OkTrends

Dating Research from OkCupid

Exactly What To Say In A First Message
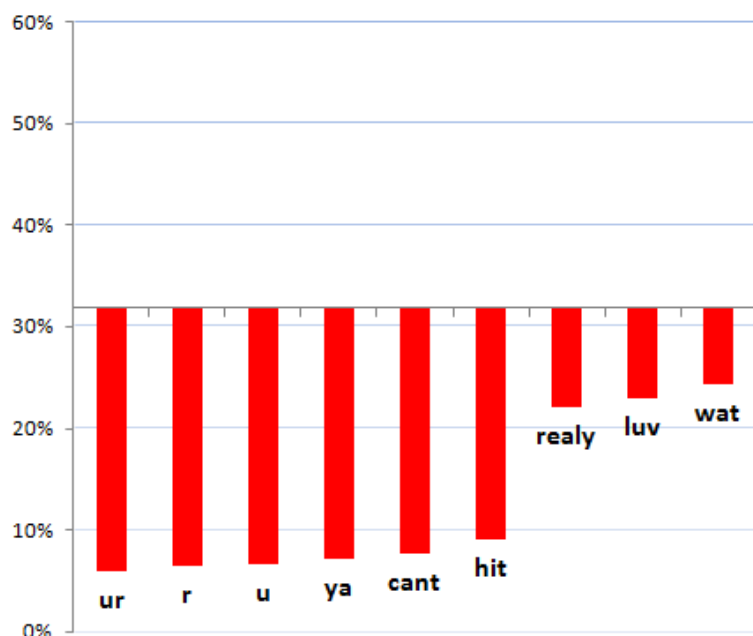
September 14th, 2009 by Christian Rudder

Ok, here's the experiment. We analyzed over 500,000 first contacts on our dating site, OkCupid. Our program looked at keywords and phrases, how they affected reply rates, and what trends were statistically significant. The result: a set of rules for what you should and shouldn't say when introducing yourself. Online dating advice at its best. Let's go:

Rule 1
Be literate

Netspeak, bad grammar, and bad spelling are huge turn-offs. Our negative correlation list is a fool's lexicon: *ur*, *u*, *wat*, *wont*, and so on. These all make a terrible first impression. In fact, if you count *hit* (and we do!) the worst 6 words you can use in a first message are all stupid slang.

Graphs show reply rates of messages containing the listed keywords, plotted against the average reply rate of 32%

Language like this is such a strong deal-breaker that correctly written but otherwise workaday words like *don't* and *won't* have nicely above average response rates (36% and 37%, respectively).

Interesting exceptions to the "no netspeak" rule are expressions of amusement. *haha* (45% reply rate) and *lol* (41%) both turned out to be quite good for the sender. This makes a certain sense: people like a sense of humor, and you need to be casual to convey genuine laughter. *hehe* was also a successful word, but much less so (33%). Scientifically, this is because

it's a little evil sounding.

So, in short, it's okay to laugh, but keep the rest of your message grammatical and punctuated.
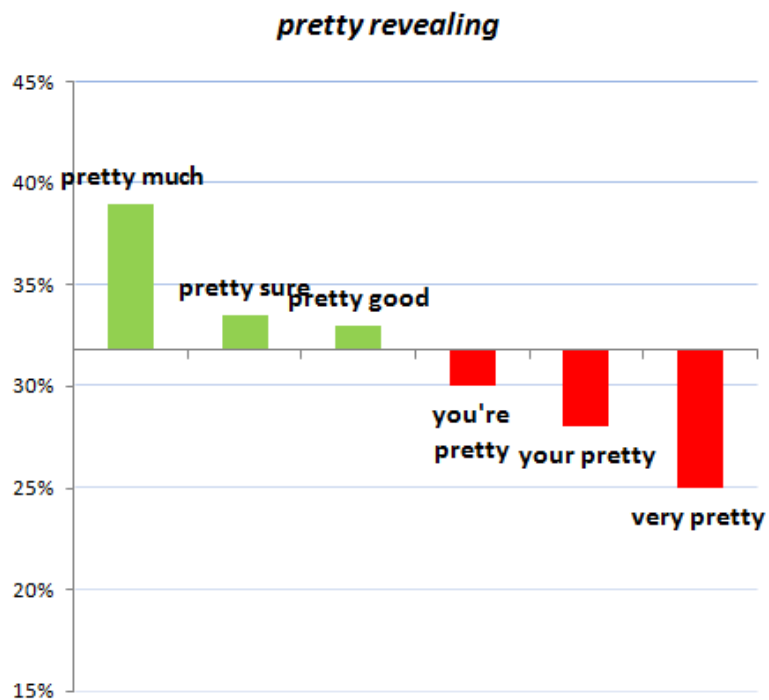
Rule 2
Avoid physical compliments

