

Foreword by **JACK DORSEY**, Co-Founder of Twitter

Making the most of your messages on **Twitter**,  
**Facebook**, and other **Social Media** sites



# 140 CHARACTERS

A Style Guide  
for the Short Form

**DOM SAGOLLA**



## Praise for *140 Characters*

“Inspired by new mediums of publishing such as Twitter, this book provides a refreshing look at the breadth of linguistic techniques that shine with the advent of the modern short form.”

—Britt Selvitelle,  
Front End Engineering Lead, Twitter, Inc.

“In the midst of all the conflicting hype about Twitter, Dom Sagolla has produced a veritable bible that will guide anyone in participating in the most interesting social networking phenomenon of the past several years (without appearing to be a newbie!). His deep insights will inform both beginners and longtime Twitter users alike, and his inimitable style makes it an enjoyable read!”

—Andrew C. Stone,  
@twittelator of stone.com

“With *140 Characters*, @Dom has captured and conveyed the potent new short form language of the emergent twenty-first century Twitterverse in a way that only a master practitioner and true pioneer can.”

—Bruce Damer,  
Virtual Worlds pioneer and author  
of *Avatars* (PeachPit Press, 1997)

“Reading *140 Characters*, I found out how to create value and look cool using Twitter.”

—Gifford Pinchot,  
Co-founder and President Emeritus  
of the Bainbridge Graduate Institute,  
and author of *Intrapreneuring*  
(Harper Collins, 1986)

“Timeless.”

—@AdamJackson

“Provocative.”

—@Susan

“Illuminating.”

—@MarkLukach

“Essential.”

—@bmf

“Insightful.”

—@Case

“Quotable.”

—@ChristopherA

“Literary.”

—@Vigoda



# **140** **CHARACTERS**

**A Style Guide  
for the Short Form**

**D O M S A G O L L A**



**WILEY**

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*For @Meredith*





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Thank you for helping to make this work better by emailing [style@140characters.com](mailto:style@140characters.com) or visiting [www.140characters.com](http://www.140characters.com).



# Foreword

What you're holding in your hands is a set of guidelines. A collection of protocols which describe an approach to another protocol, something we call Twitter.

The amazing thing about this particular protocol is that it's being defined daily. By you. Twitter was inspired by the concepts of immediacy, transparency, and approachability, and created by the guiding principles of simplicity, constraint, and craftsmanship. We started small. We built something out of love and a desire to see it flourish throughout the world. We defined a mere 1 percent of what Twitter is today. The remaining 99 percent has been, and will continue to be, created by the millions of people who make this medium their own, tweet by tweet.

I leave you now in the capable hands of a documentarian, storyteller, and practitioner of a new protocol of communication. Listen, learn, and most importantly, define it for yourself.

—Jack Dorsey  
Creator, Co-founder, & Chairman, Twitter, Inc.  
San Francisco





# Introduction

The irony of 40,000 words on the topic of 140 characters is not lost. This book began as a work in hypertext, published online bit by bit. One of those bits (“How Twitter Was Born,” the basis for this Introduction) resulted in an interview, and the project was written up in the *New York Times*. That article charmed a mighty agent of letters in New York City, who engaged the fleet publishers of John Wiley & Sons.

*Je n’ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n’ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.*

—Blaise Pascal, 1657

(Translation: I have only made this [letter] longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter.)

This introduction contains some definitions, a brief history, and a caveat. Feel free to skip to Chapter 1 for the first lesson, on leadership. I will proceed to tell you the ways that I do things, but I fully expect you to do whatever you want anyway. This is my first book, and I’m publishing it simply to get a break from reciting its contents.

Use this book as a guide, the way you would use a field manual for camping or travel. Use it to discover a new genre of literature.

## The Short Form

The combination of short and instant message services, status appliances, and social networks has created an audience that both is voracious and has a deficit of attention.

We as readers define the short form within the limits of our own attention. Material that makes a reader react and subscribe becomes successful, while other attempts fall by the side. We witness literary natural selection as people publicly endorse each other’s messages.

Constraints can define a genre. Screenplays, for example, have a certain style due to the constraints of the form. Stray outside of that convention and the work becomes something else.

The short form may be recognized by several unique features. It is measured in number of characters, it is time-sensitive and serial, but it also allows for hypertext. Just as constraints can define the genre, so too do they necessitate style. Any genre is measured by its expressiveness.

Short messaging has a long and increasingly humble history of expressive creativity, from the first telegraph message in 1844:

*What hath God wrought?*

—Samuel Morse

to the first SMS (short message service) text message sent over mobile in 1991, said to be:

*Merry Christmas*

to the first man-made tweet in 2006:

inviting coworkers

<http://twitter.com/jack/statuses/29>

We have also seen a compression of time between innovations.

Tiny History of the Short Form: telegram, tcp/ip, email, txt, chat, web, twitter, wave.

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2409382174>

At the heart of these innovations are simply words. The tale of each creation is marked by moments of inspiration and lessons learned along the way. Allow me to share a few moments and some lessons we learned while creating Twitter.

## The History of Twitter

The entire Internet as we know it is barely a teenager, instant messaging (IM) a toddler, and the short form a mere babe in comparison. Social networking was just one of an emerging class of “Web Apps” only a few years ago. When Facebook was born in 2004, mobile applications like SMS had barely gotten started in the United States.

While Facebook remained closed to the general public (only certain higher education students and alumni were allowed in at first), alternative online community platforms exploded and fizzled. In 2005, the buzz was around “user-generated content.” It seemed like rich, mobile media was the future of the Internet, and podcasting was on the rise.

The service now known as Twitter was hatched in early 2006 as a side project by: @Jack Dorsey, @Biz Stone, @Noah Glass, @Crystal Taylor, @Jeremy LaTrasse, @Adam Rugel, @TonyStubblebine, @Ev Williams, myself (@Dom Sagolla), Evan “@Rabble” Henshaw-Plath, @RayReadyRay McClure, @Florian Weber, @Tim-Roberts, and @Blaine Cook. We worked at a podcast company called Odeo, Inc. in South Park, San Francisco, and had just contributed a major chunk of open source code and shipped the software for Odeo Studio.

I had been brainstorming with Ben @Vigoda at the MIT Media Lab, and invited him to visit Odeo. He gave a talk outlining our ideas for ongoing, asynchronous group discussion via cell phone. Ben suggested converting Odeo’s existing *AudioBlogger* technology into a kind of group voicemail dispatch service where people could both post and listen to ongoing conversations.

AudioBlogger was our only revenue-generating product at the time, based on a small deal we had with Google to record audio and send it automatically to Blogger.com. The service was designed and built by Odeo co-founder @Noah Glass, who was very keen on Ben’s and my idea of a “mobile listening post.”

AudioBlogger and our podcast directory with casual recording tools didn’t generate the level of usage that we had expected, however. This, along with tremendous competition from Apple and other heavyweights, sapped the optimism of our investors and the Odeo corporate board. We were forced to reinvent ourselves.

*Rebooting* or reinventing the company started with a daylong brainstorming session. We broke into teams to talk about our best ideas. @Florian and I chose to be in @Jack's group, where he first described a service that uses SMS to tell small groups what you are doing.

@Jack described an idea he'd had since 2001 called "Stat.us" (see [www.flickr.com/photos/jackdorsey/182613360](http://www.flickr.com/photos/jackdorsey/182613360)). His concept was based on early experience with LiveJournal's status feature during a time when he was writing software for dispatch couriers. "I want to have a dispatch service that connects us on our phones using text," he said.

His idea was to make it dead simple for anyone to just type something and send it to multiple other phones, and to the Web. Typing something on your phone in those days meant you were probably messing with T9 text input, unless you were sporting a relatively rare smartphone. Even so, we got the idea instantly and wanted it.

Later, each group presented their ideas, and a few of them were selected for prototyping. Days and weeks of demos ensued, in a survival of agility. @Blaine, @Rabble, and I each had prototypes for sharing status via voice instead of text. The mobile listening post concept made it quite far along into the working stages. @Jack's strictly text proposal rose to the top as a combination of these and other status-type ideas. @Jack, @Biz, and @Florian were assigned to build version 0.1, managed by @Noah. The rest of the company focused on maintaining Odeo.com, so that if this new thing flopped we'd have something to fall back on.

The first version of @Jack's idea was entirely Web-based. It was created on March 21, 2006. His message, and the first messages of the other joiners, was automated by the system. The first truly substantive message was prompted by hand:

waiting for dom to update more

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/35>

oh this is going to be addictive

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/38>

That first prediction was quickly borne out as we each signed up to communicate with each other at all times, wherever we might be.

We struggled with a code name and a product name. “It’s FriendStalker!” joked @Crystal, our most prolific user. The user base was limited entirely to the company and our immediate families. No one from a major company of any kind was allowed. For months, we were in Top Secret Alpha, because of competing products like the now-defunct Dodgeball, txtmob, and UPOC.

The original product name/code name, twttr, was inspired by Flickr and the fact that American SMS application names (or *short codes*) are five characters long. @Florian was commuting from Germany, so to operate with him we secured a “long code” or a full 10-digit phone number, linked to a small-potatoes gateway. Twttr probably had about 50 users in those days.

