

Talk to the face, cause the brain ain't sure

By [Sarah Heuer](#)

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Emoticons. Emojis. Smilies. They really are everywhere, and I'll admit to using them quite liberally (sometimes I even put one in an email to a favourite client).



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So – are they a blessing or a curse? Do they herald the evolution of punctuation, or the loss of our ability to decipher tone? It depends on who you ask, and I'm still making up my mind. And because I remain undecided, conflicted, ambivalent, and a whole bunch of other lovely nuanced words that you really cannot convey by means of a tiny yellow icon of a face, I've decided to take the completely unemotional approach that hardly ever gives you the answer you want, but probably will indicate the answer you deserve.

I'm making a list of emoji pros and emoji cons.

PR☺	CaN
LOST IN TRANSLATION	DUMBING DOWN
An emoji allows for clarity when your tongue in cheek or sarcastic tone may otherwise be overlooked... although different operating systems can pose a problem, due to the differences in the way an emoji is portrayed from one to the next.	Before emojis, we all had to read AND write with the potential for misunderstanding taken in mind. Well, those of us who cared, anyway. We're getting lazy and our 'punctuation' is both cause and symptom. And lazy brains eventually stultify.
UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE	I THINK, THEREFORE I AM NOT ROBOT
Pictorial communication is the closest we'll ever get to the real thing. Even so, emojis (like slang) have different meanings in different subcultures. Fascinating anthropologically, especially the aubergine icon, but once again it leaves room for confusion and embarrassment in real terms.	How many of us would pass a Turing test, or be able to detect a bot, if the only indication of tone was conveyed by emoji? And how will we ever show truly deep and sincere emotion if we are reduced to a few two-dimensional icons?
SYMPHONIC SUBSTITUTION	TONE-DEAF TEENS
The written word necessarily reduces meaning by a massive amount due to the absence of facial expression, body language, and intonation. Imagine an orchestra without a string section. It's always good to have a substitute, even if it is just a banjo and a ukulele.	Usually the English exam section that is most poorly answered includes the textual interpretation question. In fact, this 'deafness' is not just a teen phenomenon. I've lost count of the number of times people have accidentally interpreted an article from The Onion or a similar satirical site as being factual. It's amusing when it happens, but it's an ominous sign of where we might be headed. One day, we might all write the way Stephen Hawking sounds (no offence to the man – he's a personal idol and I'm sure he would agree that life without vocal range is frustrating).
KEEPING THINGS FRESH	MIND THE GENERATION GAP

Bottom line: they're fun, they can be used in loads of novel ways (have a look at [Les Misérables](#) and [Shakespeare](#) 'translated' into emojis if you don't believe me) and pictures are often more memorable than words. And they don't take up nearly as much space, either.

My personal mentor, who is almost in her 50s, admits to being fascinated by the topic, but completely emojiilliterate. So it's important to bear your recipient in mind. Think before you moji, or risk a damaged mojo!

The verdict: Four for four!

I'm quite relieved that it's a tie – I honestly thought I'd land up with a much longer list of negatives and then I'd have to be a grumbling stick-in-the-mud once again.

Of course, it's totally up to you to decide where you stand, lists notwithstanding. But whatever you do, remember that etiquette, propriety, and context are always going to play a crucial role. If there were an emoji depicting common sense, I'd use it in closing, but since there isn't, this will have to do...



ABOUT SARAH HEUER

Has been in the language and communication business for 15 years. She holds Cum Laude Honours degrees in English Literature and Publishing. She has lectured Journalism, taught English, and written and edited in a variety of sectors, including law, the culinary world, secondary and tertiary education, psychology, the arts, finance and economics, and marketing. In her spare time, she toys with the idea of writing a best-seller. She is currently head editor and copywriter at inSite Innovative Education Solutions.

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