Although the data shows this advice holds true for both sexes, it's mostly directed at guys, because they are way more likely to talk about looks. You might think that words like *gorgeous, beautiful*, and *sexy* are nice things to say to someone, but no one wants to hear them. As we all know, people normally like compliments, but when they're used as pick-up lines, before you've even met in person, they inevitably feel…ew. Besides, when you tell a woman she's beautiful, chances are you're not.

On the other hand, more general compliments seem to work well:

The word *pretty* is a perfect case study for our point. As an adjective, it's a physical compliment, but as an adverb (as in, "I'm pretty good at sports.") it's is just another word.
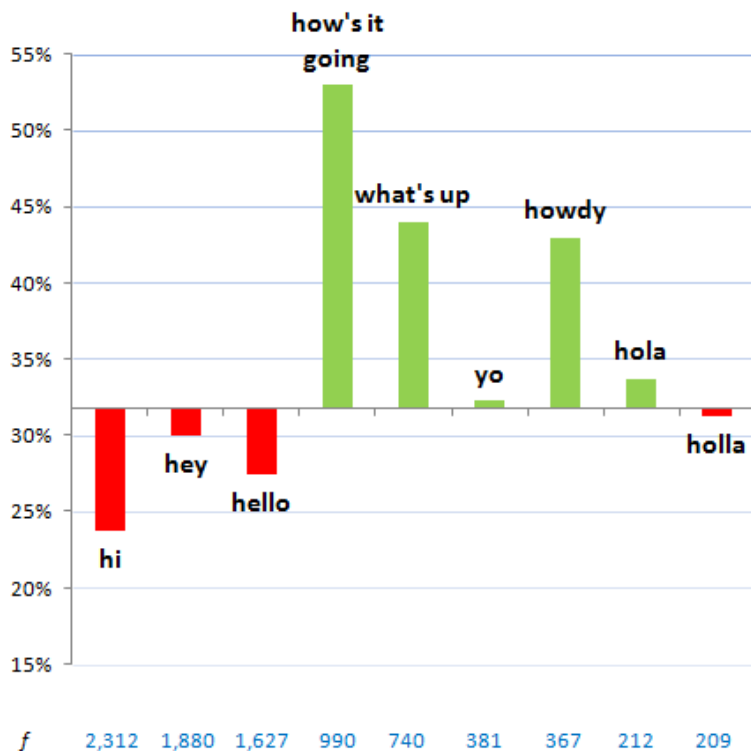
pretty revealing

When used as an adverb it actually does very well (a phenomenon we'll examine in detail below), but as *pretty*'s uses become more clearly about looks, reply rates decline sharply. *You're pretty* and *your pretty* are phrases that could go either way (physical or non-). But *very pretty* is almost always used to describe the way something or someone looks, and you can see how that works out.

Rule 3
Use an unusual greeting

We took a close look at salutations. After all, the way you choose to start your initial message to someone is the "first impression of your first impression." The results surprised us:

Reply rates of messages containing these keywords in the first 7. Plotted below each keyword is its frequency per 10,000 messages sent.

