adapt their language, Kohn said. But there’s more to it than that. “It seems that linguistic flexibility is partially a factor of age, exposure to various inputs, social factors, but also personal factors,” Kohn said. And these personal factors are “hard to pinpoint.”

In her latest research, Kohn used an audio database that features interviews with dozens of children from infancy up to when they're in their twenties. (The database features audio of family members, friends, and teachers, too.) She studied the kids at the same four stages of life (fourth grade, eighth grade, tenth grade, and early twenties) and tracked—by analyzing sound waves—how their pronunciation changed over time. While she focused on pronunciation, which offers a narrower view than slang terms, what she found is revealing for the way people think about teenagers and language trends. What stood out to her about the teenage years was the fact that, well, nothing consistently stood out. Just because you're a teenager, it doesn't mean your language will change in a way that's more pronounced than during other key phases in life, and it certainly doesn't mean that you'll influence broader linguistic trends.

Because language patterns are so wrapped up in larger expressions of identity, Kohn believes that people's word choices evolve in concert with other life changes—you might adopt new words when you start attending a new school, or take a new job, or have a baby, for example. The endurance of some slang terms over time, she says, has to do with how people navigate individual life changes against an also-changing social backdrop.

“Why some words skyrocket to popularity, only to crash and burn—for example, the unfortunate ‘fleek,’ or my generation's ‘joshin’ and ‘betty’—while others have a longer lifespan is a mystery,” Kohn told me. “‘Dude’ in its current meaning has been present for at least a century. If a word spreads too quickly from a subgroup to the mouths of moms or television actors, it will likely no longer serve the purpose of creating in-group identity, dooming it to failure.”

My colleague James Hamblin made a similar argument in a [eulogy for the word “bae”](#) in 2014. “The commercial appropriation of a word signals the end of its hipness in any case,” he wrote, “but as Kwame Opam at *The Verge* called it, ‘appropriation of urban youth culture’ can banish a term to a particularly bleached sphere of irrelevance.” (However, now that “bae” has been rejected by the mainstream, Robin Boylorn [wrote](#) for *The Guardian* last year, black people can reclaim it.)

All this underscores how language can be as much a way to communicate who you *aren't*, as it can be used to signal who you are. Culturally, people often draw those lines generationally. Linguistically, it's another story.

One infamous example of a failed attempt by outsiders to infiltrate a linguistic subculture was a 1992 *New York Times* story about grunge slang. The newspaper reported a list of terms based on a single interview with a 25-year-old who worked at a Seattle record label. It was later revealed that she had made up the terms she defined for the *Times*—including “wack slacks,” “lamestain,” and “swingin' on the flippity-flop,” to name a memorable few. The paper ended up printing the phrases as real examples of popular slang.

More often, though, words and expressions shift in and out of popular use gradually, without much notice. Sort of the way “yeah” and “yes” have made way for “yesssss” and “yaaaaas” and “yiss,” a phenomenon my colleague Megan Garber explored last year. Kohn offered an example of a once-scandalous neologism that is today utterly mundane: “While Oscar Wilde’s peers may have lamented the death of English when youth waited for the *bus*, instead of the *omnibus*, modern audiences would find the longer word stilted and strange.”

And the thing about linguistic changes is they can't exactly be stopped in any sort of deliberate way. (“Stop trying to make ‘fetch’ happen,” only works if fetch was never going to happen in the first place.) Even old-school grammar geeks are warming up to “they” as an acceptable gender-neutral pronoun, understanding that culture doesn't just trump language rules, it creates them—then destroys them, then creates new ones again.

Oft-spoken terms either peter out or they stick around. “As if!” becomes “I can't even.” And the tendency for older adults to criticize younger generations for how language changes is its own form of establishing identity or staking a space in a social group. Which is, let's face it, pretty budge. Blatantly.

Is the internet killing language? LOL, no.

Linguist Gretchen McCulloch says Twitter banter and text-speak are signs of an evolving language — and that's good.

Texting, posting, and emailing has become a key part of how we communicate in our lives and relationships, so much so that it's fundamentally changing language and communication. According to linguist Gretchen McCulloch, the author of *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* and co-host of the podcast *Lingthusiasm*, it's making us better writers, speakers, and communicators.

So all our SMHs and Kim Kardashian crying memes aren't eviscerating the English language? Tell that to the English teachers of the world — and the mansplainers on Tinder.

"Language is humanity's most spectacular open-source project," writes McCulloch, who studies and analyzes the patterns of internet language. "Just as we find things on the internet by following links from one place to another, language spreads and disseminates through our conversations and interactions."

Today's digital natives are expected to be bilingual in both formal English and informal internet-speak — and know when it's appropriate to use them (like when you're emailing your boss versus texting your crush).