I followed everyone on the system at first. We had an Administrative page where you could see who was signing up. It was our only means to compile a “public timeline” back then. As the sole test engineer for the company, it seemed like my duty to watch for opinions or issues from our users. This caused some confusion, though, when family members of our team suddenly found themselves being followed by a person they didn’t know.

Thus, Private Accounts were born. @Jack and @Florian created a means for users to mark themselves private, and we admins had the ability to tell who wanted to be private so we’d know not to follow them. There were about 100 users when Private was invented (now called “Protected”).

At the outset, the interaction model and the visual metaphor for the service were constantly in flux. There was no “Twictionary” or cheat-sheet back then; data in the system were referred to as *posts* or just *messages*. The lack of clear terminology caused some spirited debates leading up to the spring of 2006.

We launched Twttr Alpha on @Ev’s birthday, March 31, 2006, just 10 days after it was born. We could now invite a slightly larger circle of friends, but still excluding any large companies (with a few trusted exceptions within places like Google). We all knew that we were going to change the world with this thing that no

one else understood. That day stands out in memory as the deep breath before a baby's first cry.

looking at the twttr recap of the party. This is like, so, postmodern.

<http://twitter.com/Adam/status/2454>

Meanwhile, Odeo management and the venture capitalists were at a tension point. Not only was the value of Twttr difficult to quantify, the relevance of Odeo was declining rapidly. Drastic cuts were recommended. One day in early May 2006, @Ev let four of the 14 employees go: myself, @Rabble, @Adam, and @TonyStubblebine. @Noah and @TimRoberts would later be asked to leave as well.

Looking back on it, our continued use of Twitter after our departure allowed us to stay connected when we might not have otherwise been. After all, we weren't even public with the site yet, so each of us continued to add value just by using it. Odeo itself was bought back from the investors by @Ev, and then rolled into a holding corporation called Obvious Corp, LLC.

In July 2006, Obvious launched Twttr.com to the public. Still, very few people understood its value. At the time, most people were paying per SMS message and worried that Twttr would run up the bills.

i went to twttr and all i got was this lousy 5cent per message phone bill

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2480>

"How and why should we use this thing?" and "Who cares what I'm doing?" they'd ask. Each one of the founding users became a kind of personal evangelist for Twttr, endeavoring to convince our coworkers and friends to use it.

One feature was a big part of Twttr's early attraction. On July 28, 2006:

Twtr launches direct messaging. Try me directly:  
“d dom”

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/14599>

Direct message (DM) is the way to contact another Twtr user privately. You can send a direct message only to someone who has chosen to follow you. The asymmetrical subscription model of Twitter distinguishes it from other social networking tools like Facebook, which requires mutual subscription.

Immediately following the DM feature, an application programming interface (API) was developed. The API allowed first the company engineers, then third-party developers to create Web, desktop, and mobile applications that interfaced with Twtr as alternatives to Twtr.com and SMS. These “clients” make “calls” directly to the servers for data.

@al3x "The API represents around 90% of @Twitter's traffic today."

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1196344247>

An API is considered *the key* to a service's early success and adoption rate. An early success with the API was TwitterVision, a Web application that shows Twitter messages on a world map as they happen, which landed in New York's Museum of Modern Art.

@Jack was still just an engineer, and the public service was only a few months old when Obvious acquired the domain name Twitter.com and rebranded. Back then, there was no character limit on our system. Messages longer than 160 characters (the specified SMS carrier limit) were split into multiple texts and delivered (somewhat) sequentially. There were other bugs, and a mounting SMS bill.

The team decided to place a limit on the number of characters that would go out via SMS for each post. They settled on 140, to leave room for the username and the colon in front of the

message. One day in February 2007, @Jack wrote something which inspired me to get started on this project:

One could change the world with one hundred and forty characters.

<http://twitter.com/jack/statuses/5383980>

That day I created 140characters.com, convinced that @Jack was right. The evolution of Twitter then underwent drastic acceleration. A Twitter update, instead of simply being listed in a timeline, was also given its own individual Web page. Twitter accounts got automatic syndication (RSS). @Blaine pushed for IM integration. Each major feature added tremendous gains in users and in usage per user.

Odeo, the service, was put up for sale so that Obvious Corp could focus completely on Twitter. Just in time for the media/technology conference South by Southwest (SxSW) in March of 2007, @RayReadyRay rigged a Flash-based visualizer intended for display in the halls of the conference.

I happened to be at the Twitter office in SF when the visualizer went live onsite in Austin, Texas. When people filtered out of their sessions, they could see their recent comments floating along the hallway screens. Twitter won an award at SxSW in the Blog category.

I'd like to thank everyone in 140 characters or less . . . and I just did.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/6825111>

The communal use of group-chat conventions like the @ symbol began to drive adoption as well. Twitter's incorporation of "@replies" as a fully fledged feature tapped a new well of addictive user behavior in 2007. For the first time, use of the @ symbol before a username in a Twitter message created a hyperlink to



that user's account, allowing greater ease of navigation and discovery. Twitter.com was barely over a year old when it reached the proverbial 300,000 users (considered a high mark at the time).

Epic day for Twitter: first update <http://twitter.com/jack/status/5764642> to its millionth <http://twitter.com/rentzsch...> !

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/5764642>

Twitter, Inc. was formed in May 2007, with @Jack as Chief Executive Officer. The inventor who had sketched his idea in a notepad back in 2001, then brought it to life as an engineer, was now in charge of a 14-person company with a multimillion-dollar valuation. A rapid series of high-profile activities immediately pushed Twitter into the spotlight.

Summer 2007 had the MTV Music Awards “moon man” posting to Twitter.

MTV tells me to get hip to the digital age. “Try Twitter” they said. So here I am. What? -mtvmoonman

<http://twitter.com/vma/status/199127112>

This was a hit with the reality TV/celebrity crowd, and boosted the number of users close to one million. To help people find one another, Twitter released a user search tool at the end of summer 2007. This was extremely basic, and only allowed a search of real names or usernames, not the messages themselves.

Twitter had been operational for more than a year when management decided to create an account to represent the company itself. It became apparent that a single account to transmit information to users was needed to replace the practice of users getting updates from employees' personal accounts. @Twitter got its own voice:

Taking twitter down for a little nap - the site and message delivery will be back within 4 hours

<http://twitter.com/twitter/status/439276572>

During mid- and late 2007, Twitter's simple persistence fought off insurgent threats from similar services. Meanwhile, corporations were starting to notice that real people were talking loudly in public about them via Twitter, and sometimes not too kindly. Comcast was the first publicly traded company to start using Twitter for customer support. In April 2008, @ComcastCares got its first break helping a tech blogger who had problems with his Internet connection.

As the news got out that Comcast was proactively reaching out to customers via Twitter, more companies joined, and 2008 became the year that businesses joined Twitter. Big and small companies joined the service and began interacting.

Learned that twitter is quite addictive

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/5385798>

Not only companies but government authorities and news media soon started listening.

James Buck, a photojournalist from Oakland, California, was on a trip to Egypt. On April 16, 2008, he was detained by Egyptian law enforcement over a simple misunderstanding. As he was thrown in the police car, he wrote one word:

Arrested.

<http://twitter.com/jamesbuck/status/786571964>

This Twitter post was picked up by U.S. authorities and resulted in his release from jail the following day. Twitter received

nationwide news coverage that day, a true sign that one could have a large impact with only a few characters of text.

April proved to be a historic month in other ways. On April 23, Twitter's chief architect @Blaine left Twitter amid organizational changes. Soon after, Twitter experienced significant challenges to service reliability. The Fail Whale, which started as some iconic art on the Twitter error page, became an icon for the crisis of Twitter's growth in late May and June.

ha! @caro says twitter used to be whaling slang looong before the failwhale surfaced. <http://bit.ly/PR1mV> (via @vindugoel)  
<http://twitter.com/jennydeluxe/status/1730100525>

A dozen new engineers were hired. As the number of users grew (along with messages per user), the team focused completely on maintaining service reliability. As a result, there was a certain feature vacuum and innovation took a backseat to maintenance.

In mid-2008, as Twitter began to grow exponentially, a service called Summize was launched, with Twitter as its first search subject. It became possible for anyone to see real-time search results from messages on Twitter, whether or not they were a user on the system. This opened up Twitter content to a much larger audience and created a demand for real-time search elsewhere on the Web.

Twitter's second round of financing in June 2008 allowed the team to purchase Summize shortly thereafter. Twitter retained all of the Summize engineers. Tweets became indexed and searchable in real time. Major world events started showing up as *trends*.

Using Search, Twitter "covered" the 2008 presidential election, beginning with the first debate on September 26. Current.tv, a broadcast television channel, would stream tweets in real time during the debate. This instant citizen feedback was very popular, leading to another round of mainstream attention. Alongside this, fall 2008 saw the release of a very special Search Filter: election.  
.twitter.com.

When you look at <http://election.twitter.com> you're looking at what the world is thinking about the election, from anywhere, in real time.

<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/935317720>

These contributions proved to be the last for @Jack as CEO. @Ev replaced him, becoming Twitter's CEO while @Jack assumed the Chairman's seat in October 2008. The change came amid dire economic news for the world.