The top three most popular ways to say "hello" were all actually bad beginnings. Even the slangy *holla* and *yo* perform better, bucking the general "be literate" rule. In fact, it's smarter to use no traditional salutation at all (which earns you the reply rate of 27%) and just dive into whatever you have to say than to start with *hi*. I'm not sure why this is: maybe the ubiquity of the most popular openings means people are more likely to just stop reading when they see them.
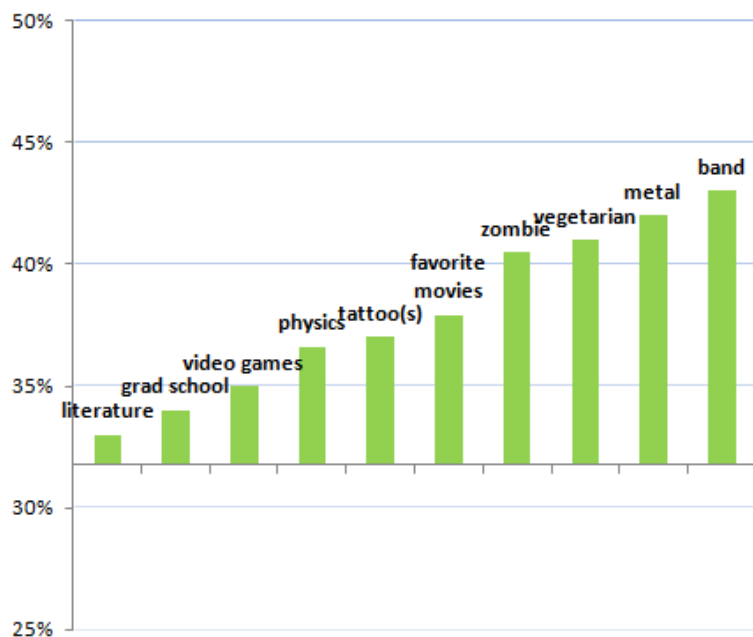
The more informal standard greetings: *how's it going*, *what's up*, and *howdy* all did very well. Maybe they set a more casual tone that people prefer, though I have to say, **You had me at 'what's up'** doesn't quite have the same ring to it.
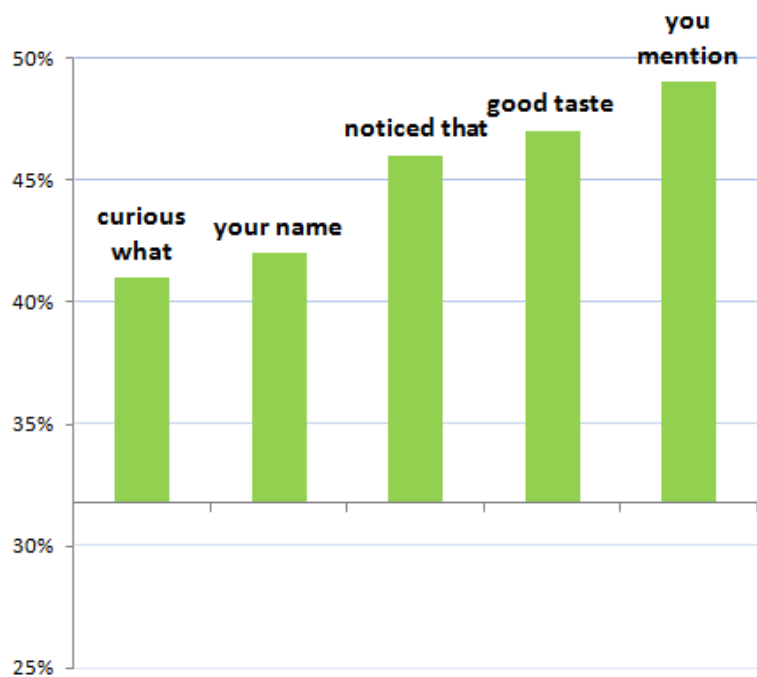
Rule 4
Bring up specific interests

There are many words on the effective end of our list like *zombie*, *band*, *tattoo*, *literature*, *studying*, *vegetarian* (yes!), and *metal* (double yes!) that are all clearly referencing something important to the sender, the recipient, or, ideally, both. Talking about specific things that interest you or that you might have in common with someone is a time-honored way to make a connection, and we have proof here that it works. We're presenting just a smattering: in fact every "niche" word that we have significant data on has a positive effect on messaging.