Skip Ad

From words and acronyms to emoji and GIFs, people today have a wide range of tools in their arsenal to express online what they're thinking and feeling. If you're meeting a friend for happy hour, sending a **GIF of Betty White** swirling a glass of wine can often capture your excitement better than words can. Hate Mondays? Posting a **meme of Grumpy Cat** (RIP) can instantly relay your disdain. Those fluent in internet-speak can also play with punctuation, capitalization, even spacing to convey emotional nuance and tone of voice. Words can now be altogether replaced with emblems and icons, which helps explain the popularity of emoji and GIFs in our online conversations.

All of this helps enliven our social interactions, and the fluidity of language is actually its biggest strength. "I mean, fashion can change, why can't language?" asks McCulloch. "Linguists are generally very positive about language evolution, and it's unfortunate that this message hasn't been conveyed to broader society as much because we're still dealing with a history of people worshipping Latin."

I spoke with McCulloch to better understand how our text and Twitter banter is influencing the way we communicate on and offline. Our conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Megan McDonough

Some people believe the internet is leading to the demise of the English language. You argue that it is doing the opposite, and, in fact, is making us more dynamic and flexible communicators. How would you respond to skeptics who worry the internet is ruining the written word for future generations?

Gretchen McCulloch

Language has changed and is always changing. There's not one right way to communicate. We don't speak the way Shakespeare did, and Shakespeare didn't speak the way Chaucer did.

Megan McDonough

In your book, you explain that internet language is dependent on one's age group, when they were exposed to the internet and with whom they were communicating.

Gretchen McCulloch

Yes, it's really interesting to look at how different people [of different ages and eras] are using language on the internet. There's a misperception that if people are using language differently, then someone must be right, but that's not true. There's not one right way of using language online. We can use language differently, and it can actually help us better understand each other.

For example, a user from [one] generation may use periods at the end of every sentence. A person from another generation may interpret this as passive aggression. You can write the way you want to talk, but we need to have some communication about the means in which you are expressing it to avoid communication difficulties and misinterpretations.

Megan McDonough

Have you found in your research that friends or family members tend to adjust their language to mimic each other's speech patterns, styles, or preferences?

Gretchen McCulloch

Anecdotally, I certainly do. If people use emoji, then I'll use emoji. If they use exclamation marks, then I'll use exclamation marks. I'll sometimes go back in my previous correspondence with somebody and see if we were on "Hi" terms or "Hey" terms. I try to reply to people in the spirit that they're in, because why not? It's more comfortable and I think you get along with people better that way.

It has also been found in research by [Columbia University researcher] Michelle McSweeney: People tend to match styles in conversation in text messages and will latch onto certain features, but not others. For example, emoji. If you send a bunch of emoji hearts in a conversation, people will often send the same sequence back. However, they

won't budge on other features, like acronyms. If you use LMAO instead of LOL, you're going to keep using the acronym you prefer.

Megan McDonough

You write that teenage girls play an especially important role as language disruptors throughout the history of language. [In her book, McCulloch says young women overwhelmingly lead language trends, from uptalk (rising pitch and intonation at the end of sentences) to the use of the word "like" to introduce quotations (I was like, "Oh, my god, Becky, look at her butt").]

How and why do women — particularly teens — help lead the way with language?

Gretchen McCulloch

Women are on the bleeding edge of a lot of linguistic innovation. Some people believe it is related to their social position. They are more likely to have a broader network of people, or you're more likely used to paying more attention to how you talk because your choices are more policed. Some people also point to the fact that women are still disproportionately likely to be caregivers for young children. So even if men are creating more innovation, if they're not interacting with young children as much, it's less likely to be carried on. It's probably something that has multiple factors and is still an open area of linguistic research.

Megan McDonough

There are expressive tools used in informal writing, like letter repetition (heyyy or yaaas) and multiple exclamation points (omg!!!). Can you talk about why these quirks have caught on fire on mediums like text and social media?

Gretchen McCulloch

I think expressive tools for informal writing are a really important way to convey attention and context as to what we are saying to each other, like, for example, sarcasm. Conveying irony in writing is tremendously important. There are philosophic proposals that date back to the 1500s requesting better ways to convey irony in writing, but they never caught on, because it turns out people don't read Rousseau to figure out how to capture irony.

What needed to happen in order for irony punctuation like ~*~sparkle sarcasm~*~ to take off was that people needed to have a collective response — it couldn't be just one person coming up with something — to signify meaning and double meaning. If you convey enthusiasm through sparkles and emoji, or that something is important through capitals or quotation marks, it can now be subverted to convey ironic enthusiasm or ironic importance. Allowing things to take on double meaning is what really paved the way for ironic punctuation, and now we have so much of it.

