

10 Commandments of Twitter for Academics

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Most of my friends (the ones who are not already on Twitter) have heard my Twitter pitch, and it's true that since joining several years ago I've become quite an evangelist.

Recently over dinner, a colleague told me he had never really gotten the point of Twitter, but now that he had a book to promote, he wished he had followers he could share it with.

Twitter is what you make of it, and its flexibility is one of its greatest strengths. I'm going to explain why I have found it useful, professionally and personally, and lay out some guidelines for academics who don't know where to start.

The first and most obvious benefit has been helping me get to know a lot of great people whom I probably wouldn't have met otherwise. A number of my pre-Twitter, real-life friends are regular tweeters, too, but most of the people I follow and almost all of those who follow me are people I know only through Twitter. I've also used it to engage directly with scholars whose work I admire (and not just academics: I've been retweeted by Margaret Atwood and Susan Orlean, and both times it made my day).

Thanks to Twitter, I have been sent copies of obscure articles much faster than I would have received them from an interlibrary loan. I just need to tweet “Does anyone have access to the Journal of X, 1972?” and within an hour someone will have e-mailed me the PDF. It’s tremendously useful.

It’s important to have a keyword, or hashtag, that others can search for when you want to communicate with networks beyond your own followers. In 2009, I created a hashtag for historians on Twitter: #twitterstorians. At first I was just curious to find and connect with other historians. But the hashtag has turned out to be a useful way of marking posts on historical topics and finding colleagues working in the same topic. It’s great to be able to search and see what other people are posting related to your field. Other fields have their own tags—#histsci and #histmed for the history of science and of medicine, for instance. Whatever your discipline, there’s probably a hashtag in use, but if there isn’t, create one.

A common error I see some academics make on Twitter is to set up an account solely to promote a new book or project. As academics, we all have things to promote from time to time: books, conferences, calls for papers. But in order to promote something successfully on Twitter, you need to already *have* an audience. Why would anyone follow an account whose sole purpose is a sales pitch? Build an audience first, and the audience will follow if they like you and will then listen once you have something to pitch.

You can ask for or about anything on Twitter. I’m consistently in awe of how knowledgeable my Twitter friends are. Asking about academic issues in my field has generated some great conversations about history. I recently founded a journal, and half of the members of the editorial board are people I got to know through tweeting. I’ve also used the network to find colleagues who are willing to comment on my work or serve on conference panels I’m organizing.

I once tweeted for recipe suggestions, having found several bags of dried flageolet beans in my cupboard. Lickedysplit I had a recipe for lamb with beans, and also a fabulously delicious bean-and-garlic soup. I’ve been able to get tips on everything from leather-coat repair to how to treat a burn. When travelling, the first thing I do is tweet asking for local recommendations on restaurants and such.

Which brings me to my next point: You are allowed on Twitter to admit to having a life outside of academe.

Some scholars are reluctant to show any persona on Twitter beyond a professional one. That’s understandable, but it leads to some tedious feeds. (“Today I am at the library/in the lab,” or “This afternoon I am reading The Journal of Highfalutin Studies”). It’s great to let your followers know what the life of an academic involves—indeed, many professors have used the #dayofhighered hashtag recently to demonstrate how they spend their time.

But tweeting only when you're engaged in worthy academic activity creates a sterile feed. It looks artificial, like you're trying to present yourself as an academic robot. And as it turns out, showing your personality actually impresses students.

Should you tweet your students, or allow them to follow you? I see a number of professors not only talking with their students but also using Twitter as a tool to send messages to the class. Whether that would work depends on your institutional culture, but again, the beauty of Twitter is that not everyone has to use it the same way.

Another common mistake is just to post links to articles from major publications without any personal commentary. Occasional links to articles or columns that you find particularly interesting are great—especially if you say why you like them. But if your feed just looks like the first page of Google news, no thank you.

The immediacy of Twitter does mean that to get something out of it, you've got to participate regularly. But the brevity of it means you can just dip in and out. Twitter can be something you have on in the background while you work. I use Twitter for Mac (the program is free to download), and the little blue bird lights up at the top corner of my screen if someone has written to me. You can also use a smartphone for Twitter if you don't want to use your computer.

Because I mostly work from home, Twitter is the “water cooler chat” I would otherwise have with colleagues in the office. My colleagues just happen to be scattered around the world.

In closing, let me share my 10 commandments of Twitter use, some of which will repeat points I've made already:

1. Put up an avatar. It doesn't really matter what the picture is, but the “egg picture” (the default avatar for new accounts) makes you look like a spammer.
2. Don't pick a Twitter name that is difficult to spell or remember.
3. Tweet regularly.
4. Don't ignore people who tweet at you. Set Twitter to send you an e-mail notification when you get a mention or a private message. If you don't do that, then check your account frequently.
5. Engage in conversation. Don't just drop in to post your own update and disappear. Twitter is not a “broadcast-only” mechanism; it's CB radio.
6. Learn the hashtags for your subject field or topics of interest, and use them.
7. Don't just make statements. Ask questions.

8. Don't just post links to news articles. I don't need you to be my aggregator.

9. Do show your personality. Crack some jokes.

10. Have fun.

To get you started, here are some great Twitter accounts of academics to follow: Lauren Hall-Lew, linguistics at the University of Edinburgh (@dialect); Mark Sample, English at George Mason University (@samplereality); Rebecca Goetz, history at Rice University (@historianess); Greg Restall, philosophy at the University of Melbourne (@consequently); and Kate Clancy, anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (@KateClancy).