Prior to fall 2008, there were but a few celebrities using Twitter. Not all of them were using the service publicly, and instead opted for private accounts. Soon other stars jumped in.

The big names using Twitter started writing as themselves. When the celebrities sign up, so do the fans.

Only two years and eight months after Twitter launched, more than 1 billion tweets had been sent using the service. User count is not disclosed by the company, but guesses ranged around 6 million when Twitter announced yet another round of venture capital in winter 2009.

January 2009 was the month that mainstream media started talking about Twitter, due to three monumental events. The first was Barack Obama's election to the U.S. presidency.

His campaign leveraged the power of Twitter to its fullest potential; He was the most-followed user at the time. Obama announced Joe Biden as the vice presidential nominee over Twitter (and his own SMS short code), then thanked everyone as the news broke that he had won the 2008 presidential election. This turned many influential writers and public figures on to the service.

We just made history. All of this happened because you gave your time, talent and passion. All of this happened because of you. Thanks

<http://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/992176676>

The second event that launched Twitter into the larger public sphere was the terrorist attack in Mumbai, India, in late November 2008. News of this tragedy reached the world first via Twitter, as updates came fresh from a scene that few reporters could reach. The realization that short communication could potentially save lives had begun to sink in.

A third event that demonstrated Twitter's value to the news world was the crash of a commercial airliner in the Hudson River. The first news of the crash broke over Twitter as someone took a photo and shared it via the Twitter API. This photo was viewed thousands of times, very quickly. Updates on the crash were available first through Twitter, directly from the rescuers.

<http://twitpic.com/135xa> - There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.

<http://twitter.com/jkrums/status/1121915133>

Astronomical growth has occurred while Twitter has gone mainstream. Percentage growth of the service is measured in the hundreds. In just three years, Twitter has gained tens of millions of users (and growing). It's been host to breaking news, helped raise money for charity, and ignited the imagination of a new generation of writers.

To recap Twitter and its brief history:

Odeo @Jack @Ev @Biz & SMS 2006. @SxSW @MTV 2007. @FailWhale then @BarackObama 2008. Mumbai. Hudson. @Oprah. #Iran.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2289905261>

The rise of Twitter has been so swift and dramatic that there has hardly been time to reflect on its meaning and impact. There have been many guides to its use, both technical and businesslike. I seek instead to place Twitter within a larger context of the modern short form of composition.

The following chapters have an obvious Twitter bias. Most of the examples you will see come from that community, although I enjoy others and they are mentioned. Each vessel of social messaging has its place. The purpose of this work is to find the prevailing similarities, chart a safe course through social networks, and offer a vision for the future of this new genre of public theater and written works.

starting to write my piece for @nightline tonight on my visit to Twitter HQ. A meeting of minds, @biz, @ev, and down the street @dom.

<http://twitter.com/JohnDonvanNL/status/1249914595>

If you follow the advice within and stuff blows up in your face, please do not blame me. Similarly, I do not take credit for the success of anyone following this advice. All I ask is that you lead the way, value your time, master the short form, evolve your style, and accelerate toward your own goals.

—Dom Sagolla

# Part One

## LEAD

Who is anyone to teach you about style? Style is the sound your words make in the mind. It is the tone taken when you are read aloud by someone else. Style is the ineffable, immeasurable spark of life in the text. Style is a mystery.

We stand at a frontier in writing. This wilderness grows wilder and less civilized as more and more writers create more and more content. We must establish a form to this frontier, and develop 140 characters as a standard worthy of the word *literature*.

Don't listen to that guy. He's trying to lead you down the path of righteousness. I'm gonna lead you down the path that \*rocks\*.

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/1924660238>

Although the short form may appear spartan, the nature of hypertext allows for virtually unlimited creativity. We as participants can write our own dictionary, tag items and text, and invent a potent new language together.

Short-form communication is ubiquitous and instantaneous. Those same features are also the bane of the medium. Interruption and distraction can appear at any time, and anywhere. The weakness of short-form communication is the need for filters.

The danger of information overload is real. We've seen it with e-mail and more real-time methods of communication. The human

mind is adapting quickly to sustain new levels of sensory input, but a learning gap has existed since the beginning of the Information Age. We all need the means to filter and control the amount of information that bombards us.

One effective method for existing in data-rich environments like short communication is to practice a zen-like state of flow. This practice is a mantra that keeps the author in the moment. Staying in the moment will allow you to realize that it is not necessary, or even possible, to read all of the terse content out there every day.

Staying in the moment will help you as a consumer and especially as a producer of terse content. Realize that everyone's attention is limited, and you will naturally arrive in the present.

To make your voice heard in this new medium, develop an authentic and original style. The following pages provide discipline and guidance for any writer. If you can learn the first lesson, you'll have done the hardest part. The first lesson teaches us to lead.

There is clearly one leader in the short communication space: Twitter is whatever you need it to be, whenever and wherever you need it, in 140 characters or less. It works by quickly routing hypertext messages to small groups who subscribe to get them.

Easier to experience than to describe, what starts as a steady stream of headlines from your friends and family turns into an all-knowing social "status-sphere." Tempting as it may be to spend all day reading and reacting, a writer writes.

In real life, a person with a lot of followers is called a *leader*. In the sense that social media is a constant flow of updates in public, when you write you are leading a conversation. Where you lead your readers is up to you.

## Lead by Example

Lead with action! Lead with vision. Lead with clarity. Lead us into temptation to reply.

Reminding myself that the idea behind Twitter was to get away from the computer (as I spend 8++ hours in front of one).

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/192882082>



Sequential, short-form communications represent a new kind of memoir. A collection of time-stamped journalistic entries can even be considered a standalone work, much like the collected letters of old. Unlike the older forms of literature, the new work is alive, and off the page.

“My life is my message.”

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1162379845>

Such intimacy can result from pure text in just 140 characters. That space can contain the most mundane of thoughts or the greatest of inspiring quotations. Because social networking is so experiential and event-driven, the short form brings with it a cultural revolution that must be witnessed to be understood.

Terse communication is a skill that may be practiced anywhere. Consider the possibilities in headlines, e-mail subject lines, signatures, definitions, instant messages, or any small field. There are ways to lead with style and grace in each of these media.

Leadership in the short form subject may be characterized by three active principles: describe, simplify, and avoid. These principles have been drawn from hard-learned lessons that provide basic protection when venturing into the wild.

So-called social networking is the result of words and coded speech colliding with a certain type of technology. The question remains: Is this a durable mutation along the evolution of literature? Will this mutation adapt to its environment and survive over time?

Yes, the short format has already passed the tipping point. Fed by thousands of new writers every day, a new movement has begun to stir. We each have our own individual direction, of course, but collectively it is clear that we are headed into a time of rapid social change.

Today, a transformation is happening. Short messaging services, and the rich media applications that magnify them, are augmenting society one layer at a time. Superfluous, outmoded forms of communication and consumption are rapidly being replaced

with new models. This is happening so rapidly that the old guard barely has time to report on the fact of its own demise.

Communication and consumption must change, because as it stands right now, traditional media is a totalitarian aristocracy, subject to the political whims of the corporate few with power.

It will change, and we will be there before anyone else. We'll be there because we live there, on the front lines of battle, rescue, loss, redemption, and daily triumph. Everyone is a writer now, each of us a photojournalist.

Throw yourself into 140 characters, and emerge as that writer you have always wanted to be: clear, concise, expressive, and unique. Become a better writer because one day you will need it.

"Every generation needs a new revolution", Thomas Jefferson

<http://twitter.com/revmsg/status/2455916013>

We are heading toward a revolution, the effect of which will be to irrevocably change composition as we know it, to reshape it, to redefine words. As in the European Renaissance, or the American Revolution, we form small societies that transcend nation and corporation. Our societies bring us comfort, haven, news from the outside, word of the resistance.

Back in the day, there was the underground press, the essential tool of revolutionaries. Now the underground press, that irrepressible duplication device, has replicated itself, shrinking in the process. We now carry that press in our pockets.

Democracy travels in wee packets of ideas, words shaped for speed and accuracy, arriving in moments of need. Now is the best time for free speech; it is blooming all around us. Letters packed into the crannies of text messaging programs, traded between friends and lovers, are the seeds of hope for a more literate generation.

Necessary change is what the short form represents, from a past in which only certain people had access and reach to a time when the most basic cellular device may broadcast hypertext to millions instantly.

We can now bring distributed community to places where traditional data networks have yet to establish themselves. Any cellular device will do; they all support the basic texting protocol, because it was designed to test the network itself.

We are using the tools of the most humble quality engineer to build the most powerful network ever created. We use this short format the way we want to use it, not necessarily the way it was designed to be used.

As individual voices are heard and become more mighty, we will see a rapid evolution in government, finance, and many sectors never before touched by the Internet. Not all of us were born to become authors, but we are each given the chance. Once you begin to focus on words, winding paths of imagination open up. What was indescribable now takes form step by step.

Whatever we were before, now we are writers and authors of our own destiny. Each of us is breaking the story of our own lives.

