

A non-fanatical beginner's guide to Twitter

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Thanks to a bunch of mainstream media coverage, a lot of folks around me are becoming more interested in participating in the Twittersverse. "All right, all right," they say. "You've convinced me. But how do I get *started*?" It's almost like walking into a giant party for the first time: You're not sure where your friends are, the bar is on the other side of the room, and the bathrooms are anyone's guess. Allow me to be your party guide.

Sure, sure, you could also just Google "beginner's guide to Twitter" and read a any number of other guides that have been written. Problem is, I feel like most of them focus on two niches: how to be a fanatical Twitterer, and/or how to be a really obnoxiously popular Twitterer. What I'm aiming for here is more for people who want to experiment a little and connect with other folks on a pretty direct level. We'll talk later about different ways you can participate, but for now, let's just get the basics down.

Grammar and vocab

First, it's good if you can get some of the lingo down before jumping it. Pretend you're visiting a foreign country where you don't speak the language— there are always a few basic phrases you want to have in your back pocket.

- **Following.** These are the people whose tweets you've selected to read; their tweets appear in your "feed" or "stream."
- **Follower.** This is someone who is reading your tweets.
- **The @ symbol.** Put this before any other Twitterer's username to refer to them. Why? It creates a link to their profile automatically, which is handy for your followers to track conversations or look at people you're referring to. @Replies will likely show up in that person's [Mentions page](#).



Note that if you reply to another person using the Reply arrow button on Twitter, though, that only people who follow that person will also see that reply in your feed. It's kind of a drag; [more on this here](#).

- **Rt, RT or rtwt.** These stand for "retweet." If you read someone else's tweet that you think people following you should also read, put this before copying and pasting the whole thing, including the original tweeter's username. Here's an example, where I retweeted something that Nancy Scola posted: "*rt @nancyscola: isn't there something uniquely DC about 1/5 of Politico's "top 10" DC Twitterers not actually tweeting? <http://ow.ly/qmy>"*
Update: Also, you can use "**via** @username" to attribute something that you saw with another user, but aren't directly quoting word for word. (thanks, @nezua!)
Update #2: Twitter now has its own built in retweet function (the circular arrow button). Many people don't use it, though, because those retweets don't show up in Mentions, and it throws off their user's own feeds by displaying the icons of strangers.
- **The # symbol.** Words that follow # in Twitter are called "hash tags." It's a way of assigning a keyword to a tweet so that so that others can follow the topic. For example: When folks were attending the WeMedia conference this week, they would tweet information about the conference and put #wemedia somewhere in the tweet. That way, everyone else interested in news from the conference could easily find and track them. [Tracy Van Slyke](#) of the [Media Consortium](#) said this, for example: "*#wemedia. Twitter wins game changing award! @bizsays best thing: twitter isn't about triumph of tech, it's about triumph of humanity.*" And you can see lots of other tweets from that conference [here](#)— by [searching for the hashtag](#). If you see a hashtag in use and don't know what it means, try checking out "[What the Hashtag](#)."



- **URLs that look like *is.gd*, *tinyurl.com*, *bit.ly*, etc.** These are URL shortening services that take very long links and squish them down to fewer characters. Why? Because on Twitter, you only have 140 characters to get your thought out, and this leaves more room for your words.
- **Direct messaging.** This is a way of sending a message to someone so that only they can see it– like sending a txt message. The person has to be following you in order to receive messages from you, though! (No DMing [Jane Fonda](#) or [Henry Rollins](#) unless they're following you, ya hear?) To do this, you can either go to the person's twitter page (aka, their profile page), and click on the "message" link in the left sidebar. Or, if you're using another device or application besides the Twitter website, you can type the letter **d**, the person's username, and then your message. I.e., "*d randomdeanna let's go to happy hour at abilene later*"

Finding your people

OK, you've got your phrasebook, now it's time to wade in. Let's start with the technical aspect of finding people to follow. Twitter makes this stunningly easy by providing a "Find people" link at the top of the website. Click on it, and you're taken to a screen where you can select different ways to connect with other people you know. Click on "Find on other networks," and then select your email provider and search for contacts already on Twitter. Twitter lets you choose who you want to follow from the list of people that it finds. It also recommends that you invite everyone else not on Twitter, but you can definitely skip that. (Please – it's considered spam!)

What if you're not on any of those email services? I actually don't use my Gmail account for regular contact, so I exported my Mac's Address Book (I used [A to G](#)), and then imported it into my contacts. You can do this with any of the providers listed; I'm pretty sure they're all free. (I do find Gmail easiest to navigate, though.) Then you can come back to the Twitter screen and move along.



Finding people who might be your people

Consider looking for Twitter folk who you don't already know, but who you might find interesting. The most effective way is often the organic way: Watch your friends' @ replies to other users you don't know. Click on those names. Scan through their tweets. Find them interesting? Follow.

Additionally, you can also browse through self-maintained directories of Twitter users. I don't use these too much myself, but I know for a while [TwitterPacks](#) was pretty popular. If you have a favorite list or site, leave 'em in the comments.

One last thing I want to mention is to pay attention to certain hashtags on certain days, particularly [#FollowFriday](#) (where every Friday, people tweet lists of their favorite Twitterers), and [#Women2Follow](#) on Wednesdays — awesome women from all over, Twittering away.

