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Can Students Still Write? In writing, Colby students juggle multiple voices in different environments

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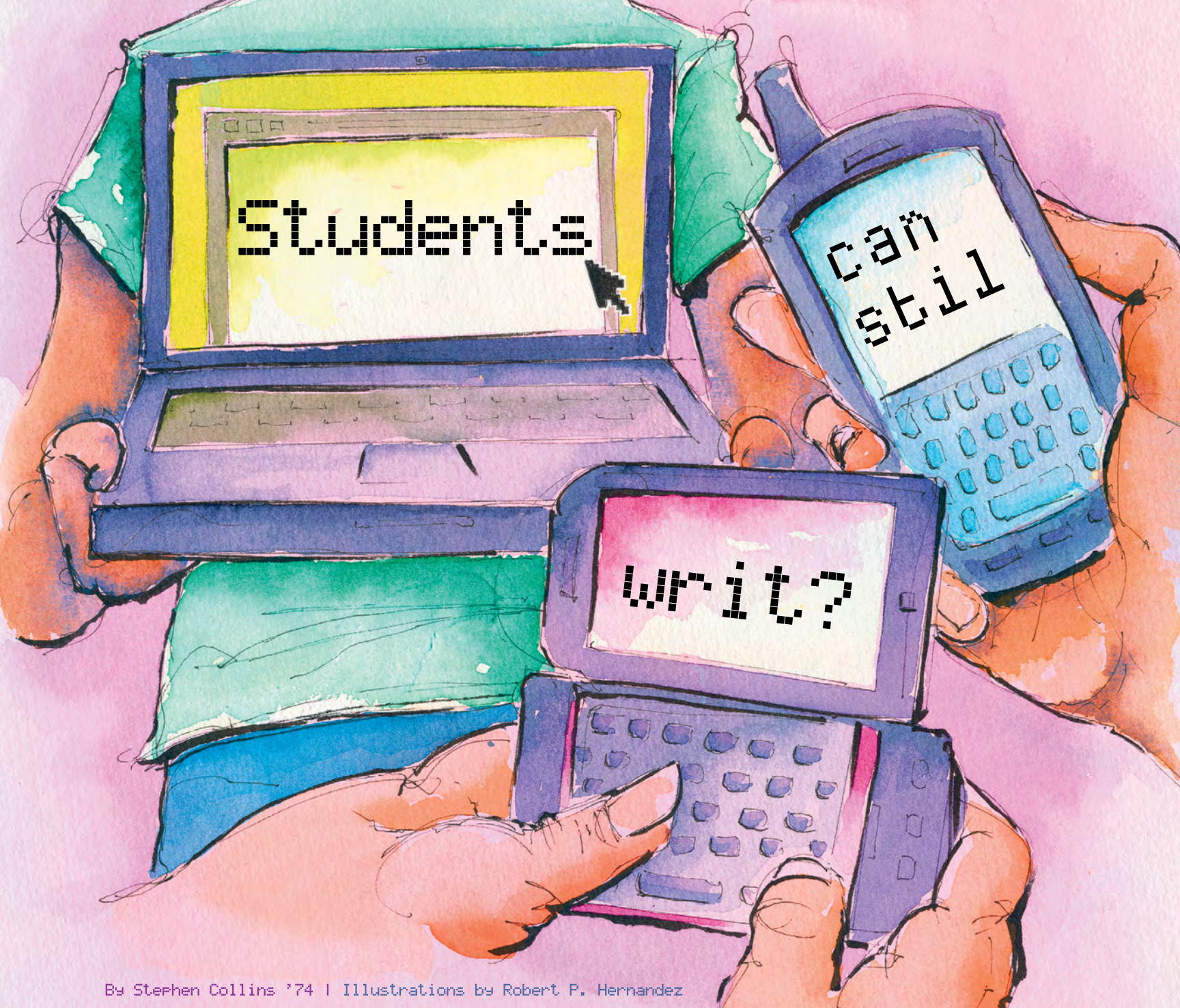
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By Stephen Collins '74 | Illustrations by Robert P. Hernandez

In writing, Colby students juggle multiple voices in different environments

Around the turn of the 21st century, reports of instant-message abbreviations and emoticons insinuating themselves into school papers horrified grammar traditionalists. (OMG!)

“Some teachers see the creeping abbreviations as part of a continuing assault on formal written English,” Jennifer 8. Lee wrote in the *New York Times* in 2002. “Others take it more lightly, saying that it is just part of a larger arc of language evolution.”