The protagonist is you. The narrator of the story is you. The first, best reader is you. 140 characters will free you from the desktop and get you out into the world. You will remain hyperconnected and even more available than before, and there will be no catching your breath.

If you're not real time, you're behind and losing ground.

<http://twitter.com/mager/status/2822789377>

Stand on the cusp of a literary movement, watch text transform in meaning, and see new literary styles emerge, be tested, fade or bloom, and evolve. What begins as a kind of confessional poetry, intimate and sometimes unflattering, becomes a portrait of unromantic reality.

The short form is without revision. One can't take back or retract a text message, a tweet, or the history of a Google Wave. Much like an e-mail, that copy is irrevocable, out there in the hand of its recipient.

making it so people can sms “follow all” or “leave all” or even just “follow dom”

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/346>

Instant vintage, that is what we have: Sudden eternity, the opposite of ephemeral, unaffected by the passage of time. Each tweet keeps its immortal bubble, as great or as flawed as it may be.

Twitter: where typos live in infamy

<http://twitter.com/japhy/status/1872401936>

Even in the tiny, we find truth. The heraldry of honesty and sincerity is unmistakable at this range. 140 characters is just enough to distinguish description from deception, simplicity from simple-mindedness, and gravitas from guile.

Lead and we will follow.

“Lead and we will learn.”—Donald Sagolla

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/3526674928>



# Describe

## A Brief Digression to Discuss Journalism Is Warranted

All good books have one thing in common - they are truer than if they had really happened. - The Man (Mr. Ernest Hemingway)

<http://twitter.com/erinmalone/status/1963853525>

We walk the ever-thinning line between science fiction and reality. It has been argued that the term *science fiction* is currently anachronistic, because so much of daily life and film is infused with science and technology.

In our hands now is the most powerful, ubiquitous, indomitable communication tool in history. What will you do with it? Truth or daring fiction, which world do you live in?

Consider your messages to be your unique story, in which amazing news may break at any moment. How will your moment strike, and how will you react?

My reaction is a balance of truth and prose. I tend not to write things that sound bad, regardless of the circumstances. In fact, if I find myself writing about something that sounds bad, it's usually a

sign for me to stop doing it. Unfortunately, the truth often sounds ugly. Making the truth palatable is the job of the journalist.

Journalism has a distinguished history of growth alongside short-form communication services like the telegraph. Now, journalists everywhere are finding sources, following leads, and even writing entire articles in 140-character bursts.

*In breaking news, eyewitness reports are almost always more valuable and interesting than a journalist's accounts.*

[www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=1774875](http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=1774875)

The short format requires not just a new language, but a different way of writing. Information usually contained in a headline and lead sentence is now constrained to less than half that size, with almost no control over presentation.

For reporters concerned with inches and word count, the short form feels a bit like writing on a grain of sand. For journalists to succeed in the short form, tools and techniques must evolve along with styles and methods.

We begin with the journalistic style because the activity of reporting is intrinsically linked with being mobile and in the moment. These two characteristics are at the center of the short form.

*Journalism is ideally designed for democratisation [sic].*

<http://blogs.reuters.com/fulldisclosure/2009/01/30/twittering-away-standards-or-tweeting-the-future-of-journalism/>

Twitter will not democratize media as much as it will inspire a more direct, genuine, & immediate discourse between every entity.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1765638345>

As publication tools are unshackled from the desk, editors and desk-like institutions seem to become less relevant, but we do in fact need those editors and academies. They help provide the

accuracy and balance that distinguish the belch of a blogger's BlackBerry from the ring of a real reporter.

There's the story you wanna tell, and the story a reporter wants to hear, and somewhere in between is the story that gets told.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/1478767971>

Real reporting can take place within social media circles. There are two key principles to remember. First: Public Twitter and Facebook updates are a part of the permanent record, and all searchable content is fair game for journalists. Second: A direct relationship with your social sphere is fundamental; keep it independent of the media outlet that employs you.

Keep your professional identity as a reporter independent and portable because jobs can come and go. You will want to retain your readers during times of change.

Along with the guidelines in the chapters that follow, additional caveats apply to journalism. This list is not comprehensive, but is rooted in experience with corporate blogging and investigative reporting.

Ten tips, in order of importance:

1. Determine your employer's social media policy. If they don't have one, write up a policy of your own and submit it.
2. Check sources and attribute—[shakes fist] *check sources!*
3. Think twice before posting: once for your source and once for your editor.
4. One drunken, angry tweet could ruin you.

some things can't be said in under 140 characters. especially after some champagne.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/158374242>

5. Jokes can almost always be taken the wrong way; expect this.
6. Never discuss a story before its time, or tweet about something before it happens.
7. Be as clear as possible with your sources about when you expect your story to post so they know when and how to promote it.
8. Own your smartphone and a great set of mobile apps.
9. Avoid writing about colleagues or the workplace.
10. Follow other journalists: @jennydeluxe, @michaelbfarrell, @mat, and the rest.

“Oh look, I sent you a link.” “Oh, I sent you a link, too.” “That’s great, we’re journalists!”

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/2939433877>

You think you want to be a Twitter journalist? You’ll need to check your facts, provide a truly unique perspective, and most of all lead with action. Do this with fairness, accuracy, and freedom from bias, and you will always have a job.

## Observe the Truth

For the journalist, the question is not “What are you doing?” but when, where, how, and why you are doing it. Support with specifics.

Be as precise as you can; the medium allows for it—the medium even demands it. Your advantage is unique or privileged information, facts not previously known.

*You can observe a lot just by watching.*

—Yogi Berra



It's permissible to leave questions unanswered in a message this small. Answers come later. Engage your audience first, then shape the discussion or commentary elsewhere.

Participate in community-funded reporting. You can start a story or contribute to a story in progress. Remember: Revolutions are started with words.

Do you think you could help improve the journalism we do? Just register on the site (10 seconds) and click "I'll donate talent" on a pitch.

<http://twitter.com/Spotus/status/2403758301>

Consider @wordnik, an ongoing project devoted to discovering all the words and everything about them.

@RevisionFairy We think "tweetosphere" is a perfectly cromulent word, but "twittersphere" seems more common.

<http://twitter.com/wordnik/status/2412836322>

RT @biorhythmist: "festooned" is a great word that is under-used. festooned festooned festooned That's probably enough.

<http://twitter.com/wordnik/status/2483176892>

You can't change the facts, but you can create an interesting angle. Play with presentation, not physics.

## Play with Perspective

Think of every tweet as an epitaph. How does your personality shine through? Start at a far point and travel inexorably toward the conclusion. Discover an entirely different experience of writing: the slow crawl.

Living each day like it's my last, because I live near a fault line (@sfquake).

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1416507887>

Just felt that earthquake. No one else here did.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/15884>

Twichter scale; fraction of Bay Area residents who tweet they felt an earthquake.

<http://twitter.com/nelson/status/1789035638>

Depending on what you are trying to accomplish, practice gender neutrality in your writing. Ambiguity can be your friend, as it may appeal to a broader audience. In the end, though, clarity and certainty are the trademarks of terse communications.

Above all, your message must describe something: a thought, an idea, a moment, a subject. Always think before you act, but realize that thinking is also an act. Your message can simply contain a thought, but frame it with the act of thinking, like @Jack.

thinking the "Subject" line of email is dead. sms is great: message is the subject.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/5593458>

Lead with a verb.

noticing that it's kinda fun to start all sentences with verbs

<http://twitter.com/ev/status/212>

## Lead with Action

Leadership is doing. Describe what you are doing. You are doing something bold. You are thinking. You are acting. You are inventing. You are declaring something. You are being original; you are being real.

What is the detail that no one else would notice? What is the one word that makes your situation unique? Define it. Define the moment. Put your name on that moment and say, “I did this awesome thing.” Don’t just tell us your story; show it to us.

Observe. Choose an object and give it the full treatment. Have an opinion about it. Make this part of your process, but don’t let it end there. Pure description in 140 characters or less is a technique on its own.

Long, low waves. Sunny water. Guy on a paddleboard. Pelicans.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/18002>

There are essentially two possibilities for description: yourself and not yourself. Be mindful of the balance between the two.

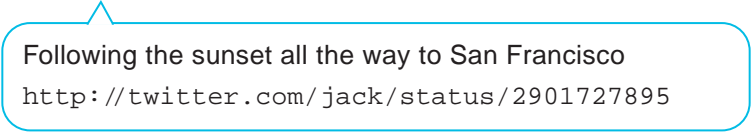
Nothing worth doing is easy.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1587611562>

Even posting a great photograph won’t give the full picture. Add some context. What are we looking at? What happened just before the picture, or just after? Your aim here should be to uncover some truth, or at least to approximate it.

Learn what this new medium means to you. Redefine conventions and openly set your own reasonable and practical bar. Above all, be declarative in your writing.

Done right, a short, descriptive message can tell an entire tale.



Following the sunset all the way to San Francisco  
<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2901727895>

Start with what you know. Start simple and small.

# Simplify

## Say More with Less

*Embrace simplicity.*

—Lao Tzu

After the ancients and the poets, perhaps the greatest master of simplicity in fiction writing was Ernest Hemingway.