Getting people to find you

"But how will others know if I'm on Twitter?"

Well, you might want to start by telling them. You could go old school and send an email to people you think might be interested, though not that many people do it. I added my Twitter page to my email signature as a subtle way of "announcing" it. Note that the people you choose to follow likely have their profiles set to get an email or other alert every time someone new follows them, so you don't have to tell them. You can also post a note to your Facebook profile, if you have one, telling folks that you're Twittering.

Update: Two other points made to me about making sure people can find you:

- It's a good idea to use your real, full name in [your profile](#) so that if people are searching for you, or if you come up in their list of contacts when they do the email address thingie, they'll see you. (*Thanks, Cos!*)



- Another good idea is to [change your icon](#) right away, so that you get rid of the ugly brown default Twitter one. One, it'll help differentiate your tweets in your followers' feeds, and two, it'll help people recognize you when they're looking for you. Many people advocate for using a real picture of yourself, but I say as long as it's something interesting and unique, go for it.

Setting your settings: web, email, phone, IM — oh my!

One of the best things about using Twitter is that it's available from any number of devices. You can read and post on the Twitter website, sure, but you can also set up your cellphone to be able to send and receive messages — go to [Settings -> Devices](#) to see how to do that. I don't get every tweet sent to my phone, because it'd just be too much. I have my phone set to receive direct messages only, so it's an additional way to get txt messages from my friends.

You can also download any number of applications to use Twitter on your phone— I use [ÜberTwitter](#) for my Blackberry Bold, and it's sort of bare-bones, but it gets the job done. If you're on an iPhone, there's about a jillion apps to choose from. It's hard for me to keep up with what the hipsters are using now, so, iPhone users: What's your favorite Twitter app? Leave it in the comments.

You can also keep your Twittering private. In the [Settings](#) page, at the bottom, there's a checkbox that reads "Protect my updates." Select this if you only want people you approve to read your updates.

Another thing to consider is that you can have your tweets also update your Facebook status. Most folks are split on whether this is a good idea or not; I'm a more the merrier kinda grrl, so mine are hooked up. You can do this by adding the [Twitter app](#) to your profile and adjusting your settings there. Or check out the extremely awesome [Ping.fm](#) service. This bad boy updates all of your social networks at once, using whatever type of communication you're most



comfortable with. Last, there's another app for Facebook that lets you selectively post from Twitter– it's conveniently called "[Selective Twitter](#)."

There are also tons of applications that you can download for your computer, but that's a whole 'nuther post on its own. Currently, the popular apps seem to be [Tweetdeck](#), [Twhirl](#), and [AlertThingy](#). I liked [Blogo](#) (which is a combo of blogging and [microblogging](#) software) myself, for a long time. Tweetdeck had just a little bit too much going on for me, and while Blogo isn't as robust as far as features go, the interface is so clean and Mac-fluent that it just makes me feel good. I'm now mostly using [Tweetie for Mac](#) because of a keychain problem I had with Blogo that never got resolved.

But what do I say?

Well, just about anything, really. Okay, we're probably not going to be interested in your belly button lint... but here are some methodologies you can try out:

- **Pure professional.** You're an expert in your field and you want to share this with the world. Pick a couple of "beats" and focus your twittering on those beats. Find other folks tweeting about these topics and have conversations with them.
- **Pure personal.** Your cat is hilarious, you're thinking about moving to Wisconsin, you're on your way to Miami for a much needed vacation. You get the idea here, but do try to keep your audience in mind as you post some of your life's minutiae. I'm guilty of posting weird stuff, for sure.
- **The blended model.** This is the way to go, and what ultimately makes Twitter so interesting, in my opinion. If I wanted to know people's political analysis only, I'd go read their blogs. There's a humanizing effect of reading about a distant colleague's child's first words, or seeing that people you think are on top of the world have bad days, too. It creates empathy and insight. When I tweeted that I'd had a really rough,



emotional weekend once, I was surprised to see which followers spoke up to say, "Hey, we're with you." And it helped further complete a picture of me for them, as well.

One of the biggest things to keep in mind about Twitter is that it's a *conversation*. I generally dissuade my fellow Twitter gurus from making blanket statements on how to use Twitter, but it's clear at this point that one of the joys most everyone gets out of it is talking to one another. Reply often (remember your vocab? the @ symbol is your friend!) to your followers and people you follow. Twitter is a two way street, with many, many lanes going both directions.

What if I don't like the people I'm following?

Stop following them.

No, really. If people are irritating, or tweeting so much that your stream/feed is overwhelmed and you're missing other stuff you find more interesting, stop following those people. It's okay. Manually check their pages every once in a while (this is what I do), or friend them on Facebook to follow their updates there, if you want. Or just walk away altogether.

This is all too much!

Check out my guide on [Twitter overload](#).

In closing, there are a few final wrap-up points:

- Twitter should be used how you feel most comfortable using it– don't let anyone tell you that you're doing it wrong.
- It takes a while to get the feel of Twitter. Commit, if you can, to trying it a couple times a day for two weeks or so. At the end of your little trial period, assess how you feel and how you think you'll use it.