specifics are successful

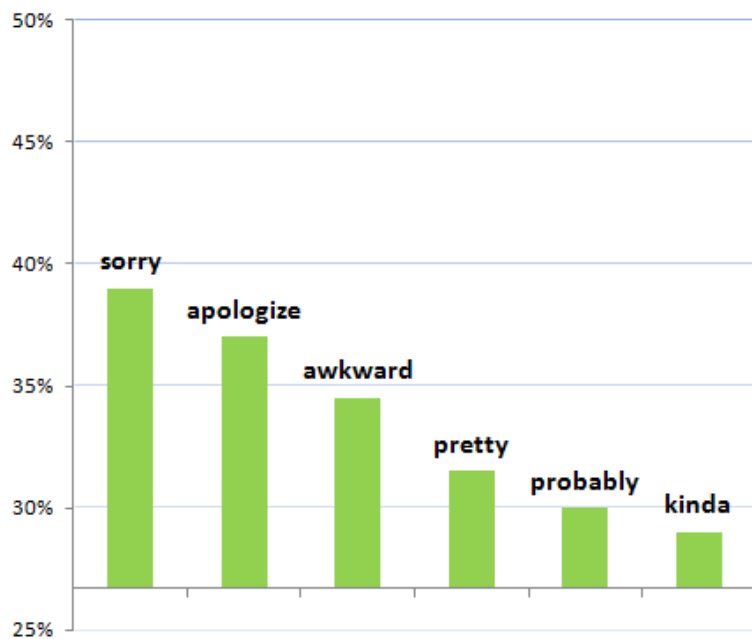Even more effective are phrases that engage the reader's own interests, or show you've read their profile:

Rule 5
If you're a guy, be self-effacing

Awkward, *sorry*, *apologize*, *kinda*, and *probably* all made male messages more successful, yet none of them except *sorry* affects female messages. As we mentioned before, *pretty*, no doubt because of its adverbial meaning of "to a fair degree; moderately" also helps male messages. A lot of real-world dating advice tells men to be **more** confident, but apparently hemming and hawing a little works well online.
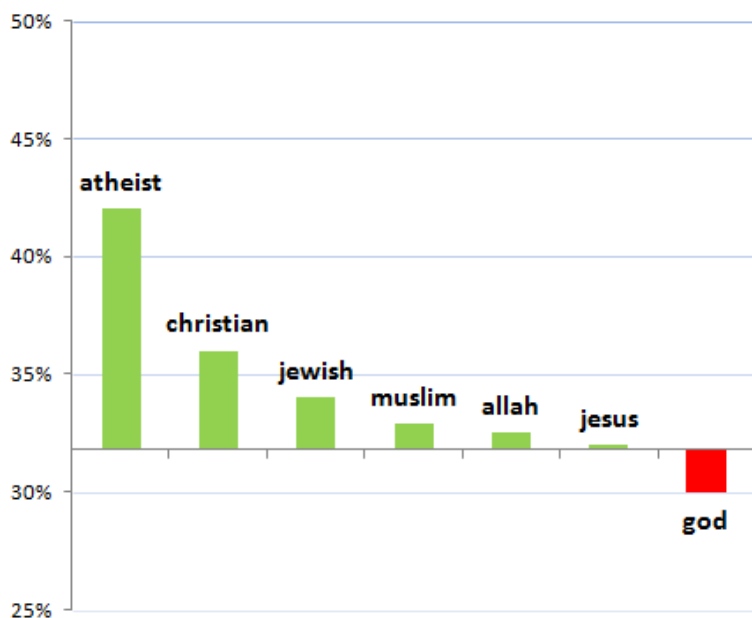
male self-effacement

The average reply rate of man-to-woman messages is 27%.

It could be that appearing unsure makes the writer seem more vulnerable and less threatening. It could be that women like guys who write mumbly. But either way: men should be careful not to let the appearance of vulnerability become the appearance of sweaty desperation: *please* is on the negative list (22% reply rate), and in fact it is the **only** word that is actually worse for you than its netspeak equivalent (*pls*, 23%)!

Rule 6
Consider becoming an atheist

Mentioning your religion helps you, but, paradoxically, it helps you most if you have no religion. We know that's going to piss a lot of people off, and we're more or less tongue-in-cheek with this advice, but it's what the numbers say.

These are the religious terms that appeared a statistically significant number of times. *Atheist* actually showed up surprisingly often (342 times per 10,000 messages, second only to 552 mentions of *christian* and ahead of 278 for *jewish* and 142 for *muslim*).