His words are deceptively simple. What at first may seem basic actually hides great complexity of thought and intention. Read the first line of *A Moveable Feast*:

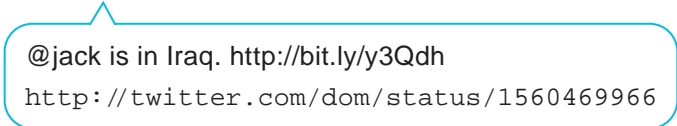
*Then there was the bad weather.*

He sets the context for an entire story by jumping right into the middle of a narrative. This is the essence of short-form communication: leverage context and expectation to produce an instantly larger result.

Once you learn that this is a work about writing, set in Paris during a time of innocence abroad, romantic expectations are set. With a sumptuous title like *A Moveable Feast*, the reader anticipates a delicious beginning.

Then there is the wet blanket. He draws you instantly into his experience as if to say it was amazing, it was magical, it was all these things and everything you have brought to the experience of reading this . . . and it was real. There were parts that sucked.

The first line of a novel is the closest I could find to that format within 140 characters. That first line is the memorable identity of the text in the reader's mind. Many will simply read the first line of a book to determine whether it is worth having. Because of this, I like to think of each update as a complete story of its own.



@jack is in Iraq. <http://bit.ly/y3Qdh>  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1560469966>

The entire innovation behind Twitter may actually be attributed to simplicity and the constraints that require it. Once you have described your moment, focus on how to refine and shrink it to the minimum possible verbiage.

## Constrain Yourself to the Atomic Unit of One Message

While it is tempting to bifurcate your thought into several successive messages (and that's actually a technique described later), this practice can become a crutch. Here are a few reasons to abide to the one message limit:

1. Successive messages may arrive out of sequence, or in reverse order.
2. Any one message can easily be taken out of context, and creating a dependency of multiple messages can fail the reader.
3. It is difficult within the same medium to quote, refer to, or repurpose more than one message.

Learn to save space by saving spaces. Remember that you technically need just one space between the period at the end of a sentence and the start of the next sentence.

Create space where there was none. A carriage return instead of a space allows visual separation between a thought and the reference, or provides space for two expressions of the same thought.

I survived writing a book and all I got was this lousy tweet. And a book.  
<http://bit.ly/140-chars>  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/3279151253>

The best advice comes from old Strunk and White themselves.

*Omit needless words.*

[www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html#13](http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html#13)

Be short, blunt, vigorous, concise. Minimize adverbs and articles. Commas are a favor to the reader, not always necessary. Eliminate personal pronouns.

When all else fails, invent a tag. A great tag works as the target of a search, and also declares its place within the message. Most tags are left at the end of a message, but they may work anywhere.

#fieldnotes Because you can't accidentally tweet a fieldnote.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1961588015>

A simple pattern is the *two words* pattern. This review of a much-anticipated film got a few stars.

Two words: Star. Trek.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1734954125>

Here, Craig invokes the imagery of a perfect face slap using the fleshy part of the palm.

Two Words\* [FLESHY PALM]

<http://twitter.com/chockenberry/status/3198840328>

Jack got me started on this years ago.

Massive. Attack.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/34121>

Be the middle point between minimalism and lush description. Chances are the reader will get where you are going and fill in the details. Give readers just enough to keep them wanting more.

## Appreciate Craftsmanship as a Thousand Small Gestures

How many microscopic adjustments are made to a sculpture before it is complete? How many stitches go into a fine garment? This is the level of awareness you must achieve: down to the individual character.

!

<http://twitter.com/Case/status/929836959>

Simplicity serves two purposes: It creates a much-needed filter for the writer and limits the cognitive load of the reader. Judge your simplicity three ways:

1. Read it fast.
2. Read it faster.
3. Skim it.



Your readers will skim it. They will misunderstand it. They will even repost it, having skimmed it and misunderstood it. Expect this, plan for it, optimize for it.

Get ready to say it once. Or, get ready to say it wrong, delete and repost really quickly. If you're lucky, no one will notice your mistake except the search engine. Limit yourself even further than the constraint requires, and then having the dimension of time will feel like a luxury when you need it.

## Start Small and Serve a Special Niche

The language you choose both defines and limits your audience. Keep your vocabulary up to date at all times, and test it regularly. Each new word unlocks access to a different nook of readers.

Take chat room slang for example, the pidgin tongue of gamers and chat room regulars.

meh < eh < huh < heh < ha < lol < rofl < roflmao < lolololololololol  
(via @piraino)

<http://twitter.com/mantia/statuses/1258898434>

Often mistaken for leetspeak, this type of slang uses various abbreviations of words to write more quickly and with fewer character spaces. By (properly) using the symbolic form, you are both saving space and defining your audience.

n bd readn, wrtng txt spk

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/155>

One characteristic of this new slang is the invention of creative prefixes or suffixes, such as the suffix “-splode” or “-splosion” as in “I had a pensplosion and now my hand is inky.”

My head asplode.

<http://twitter.com/buzz/status/32651>

To see where this type of truncated, symbolic writing is headed, investigate Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Communities of writers have been using this real-time protocol for years, long before “modern day” chat programs arrived. Short-form conventions have been written into the specification itself.

*The TOPIC channel property is the current topic of the channel.*

*The TOPIC property is limited to 160 characters.*

<http://tools.ietf.org/html/draft-pfenning-irc-extensions-04#section-8.2.9>

“Twitter is like IRC but reverse; instead of having to ignore the annoying people you follow the interesting ones.” -@Rabble

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1504070561>

Learn IRC lingo, the source of such innovations as the @user-name convention when referring to a user, and the #hashtag convention when defining a topic. As we get closer to the real-time Web with technologies like Wave, the quick among us will fall back upon these conventions for technique and brevity.

omgwtf

<http://twitter.com/Case/status/40684>

#Anyone else #find it #odd when people type #random words as #hashtags?

<http://twitter.com/atebits/status/2713852480>

In the extreme niche direction, there are emerging sets of symbols and emoji, supported on certain systems that merit observation.

 = *retweet, recycle.*

[http://thenextweb.com/2008/09/16/  
twitterkeys-enhance-your-twitter-conversations/](http://thenextweb.com/2008/09/16/twitterkeys-enhance-your-twitter-conversations/)

Choose specific language because it helps define your audience. Limit your audience because it creates focus.

## Limit Yourself to One Sentence, One Thought

Scarcity creates a natural economy. In the case of short communications, there is an economy of words, letters, and symbols. This is not a capitalist economy; it is a socialist one. Put another way: Value in this economy comes not from owning but from sharing.

Because there is such precious little space and attention, the scarcity of time and comprehension is your marketplace. The secret to achieving clarity and economy of language is to make your message in as few words or symbols as possible. If you can balance descriptiveness with simplicity, you'll have learned the lessons of the greats.

*For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*

This six-word story is attributed to Hemingway. Here is another, from perhaps my favorite novelist, Neal Stephenson:

*Tick tock tick tock tick tick.*

[www.wired.com/wired/archive/  
14.11/sixwords.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords.html), Neal Stephenson

Learn to compress. A highly energetic thought can crystallize with the proper compression. With a few choice cuts, that crystallized thought becomes a diamond-like quotation. I wrote, just prior to being interviewed by @JohnDonvanNL:

Having learned not to tweet about things before they happen.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1227687965>

That thought became compressed during the book deal negotiations.

No tweet before its time.

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/1434934708>

Try spending all day on a single tweet. Plan the time, the subject, the intended audience. Time and anticipation are some of the forces that will crystallize moments for you. Consider that you are writing as much for yourself as you are for your audience.

Practice one-sentence thoughts.

Practice brevity. What is the one word that describes this situation? What is a verb for the thing you are doing? For example: What is one word that represents *being unique*? My answer is *leading*.

Even the masters find this difficult. The famous apology attributed to Mark Twain is actually a paraphrase of Pascal.

*I apologize for writing you a long letter; but I didn't have time to write you a short one.*

Description and simplicity are the first two characteristics of innovation in the short form. The stark power of expression in the short form is matched equally between what is said and what is not said. Being simple sometimes means not posting at all.

## Avoid

### Don't Become a Fable about Too Much Information

It's all fun and games until somebody gets stalked.

<http://twitter.com/aplusk/status/1918909786>

There are as many things to avoid in social media as there are in real life, and perhaps a few more. A leader is marked by history as much by action as by restraint. Make it your goal to balance bold, descriptive writing with a conscious effort to avoid giving away too much private information.

All sorts of untwitterables.

<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/839757117>

Social media is risky. There are many cases that illustrate the type of short communication that can get us in trouble. This is the lesson of trial and error, learning the limits of your ego.

To obtain the principle of this next lesson, be humble. Be aware. Be cautious.

If you find yourself wondering, “Should I post this?” the answer is probably “No.” In almost every case where I’ve had to delete a message, it’s been foreshadowed by some doubt about posting it in the first place.

“Because I can” is not a reason. Sometimes, what seems like urgency is merely convenience. Don’t mistake anxiety for impatience. The illusion of speed is a great detractor. Sometimes great thoughts can wait.