Megan McDonough

And that's when tools, like emoji and GIFs, can be incredibly useful. They can help contextualize meaning and indicate intention.

Gretchen McCulloch

Exactly. Now there's a whole range of tools, images, and punctuation to make it clear that you're joking, or that you're being playful.

Megan McDonough

Is this why you think certain emoji — like hands and faces — have taken off in popularity?

Gretchen McCulloch

Yeah, I think so, because hands draw on resources that we already have and use to convey and clarify our intentions face to face. While it's great to have a whole bunch of plant, vegetable, and animal emoji to illustrate what you're saying, symbols that offer deliberate cues to the feelings, emotions, and intentions behind what we're saying are even more important to us than captioning a photo of a dog with an emoji of a dog.

Megan McDonough

That reminds me of the ever-popular eggplant and peach emojis, and their versatile meanings. I recently read that only 7 percent of Apple users use the peach icon to refer to the actual fruit. How do linguists feel about the adaptability of these emblems, and to what extent can they become a replacement for language?

Gretchen McCulloch

Emoji are interesting, and you can definitely use them to communicate with, but not everything we communicate with is considered language. I like the analogy of emoji as gestures because I think it explains a lot of the different ways people use them. Sometimes we used them alongside our words to give clarity as to what they mean.

Megan McDonough

Another popular trend on social media is to write in all lowercase. What are the purposes of abandoning standard capitalization on platforms like Tumblr and Twitter?

Gretchen McCulloch

Early on, when most people's typing was happening on desktop or laptop computers, the easy way to type was to just ignore the shift key and put everything in lower case. It had an anti-authoritarian connotation of being lazy and taking less effort.

But that changed with the rise of smartphones [between 2006 and 2013]. Predictive keyboards started capitalizing the beginning of sentences and any proper nouns that were in their dictionaries, and suddenly it took more effort to put something in lowercase. But

lowercase still retained this sort of antiauthoritarian connotation from the early days when it took less effort and people were not respecting the authority of the shift key, if you will.

So it's now taken on this extra layer of meaning, which is "I'm not making a large effort." If I say everything very formally [with standard capitalization], then maybe that means I am standing on ceremony, am easily offended, and will be offended if you do, too. Whereas if I type in a way that's more casual and informal, I can seem friendlier, more approachable and down-to-earth.

Megan McDonough

One of the most interesting observations in your chapter on internet memes is that the most popular and copied memes are often the least professional-looking and most unpolished. Can you explain this phenomenon and why certain memes, like LOLcats and Doge, are replicated online?

Gretchen McCulloch

Linguist Limor Shifman did a study of YouTube videos that spawned remixes and remakes compared with videos that had the same number of views but few or no imitations. Her research found that the more professional-looking YouTube videos were less likely to be copied. I think it is very readily applicable to other types of memes, whether that's visual memes or linguistic styles, that invite active involvement and make it easy and approachable for others to participate in the creative phenomenon.

A lot of formalized creativity — music, books, art — can be intimidating for a beginner. I just wrote a book, and I can assure you, it was intimidating! Most people don't see the patchwork, the edits, the back-and-forth that goes into making a professionalized creative thing look polished, but by doing creative things that are less polished, it's a more inviting way of participating in them.

Megan McDonough

You write that one benefit from internet language and the decentralization of online media is that original creators become more visible online and "Columbusing" — or the trend of white people appropriating nonwhite culture for themselves without recognizing its true origins — can be more readily identified. For example, how words and phrases like "bae," "throwing shade," and "on fleek" have been appropriated from African Americans into broader American pop culture.

While Columbusing can be more readily identified and attributed, do social sites like Twitter and increased visibility also lead to greater linguistic appropriation?

Gretchen McCulloch

I think that's a really interesting question. You know, it's easier to kind of wander into a subculture, and less obvious that you don't necessarily belong there. I think it is generally

good to be following people who have experiences that are not yours to learn more about how people who aren't like you live in the world. But one of the things I didn't want to do in the book was do a detailed investigation of Black Twitter as a white person. I didn't think it was my place to do.

I know a number of people who have stopped using the clapping hands emoji between individual words because it's a recognition that was appropriated from black culture. I don't have statistics on the prevalence of this happening before and after the internet because appropriation from African Americans has been happening, you know, for hundreds of years.

Megan McDonough

Do you believe the reader of the future will one day be taught internet language in school, like Shakespeare or Latin?

Gretchen McCulloch

I think that as long as the internet remains a place where people are hanging out and spending their time, there will internet slang. But do I think the children of the future will eventually need to be taught the way we're talking now? Absolutely. ;)