Though very few people actually do it, invoking the sky-breaking thunderbolts of *zeus* does help a person get noticed (reply rate 56%), but maybe that shouldn't be a surprise on a site that is itself named for a member of the Classical pantheon. So if you can't bring yourself to deny the deity, consider opening yourself up to a whole wacky bunch of them. But ideally you should just disbelieve the whole thing. It can help your love life, and, besides, if there really was a god, wouldn't first messages *always* get a reply?

A word about user privacy on OkCupid

Though this post talks in detail about the content of people's messages on OkCupid, all messages have been anonymized, with sender and recipient data and all IP and timestamp information stripped out. In addition, our analysis program looked at messages only two or three words at a time, to track the success of certain words or phrases (like "what's up" vs. "wats up"). The program then aggregated results by phrase before presenting the data. No one at OkCupid read any actual user messages to compile this post.

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This article was posted on Monday, September 14th, 2009 at 4:49 pm. You can follow any responses to it through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can also leave a response or trackback from your own site. Thanks again for reading.

457 Responses to "Exactly What To Say In A First Message"

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1. *MaeBest* says:
   September 18, 2010 at 9:16 am

   I would also be interested in seeing a height weight scale summery. It was extremely interesting to learn that both men and women stretch the truth about their height equally. I would be similarly as fascinated in learning the statistics of folks who fabricate their own truth about their weight. It seems so silly to me to lie about either if you are actually planning to meet someone. Although the excuses one would make up about why they are 2 inches shorter, or 50 pounds heavier may sound funnier in my head than verbalized.

2. *nick* says:
   September 18, 2010 at 5:15 pm

   That is so bizarre about the religion aspect and I have noticed that the vast majority of women online really do not practice any religion. I guarantee you 90% of these people also have at least 3 tattoos and don't have a clear cut idea of what they want to do for a living. I know this is passing judgment and a little unfair to say but, just see for yourself.

   Why do most women really disguise their personalities and don't expect men not to through out petty compliments? When you say "I like to have fun with my friends" that says absolutely nothing about you… No wonder their is such a negative stereotype to internet dating from a female perspective, they just don't take it seriously or put much faith in it.

3. *Elliot* says:
   September 18, 2010 at 5:46 pm

   all of this seems like go info, ill give it a try because my last emails have not worked jack shit for me or my profile.

4. *Saadia* says:
   September 18, 2010 at 11:37 pm

   WOW I get why my stupid netspeak turns guys off now. I wish I read this article earlier!!! AND CALM DOWN PEOPLE! The point was to keep religion out of context until you get to know the person better.

5. *Jesus* says:
   September 20, 2010 at 6:40 pm

   I wasn't going to comment but I couldn't work out if this was sarcasm, trolling or deluded ranting (I'll assume the first):

   "Atheists love to feel persecuted. That high number comes from idiots saying, "It's so hard to find attractive atheists who *understand* me." No it's not. Freaking everybody on the Internet is an atheist. Get over yourselves."

   It made me want to know the correlation between atheism and having a sense of humour because it sure looks like practically the same thing all the way to the opposite end of the spectrum after reading that. Look at Jon Stewart and Colbert vs the FOX news crowd. Yes he's jewish but his audience is largely atheist or at least made up of those that don't take their religion so seriously, including himself.

   Any atheist would be just be thinking 'WTF????' and then laughing their head off. Athiests are immune from feeling persecuted, as atheists at least, since by definition is doesn't define any part of their ego and where is this one

   Yes it can come across as being an insensitive asshole to those on the other side but being able to laugh at the world in general probably helps quite a lot in coming across as less serious, which seems to correlate with getting more responses.

   PS: sorry if this is a duplicate post but I got no indication that the first one did anything.

6. *Mostafa* says:
   September 25, 2010 at 3:12 pm

its Terrible to make GOD the last thing on the list ! Wake up people pleaaaaaaase!

7. *James* says:
   [September 28, 2010 at 3:21 pm](#)

   I don't think denying God is going to help you find a girlfriend bud.

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About OkTrends

OkTrends is original research and insights from [OkCupid](#), the best dating site on earth. We've compiled our observations and statistics from hundreds of millions of OkCupid user interactions, all to explore the data side of the online dating world.

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