*He who waits for the best never waits too long.*

—Erik Bergman, June 2003

Inevitably, you will screw up, and someone will call you on it. Some say, “Love it or hate it; just don’t ignore it.” While this is somewhat true from a viral marketing perspective, the kind of negative attention that comes from haters will sap your energy if not properly attenuated.

Twitter: new plateaus for digitally mediated misunderstanding.

<http://twitter.com/blaine/status/489433>

For the most part, you can ignore negative attention. In most cases, unjustified detractors will waste away if they aren’t fed with attention. Martial arts study teaches us to deflect aggressive energy and redirect it against the attacker.

There is always someone that just really gets to you, though. If at all possible, avoid dealing with that person in public. Here are a few methods:

1. Write something but don’t post it. This is very cathartic.
2. E-mail that person if you can. Private exchanges are a better place to vent.
3. Complain to a friend. Usually, someone not personally affected by the deluge will provide a safer perspective.

If you absolutely must respond in public, do so with as little energy as possible. Remember: They are looking for a response to feed that negativity.

You will appear mature and polite in contrast to the other person's debased desperation. Don't exacerbate a mistake with an apology unless absolutely warranted or publicly demanded.

What follows are tips for conservative, careful judgment. I will contradict some of this with other advice later on. The objective here is to gather all of the *do not*s in one place for reference.

## Remember What Not to Do

Don't lie. I know this is obvious, but it is a cardinal rule of social media. This is not meant to stifle fiction, or pranks, or wordplay. Just never pass off fiction as fact; do this once, and you'll have cried wolf for the last time.

This also goes for lying about where you are going or what you feel and then posting something else online, unless you don't mind being "Twitter busted."

Learn the lingo. Inflection, use, frequency—they are all important. Check the Glossary at the back of this book.

Customize your avatar, your bio, and your site to complement your online identity. Properly identify yourself within the medium, and refer properly to your identity on other sites that reference that medium.

Don't be gullible. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true. If you are naturally trusting, a trait that can be an asset, take a bit of time to make it harder for yourself to provide vital information like passwords. This extra step (like using a password manager) will make you think twice sometimes, and that may be all you need to stay safer.

Don't push. Most social media (especially Twitter) is a pull system, as opposed to push (as with e-mail). This means that readers may opt out of your messages at any point. Treating social media as a push system will cause you to lose readership, or worse—it could get you branded as @spam.

Avoid envy. There will always be someone with more followers, more time on their hands to post great stuff, whatever the case. The antidote to envy is exercise.

Avoid laziness. If something is hard, then doing it right will immediately distinguish you from your peers. Always do the hard part first. Procrastinate later.

Avoid density in your posts. If you post several heavy things in quick succession, some of those announcements will be overshadowed by the others. If you've got something great to announce, consider waiting an hour or a day.

Don't use robots to find people to follow. Do not set up an auto-response for direct messaging. Your reading list should grow organically, and private messages should be handcrafted.

Do not overuse the exclamation mark. If you are always exclaiming something, when you are really excited it will become difficult to express convincingly.

Number of exclamation marks in the Declaration of Independence:  
0. <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document>  
<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/2460386577>

In general, avoid negativity. This goes for most things in life: Reap what you sow. It's very tempting to complain about things, because some folks will reply in sympathy. However, many more people will not.

This principle applies to more than just sentiment, but also sentence construction. If you find yourself using the negative form, like "don't" or "not very," try writing it the other way around. If you "don't want" something, what is it that you DO want? If something is "just not good," what would be better?

Not only does this approach avoid negativity, it provides for additional context, because a preceding (or following) statement in the negative is implied.

Waiting is.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/1808348560>



Don't out your friends. Be vague when describing private events.

Headed uptown to the Four Seasons for a meeting

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2197421689>

It's sometimes acceptable to be completely obscure, for the sake of privacy.

...

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2335520703>

Don't be rude. It's easy to slip into the mindset that we can write anything we want, and that it doesn't matter how the message is perceived because the reader feels so far removed. Social media creates a kind of parallel universe where most transactions are ephemeral, but some of them really stick and quickly cross over.

Are you ready to celebrate? Well, get ready: We have ICE!!!!  
Yes, ICE, \*WATER ICE\* on Mars! w00t!!! Best day ever!!

<http://twitter.com/MarsPhoenix/status/839088619>

Do not proclaim yourself a leader, or an "expert." Only others can call you such things.

Anyone who says that they are a Twitter Expert is definitely not one.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/1723816417>

Avoid elitism. You will be judged by what you accomplish, not by where you came from or where you say you're headed.

Know your limits and find your depths before you arrive there.

## Find Your Lowest Common Denominator

The cardinal rule of entertainment is to know your audience. Decide for yourself who you want your audience to be, and don't settle for anyone else lowering your standards.

The lowest common denominator for humanity dwells in YouTube comments and written ratings for iPhone apps in the Appstore.

<http://twitter.com/marklukach/status/3093573657>

Learn to recognize when you've found your audience. They will begin to respond regularly. They will repurpose your words. They will start asking for more.

The phenomenon of constant contact via mobile phone and Web produces an epidemic of attention. What begins as simple curiosity rapidly devolves into a feeling of need.

Everyone always wants more. It's easy to become addicted to reading updates, like watching a stock ticker, endlessly scrolling and providing improbably valuable information. This type of obsession is the channel-surfing of the short form: It's deadly to concentration and attention. Some call it *followholism*.

Beware of notification overload. Don't even try to read it all. Instead, focus on surrounding yourself with just the right people, and listening to what they have to say. The important news or details will bubble up and save you a great deal of energy collecting them yourself.

The basic antidote for followholics is to adhere to the first lesson: Lead. Yes, it's important to keep up with friends and colleagues. Yes, there are times when reading is more important than writing. Just remember that a writer writes.

One symptom is simply following too many people in the first place. It's statistically impossible to keep up with more than a few hundred "friends" online, even if those people post infrequently. You'll have to make some serious choices, but remember these choices are not indelible.

A leader does not give in to addiction. Don't let instant social services own your imagination. A leader avoids temptation and obsession. When making decisions about whom to follow, ask yourself, "Would I pay for these updates?"

## Divine a Strategy against Too Much Information

Like the proverbial last straw, one too many tweets will burden you beyond recovery.

Consuming too much information can deafen you, but consider the impact on your readers if you correspond too much, too often, or with more abandon.

The endless Facebook poke cycle is this generation's Vietnam.  
<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/93981992>

What does it mean to "overwrite" in 140 characters: One word too many? One letter? A space? Perhaps too many messages in a row during a given space of time is the Twitter equivalent of poking (now that *nudge* has been removed).

Oversharing was an issue from the beginning with Twitter. @Adam and @Jack used to bug @Noah about it, but I think we were all fascinated by the phenomenon.

glass is over-tweeting  
<http://twitter.com/Adam/status/1864>

A basic strategy against TMI (too much information) is to decide ahead of time what topics are off limits.

A popular strategy is to stay as discreet as possible within the medium. The private experience (called “Protected” on Twitter) is a very simple way to avoid many of the pitfalls previously described. It’s not foolproof, but there are levels of privacy on Facebook in particular that will provide a buffer.

Direct message (DM) is a way to reply to many messages that you receive without clogging the stream with conversations. It can be used alongside or in place of e-mail.

You can only DM someone who’s following you. Likewise, they can’t DM you unless you follow them. Try sending your e-mail address in your one-way DM in that case, for further discussion.

Always check someone out before giving away any private information. Be active and vigilant in your strategy. Practice discretion. Practice restraint.

## Practice Self-Defense

Don’t get hacked. Regularly change your passwords. Regularly switch tools, so that all of your information isn’t in one place.

Read the Terms of Service. These words are your shield, as slim as it may be. You need to know the limits of your protection but also the lines you may not cross. Every system is slightly different in important ways, and they change all the time as the law and communities evolve.

Another important method of self-defense is the vanity search. Find out how to search for your name, and set up your as-it-happens results e-mail. Make sure you know all about that villainous blog post before someone asks you about it.

A search in time saves nine.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/3220743024>

Writing in public isn’t all fun and games. You don’t want that job offer you just disparaged to disappear when your potential employer searches for their name.

Also, you'll want to think before criticizing NBA referees, especially when you are the owner of a basketball team. That's because you could end up being fined \$25,000.

how do they not call a tech on JR Smith for coming off the bench to taunt our player on the ground

<http://twitter.com/mcuban/status/1405243918>

What's not fun is having your post quoted in a motion for mistrial.

Oh, and nobody buy Stoam. It's bad mojo, and they'll probably cease to exist, now that their wallet is \$12M lighter.

<http://twitter.com/johnathan/status/1255697916>

You may arrive at the point where every coherent thought appears tweetable. You will have the coffee moment. You will have an adorable pet moment, and it will seem overwhelmingly relevant and passion-filled, and you will want to write about it.

Pause. Think for a second: Would you write this down on a piece of paper, and pass it to someone? Would you put it in a letter to send someone?

Fun is contagious, but remember: One person's fun is another one's farce. The truth can be hilarious, but not when it is at someone else's expense. Take care to avoid buffoonery, or you won't be taken seriously when you need to be.