What’s the word (or the text-message contraction) on Mayflower Hill today? As the new decade begins, have the dire predictions come true? Have IM, texts, and social networking

sites really undermined students’ abilities to write a persuasive essay, a cogent lab report, or a good research paper?

Not really, professors and peer writing tutors agree. This is not to say the problem doesn’t exist in high schools (which is what Lee was writing about) or that students’ grammar is perfect. But Assistant Professor of English Paula Harrington reports that students intuitively understand a broad range of writing environments that require different levels of formality, and they do a good job adapting.

“It’s all about audience,” said Harrington, who directs the Farnham Writers’ Center. “It’s not that they should write perfectly all the time, it’s that they should figure out who

they're writing for, and they should have appropriate language for the context."

If anything, informality is somewhere well down a list of pet peeves. The top of the list? Overly formal, pretentious language that some students tend to sling around thinking it sounds academic.

Adan Hussain '11, a Writers' Center tutor and a math major, said, "People can separate the many different voices they take on during their day. I don't find text jargon within a paper." In brainstorming and outlining, text abbreviations can be useful, but students rarely let them migrate beyond a first draft, he said.

Granted she's a writing tutor, but Coline Delaporte '11 said in an interview that she even proofreads some e-mail. "It matters to whom you're writing." [Nuff said.]

Asked (by this white-haired editor) about proper grammar and style in academic writing, Hussain saw the challenge from another side. "There's a right and a wrong way to talk through text messaging," he said. "People find it strange when I use caps on text messages or add in periods sometimes." But it's not that simple. "Even text messaging is different from instant messaging online."

Case in point: Adam Gopnik, a writer for the *New Yorker*, told a story on the *Moth Radio Hour* about adopting the "LOL" from his son's texts. Gopnik used the abbreviation at the end of every message thinking it meant "lots of love" (rather than "laughing out loud"). This led to unfortunate constructions to family members, like, "Sorry about your cancer. LOL."

While new media and social networks can be a challenge for one who learned to write on an Underwood manual typewriter, Harrington sees a real upside in the communications technology revolution. "Students are writing more because of [Facebook, texting, IM, e-mail, and blogs]," she said. "Now at least they are cranking some language out."

And the language of informal environments, even some of its truncated forms, will inevitably influence the mother tongue.

"There's an increasing acceptance of contractions in formal written English," said Zacamy Professor of English Peter Harris. [Only recently did Colby's admissions publications tolerate "it's" or "you'll."] It's only a matter of time until texts and "Tweets" make inroads.

"Hemingway was affected by newspaper writing and even by the telegraph," Harris said, "so people thought Hemingway was abridging the glory of the English language."

As Jesse Sheidlower, North American editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, told the *New York Times* in 2002, "There is no official English language. ... The decisions are made by the language and the people who use the language."

Harrington sees that evolution all around her. "I think language has become more informal in recent years, and I don't think that's just because of electronic things," she said. "I think our whole culture—the way we dress and the way we act—has just gotten less formal. I think that can be good, because [writing] can be more expressive, it can be more direct, and it can be more original. The problem is it can also break down too much."

If anything, Harrington, Harris, and writing tutors struggle with the other end of the spectrum, battling pompous formality, puffed-up diction, and the dreaded passive voice in student papers. "Compositionese," Harris called it.

For some it's part of the difficult transition from high school to college. As a writing tutor Hussain hears students say, "Oh, in high school I used to BS a lot in my papers and just get away with it and still do well," he said. But given the higher standards they encounter on Mayflower Hill, they soon realize that they can't fake it anymore, he said. "It's an adjustment."

Harrington is passionate about weaning students from overuse of the passive voice. "They hear it everywhere, because it's the way of evading responsibility for actions. ... 'Mistakes were made.' ... They hear it in corporate business language. 'Dividends were suspended.' Our culture has become so inclined to have people not take responsibility in their language, [students] think this is the way powerful and important and highfalutin movers and shakers talk." And so they put it in their early compositions, thinking it sounds academic.

Clarity, though, is cardinal.

"Good clear writing shows good clear thinking," Harrington said. "Even if you have good critical thinking skills, it's not going to come across in lousy writing."

"What I say to my students is I want them to think of their writing as a good, clear stream that someone has thrown bottle caps and twigs and gum wrappers in, and I want them to get all that stuff out so I can see all their lovely thoughts—the little fish and the rocks at the bottom of the stream."

Simple advice. But as E.B. White wrote, "It is probably no harder to eat a woodchuck than to construct a sentence that will last a hundred years." 