



GETTING CHATTY

Conversation at the Virtual Reference Desk

Who uses chat?

Library staff providing chat reference frequently assume that their 12 to 17 year old users are the real chat fanatics, using instant messaging (IM) software to keep in touch with friends, do homework, ask someone out on a date, or share MP3s.

It is true that this age group represents the largest percentage of chat usage (74% of online teens have used IM). But the increasing popularity of real-time text messaging is reaching all segments of the online population. And use of IM is rivaling email in popularity. IM has revolutionized the way companies do business and may be rewriting the rules of human conversation. It has been called the “e e cummings approach” to communication!

Some statistics from the Pew Internet and American Life Project report on [How American Use Instant Messaging](#) (September 2004):

- 42% of online American adults (over 53 million) have used IM
- 21% of these IM users (11 million American adults) use IM at work
- 24% of adult IM users report using IM more frequently than email
- Among 18 to 27 year old IM users, 46% use IM more frequently than email.



Deciphering the code

For those who frequently use IM, a shorthand language has evolved.
Here's an example:

JASON:	hey sup
Way2Go:	nm, u?
JASON:	nm just chillin
Way2Go:	do you have lotta work?
JASON:	mad amount of english, u?
Way2Go:	english 2
JASON:	brb
JASON:	back
Way2Go:	k
JASON:	did you checkout that site?
Way2Go:	um, no?
JASON:	my gf told me about it
JASON:	kool...iykwim
JASON:	alright g2g pos
Way2Go:	bye
JASON:	ttyl bye

**What did these two people say to each other?
Probably nm!**

Chat translator

Here is some of the shorthand commonly used in IM conversations. Anything in all upper case is considered shouting, or a more adamant or urgent expression.

- afaik = As far as I know
- brb = Be right back
- btw = By the way
- def = Definitely
- fav = Favorite
- g2g = Got to go
- h/w = Homework
- idk = I don't know
- ikwim = If you know what I mean
- imho = In my humble opinion
- j/k = Just kidding
- k = Okay
- lol = Laughing out loud
- lp or /last = last post
- lpfm = last post for now
- more = The message you are reading is only part of a thought and more is coming.
- ne1 = Anyone
- nm = Not much, nothing much
- rofl = Rolling on the floor, laughing
- pos = Parent over shoulder
- sh = Same here
- sn = Screen name
- smthg = Something
- tia = Thanks in advance
- ttyl = Talk to you later
- UK? = Are you okay?
- ur = You are
- y = Why

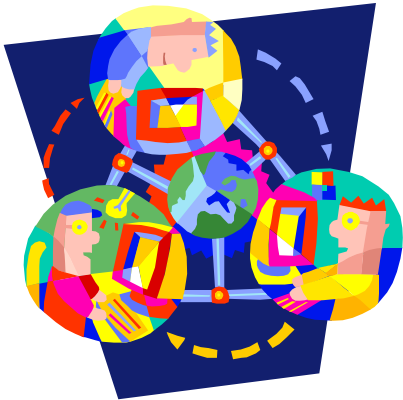
[Chat 101](#) provides glossaries of chat acronyms, abbreviations, emoticons, and terms.

Chatting at the Virtual Reference Desk

Depending on your users, you may or may not encounter “chat lingo” in your virtual reference transactions.

Here are some tips for an effective reference transaction using chat. Remember that there are no auditory or visual cues to indicate emotion or reaction!

- ✓ Be welcoming and personable. Use the patron’s name if appropriate. Reply to his/her specific question, using scripted responses thoughtfully.
- ✓ Type like you would talk. You can match the conversational tone of your patron’s posts without using slang, shorthand, or emoticons.
- ✓ Don’t use library jargon or abbreviations.
- ✓ It’s OK to use short phrases and informal language....dont get hung up on grammar and punctuation!!!...use three or four periods between words to indicate pauses.



- ✓ Break up long responses into shorter blocks (two or three sentences). Type the first part, make your last word “more,” and continue the message in your next post.
- ✓ Avoid the Caps Lock key. Typing in all capitals is considered yelling.
- ✓ Be as clear and concise as possible without being abrupt. Be careful to word your messages in a way that communicates helpfulness (“Were you able to check in our online catalog?” NOT “You already checked the online catalog, right?”).
- ✓ Keep the conversation flowing. Thirty seconds of dead air is a long time for the patron. Try to establish a rhythm of sending a message every 30 to 45 seconds or less. (“I am going to check some printed sources.” “I am still searching.”)

- ✓ Let the patron know what you will do next. (“I’m sending you a Web page now.”)
- ✓ Allow enough time for the patron to read, think and respond before your next posting. Ask for cues from the patron about pacing. (“Let me know when you see the page that I sent.” “Let me know when you are ready...”)
- ✓ If the question will take more time to answer, keep the patron informed and give him/her something to do in the meantime. (“While I am checking, you may want to look at this Web page.”)
- ✓ In chat reference, users are more anonymous, which may reduce inhibitions. You don’t have to tolerate abusive or offensive language, but don’t take impatience or abruptness personally. The Pew Report reveals that [37 percent of teens using IM](#) have written something that they would not have said face-to-face.

Also read the [Chat Communication Tips](#) from the University of Florida.



Want to read more about chat and IM?

[How Instant Messaging Works](#)