It is okay to be serious. Something can be earnestly funny without sounding exasperated. Being known as a master of understatement is never a bad thing.

This Jay-Z fella has a lot of self-confidence. I admire that.

<http://twitter.com/hotdogsladies/status/845911001>

Huh. My weather widget for the Bay Area says “END TIMES” in red. That can’t be good.

<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/1219848293>

Create a community to inform and protect you when you forget all of this. Protect a few key relationships.

## Reinforce, Don't Replace, Real Life

Most of the time, short messaging does not create friendships, only contacts. Real friendships are created via shared experiences. It’s been said that Facebook is for people you already know, and Twitter is for people you want to know.

That is partly true, but I look at it slightly differently. Since I’ve spent so long trying to get people to use Twitter, my perspective is that everyone I already know should start using it. Then we can effortlessly stay up to date with each other.

Because it’s such a tiny medium, though, I’m already geared to accept that their update isn’t the entire story. I’m not fooled into thinking that they feel as close to me as I do to them at that moment.

harvard square outdoor cafe properly sour lemonade book on randomized algorithms Coltrane birds traffic springtime it has been awhile

<http://twitter.com/vigoda/status/1896110145>

The same goes for Facebook or Foursquare or any virtual community. The value in these systems is in high-level social awareness, not always in the deepest connection. Even when there is a deep connection, it’s rare for that to be symmetrically mutual.

So, how to avoid the mistake of too much intimacy? Ultimately, discretion wins. In general, here are some types of things that should be strongly reconsidered before posting:

- ◆ Bathroom thoughts
- ◆ Drunken inspirations
- ◆ Angry retorts
- ◆ Late night ramblings

Drunk styles of the poor and stupid

<http://twitter.com/phil/status/3081516387>

If you're having a bad day, avoid the Send button. It is better to have written and canceled than to write and regret. Get an alternate account if you absolutely must vent. You can even make that account Protected and restrict it to a few close friends.

To avoid trouble, save a few special moments for yourself. Cherish your privacy, because at the rate media is growing, that privacy does not seem permanent.





## Part Two

# VALUE

It may seem antithetical to imply that tweets or short messages, so seemingly momentary, could be considered timeless. I reckon most of them are fleeting. But to the right person, at the right moment, transient thoughts openly shared can represent a profound connection.

This connection can persist. That message becomes the beginning of something great, and suddenly simple words become part of your life story. This is the timelessness that exists beyond copyright or imitation.

There is another way to think about time and tweets. A truly great work of 140 characters will give the reader more than just a single moment of entertainment or wit. Great writing takes time, but also gives it back.

Do not simply jump into conversations; bring value. Add a link, write a blog post, take the conversation deeper. Translate something.

RT @thebook: "Di más con menos en Twitter y siempre trata de inspirar a alguien en menos de 140 caracteres" ;)

<http://twitter.com/mjcalvimontes/status/1255095821>

La cancion de la cantina de Star Wars acapella, por Sixteen Feet  
<http://bit.ly/Z90i4> via BoingBoing <http://bit.ly/a7VVI>

<http://twitter.com/pejeno/status/2930640444>

Talk about why you write, and how you write. Other real writers will pick up on this, and writers make the best readers. I think the best moments of *A Moveable Feast* are the moments when the author simply describes himself writing.

*The story was writing itself and I was having a hard time keeping up with it.*

—Ernest Hemingway

Share your intelligence. What might seem like trivia or common wisdom to you may actually be fascinating to your readers. Answer questions. The world is dangerous, and we need your help. Don't leave us hanging.

Take us with you.

Glorious sandwich. Take me there.

<http://twitter.com/emarlin/status/120549722>

I mean take us to the places we could never join you physically. New experiences are intrinsically valuable.

*Intrinsic value involves things that are good in and of themselves, such as beauty, truth, and harmony.*

[www.csmonitor.com/2009/0519/p09s02-coop.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0519/p09s02-coop.html)

Something else that is intrinsically good is giving your stuff away. "Copyleft" is a growing reality (often a boon) for many writers. See @CreativeCommons, or read the quite liberal Twitter Terms of Service (<http://twitter.com/tos>).

Now hear this. <http://www.canyoucopyrightatweet.com>

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2879830459>

Can you copyright a tweet? It would be tough to do unless your message is one of true poetry. The reason is that most messages are not copyrightable because they are either: (a) fact, (b) not original, or (c) not registered for copyright in the first place.

You have to go out of your way to copyright something as small as this. Imagine placing “© 2009 Dom Sagolla” in a tweet! (both the symbol—or the word “copyright”—and the year are necessary next to your name). That’s 19 characters right there! Of course, that’s only one way to register a copyright, but you get the idea.

What you can do is copyright a collection. That’s part of the purpose to this book. I’m collecting years of small expressions, adding some commentary, putting a copyright on there, and voila: a “work.”

When you have taken the lead by simply being descriptive and avoiding the pitfalls of too much information, it is time to consider the real value in social media. The value of platforms like Twitter is the same as with any digital commons: Public speech. Create a *voice*, like a persona or an avatar. The best example I can think of is Ira Glass. He has a distinctive physical voice, but also a very recognizable pattern of speech. I actually met him at a Private Evening of his, and encouraged him to try Twitter. Ira, if you’re reading this: it’s not too late.

It’s never too late. Presently, the value of your voice to your audience is directly proportional to the currency of your message.

Measure this along a few dimensions: range, frequency, and reach. By range, I simply mean repertoire. By frequency, I mean not only how often you write, but all of your activity, including how often you read, star, like, poke, and so on.

Reach is another, more complex measurement of your audience. Consider your messages a conversation with your audience over time. The degree to which your audience participates in dialogue with you, in public, is your influence.

Next you will learn how to create and strengthen your voice, and build a writing process out of the short form. The same process that was used to create this book can help you master the longer forms as well: reach for a new audience, repeat your message in different ways, find your frequency and volume, design your mark, embrace hypertext, and learn from poetry.



# Voice

## Say It Out Loud

Social media can feel like reality television. The entire impulse to do something *so you can blog about it* is a symptom of that inclination. Social media does have a certain reality appeal, but it's important to remain genuine.

I would like to read about your food if and only if it is part of some profound realization (like @emarlin and his sandwich). How are you unique and distinguishable from everyone else and their lattes?

Excuse me, I'm running latte.

<http://twitter.com/work/status/3270496765>

Where is your voice, buried in that food or refreshment? Eat food, have thoughts about that food, and move on. Drink, enjoy, be merry, take a break from writing. I decided for myself early on about this.

I will not twitter about food.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1040843>

Sometimes I do find myself talking about food, despite myself. If I do to write about food while eating, I try to be original or ironic about it, like @Blaine.

My Butterscotch Pudding - Let me taste you it.

<http://twitter.com/blaine/status/229612302>

Irony is thick in social media. The antisocial nature of an individual making an update is evidence of this. Witness the person tweeting during a party. Irony is not simply sarcasm, it is the opposite of logic.

"Please consider the environment and do not print out this Tweet unless absolutely necessary."-@drewtoothpaste

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2711943466>

Let's decipher the irony in this statement. First, there is the ironic capitalization of the T in *Tweet*. The word *tweet* was recently canonized by Twitter, and thus it could be considered reverent/irreverent to use a capitalization, as it is unnecessary.

Then there is the intentional irony of retweeting this message as @thebook, which is not technically printing it, but still reproducing it. In addition, there is the literal irony, which exists by having printed this sentence here. This serves a purpose, so it is indeed necessary, but its purpose is to exemplify irony itself.

Encrypt irony in an intentional misspelling, or slip into leetspeak to make a point. The meaning of an unintentional mistake isn't lost on those who have been exposed to elements of grammar and style.

Irony is an incompatibility between what one says or does and what one means (or what is generally understood). You are calling to attention the writer's knowledge and that of the audience.

Most Twitter parodies rely on the incongruity of tweet-like communication in real life, which is weak. Twitter deserves savvier mockery.

<http://twitter.com/buzz/status/1661489298>

The ironic, sarcastic voice is a major style in short form writing, but there is argument about what qualifies as ironic. There are two major camps: one revolves around the perception of the audience, and one focuses on the intention of the writer.

Regarding perception, create a discordance between what is expected by the audience and what actually happens. Set something up, then deliver the opposite but literally fitting result.

@hotdogsladies will be the first person in court to try the “Irony Defense.”

<http://twitter.com/bmf/statuses/1477064013>

The ironic voice is not only tough to maintain, but it’s difficult to endure as a reader. It is limiting. Offset irony with sincerity and true intention.

Discover your true voice with a writing implement in the hand. Resort to the pencil, the pen. When you mark up a page, every stroke counts. The act of holding and using a pen or pencil massages acupuncture points in your hand, stimulating thought.

Extend your sensitivity.

## Extend Your Range

Speak like a leader. You aren’t merely describing something, you are commanding it to be so. Write yourself out of a stuck situation.

Write your conscience.

*Gravitas.* I've found it can be identified as a kind of consonance, a harmony of speech. Agreeable words and sounds, or the same sound repeated or chimed in a kind of *overture*, provide subtle veracity.

History was made today when Sonia Sotomayor took the judicial oath and joined the Supreme Court. Congratulations, Justice.

<http://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/3197377647>

I try assonance and alliteration all the time. Using the same sound or letter at the beginning of nearby words creates a visual texture and assists the memory.

Better busy than bored.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1964141596>

Dusk. Dolores Park. Duvel. Dark chocolate.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1831554279>

You will recognize several other voices that suit themselves well to the short form. Watch for the proverb. Heck you can even subscribe to a @TinyBuddha.

"Great acts are made up of small deeds." ~Lao Tzu

<http://twitter.com/tinybuddha/status/2461664901>

Moving on: take hip-hop, Creole, or gangsta, formerly beat, jazz, or Motown. Even without rhyme or lyric these styles are unmistakable.



"Shamon!" <http://bit.ly/wa9v8>

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2520442789>

Your basic test is to say it out loud a few times. Say it fast, listen to the rhythm. Try anything and everything to let your voice out.

## Build Your Repertoire

Inherit a "literary accent" from casual speech, verbal sound effects, and likely places like the great opening sentences of books.

"I can remember what life was like without Twitter."

<http://twitter.com/TwitterLit/status/1971028633>

Onomatopoeia is the great gold mine of comics and visual storytelling. It's virtually endless:

- ◆ Oof.
- ◆ Grrr.
- ◆ Psst.
- ◆ Pfft.

BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK  
BARK BARK BARK my neighbor's dog BARK BARK BARK  
BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK

<http://twitter.com/ravenme/status/3199311027>

Every sound is part of your repertoire, even the words and sounds that we forget or ignore.

I can tell how old you are by counting how many times you use 'like' in a sentence.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/521651552>

Of course, having a broad range and an extensive repertoire will only get you so far. To really project your voice, you must also have stamina and might.

## Strengthen and Amplify

If you've never read the yoga sutras, try it. A bunch of very deep one or two liners that have influenced all practices of yoga for ages.

<http://twitter.com/crystal/status/2647116783>

As you go about messaging—updating your status, sending a broadcast, microblogging, whatever you want to call it—you will start to feel physical fatigue which can seriously hinder your writing voice.

For me, it started in my hands, then wrists, shoulders, neck, back. I've been studying ergonomics for about four years, and I still don't have it down perfectly. However, I do know counteractivities to strengthen my mobile muscles.

Physically strengthen. What you do when you are typing or tapping, especially on a mobile device, is habitually repetitive and can really hurt if you are not careful. To prevent this, practice some kind of upper-body sport if you can.

Physical strength will give you a real advantage in the field, and here is why: Nothing.

When you exercise, you are thinking about nothing. Except for the pain, or the goal, or the end of exercising, there is nothing. When there is nothing, we sometimes have a thought. It is quick, but it is powerful.

Exercise, the shower, the clothing ritual, these empty the mind. Inevitably, there is a thought of real value in there that sticks. That is the thought of clarity and purpose. The mind needs a break or it starts to feed on itself, just like the body.

Ergonomics are critically important, I cannot stress this enough. You will soon encounter this if you have not already. One occurrence of repetitive stress and you could be seriously hosed forever. So take this seriously: Watch your habits.

Write much. Fidget little.

A sound mind in a sound body still requires a distinct voice. There is much more to say about repetition, reach, hypertext, and poetry. For now, just remember the immortal words of John Hodgman:

**SOMETHING BRIEF AND HILARIOUS** That is all.

<http://twitter.com/hodgman/status/787143363>

# Reach

## Understand Your Audience

The brilliant thing about social media is that our audience is fairly well defined. Whereas with traditional broadcast media there may be many more people paying attention, their identity and point of contact is relatively unknown. Social and interactive media provide access back to the audience, which multiplies the value of each participant.

There are many strategies of the moment to affect certain statistics that reflect this value. Most of them are feeble, because they neglect a central fact:

It matters not how many followers you have, but rather who are they.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1499861542>

Retweets, mentions, and followers are easily quantified, but they don't give a full picture of your social sphere. For example, they don't translate well across other social media, such as Facebook or Flickr.

Investigate how you are being retweeted and when. Examine where and how your readers are replying—are they on the Web,

SMS, or some client program? If a person is talking to you over SMS, that can tell you a lot about that person, their dedication, and how they are reading. SMS is a much more interruptive and immediate form of communication, so an SMS subscriber is a more attentive audience.

## Measure Reader Engagement

A few statistics provide some context. At least one-fifth of most social media accounts are empty placeholders (especially true for Twitter). These are the accounts that have not posted a message yet. They are placeholders or experiments with dubious value. Watch these accounts convert over time.

Beyond a limit of about 140 people (exceptions excluded), persistent two-way connections are either impractical or disingenuous. Most who have tried now agree with me on this.

*Some think you should follow everyone who follows you. Personally, I don't because that would render Twitter unusable for me.*

<http://blog.twitter.com/2008/08/making-progress-on-spam.html>

A small minority of users will create most of the activity on any messaging system. I follow almost 500 accounts on Twitter, and the people I choose to follow are much less active than most. About 25 percent of the people I follow are active, and about 25 percent of those people are what I would call prolific.

The same statistics apply for me on Facebook, except that I'm mutual friends with about half that number. That still accounts for a great deal of activity, and I'm currently in danger of missing quite a bit of interesting traffic. Even though I'm aware of this, I just can't seem to stop finding interesting people to follow.

What follows are some measurements that can help you learn more about your readers. Learn what types to follow back, and who to admire from a distance.

## Gauge the Reaction to Your Message

As you post links to Twitter and Facebook, measure incoming traffic from search engines and subscribers separately. Rate highly any incoming manual links like blogrolls and tweets. In-post deep links are meaningful, but easily automated, and therefore less valuable.

If you must obsess about your follower count or subscriber count, remember: That number does not equal the number of readers you have at any one time. The number of readers is actually much smaller. This is because not everyone is paying attention at that moment.

On average, about 10 percent of your followers get to read your tweet at the time you post it. About 10 percent of those people (1 percent of your total followers) will reply or retweet your message, on average.

What you are eternally trying to measure is trust. Which of your users trust you as a source of information? Conversely, which of your users can you trust to help spread your message? I trust @mashable to help me analyze intangibles like influence.

There are certain statistics that approach reliability. With Twitter, I've found the number of followers I gain or lose with a tweet to be fascinating. Try <http://tweeteffect.com> to track this.

Not a statistic as such, but the word cloud from @tweetstats shows a user's most frequently used words. Here is @dom's:

08 @adamjackson **adobe** app apple away baby  
@barackobama **beach** beer best better big @big\_words  
birthday board break ca case check city **day** days doing  
@dollarapp dom end enjoying family feeling feet flickr  
follow followers following foot **francisco** friend friends fun  
**getting** going **good** google **great** guitar happy hard having  
head heading he's **home** hour hours house **iphone**  
iphonedevcamp @iphonedevcamp itunes jack @jack know

leo leo's life lindamar listening little live long looking love  
 lunch mac macky make makes making man mer @meredith  
 mer's month morning music napa need net new nice night  
 number obama ocean odeo office oh old org pacifica  
 @pacifica party people photos place playing @ravenme  
 reading right san sf short sleep small snipurl song south star  
 stoked store street sunny @surf surf surfing taking talk  
 team thanks that's @thebook thing things think thinking  
 time times tip today tonight trying tweet twitpic  
 twitter @twitter twttr using video walking watching  
 wave waves way week weekend wondering word work world  
 writing WWW year you're

Enjoy another way of looking at the most frequently used words in your timeline from <http://wordle.net>:



You can see more clearly the subject of my public affection. Neither visualization is a true measure of reach, but they do help me understand the niche that I'm serving.

The operative ratio seems to be 1:1 for followers to following in the average Twitter account. This corresponds to a similar ratio in Facebook, the difference being that there is a complete overlap between the two audiences (follower, following) in Facebook. With Twitter, the two audiences have less overlap.

As your audience grows, the impulse will be to change or limit the topics you write about. Write about what you learn. Tell us of recent scientific breakthroughs, your thoughts on the economy, and your favorite song.

It's fine to be of "niche" interest—it's a unique way to lead. Remember that search is the most lightweight way to experience social media for others, and a targeted search produces a much larger audience (over time) than the one you're serving at the moment.

There are people with enough trust in me to subscribe to my writing in more than one way. Those ways can be tweets, notifications via SMS, blog, photos, or videos directly. This moment-to-moment audience I call my *fan base*.

## Identify Your Fans

Establish a track record for meaningful audience members. Base this on their experience, the age of their domain (for example), their number of blog posts, and how long you estimate they have been reading.

Define relevance for yourself along the following curves. These should apply directly to Twitter, and other services by coincidence.

**Total audience.** This is your number of followers, friends, subscribers, what-have-you. There are a lot of passive and inactive readers in this number. This number also reacts to the size of the community and may have little to do with your individual popularity.

**Power of audience.** This is a multiple of your total audience, factoring in the size of their audiences. Again, this is a somewhat unreliable measure, as each person's "fandom" within their total audience will vary according to their reach. Just remember: Hundreds join every hour, but hundreds also leave or disappear due to inactivity.



*Number of updates.* Your total number of posts in a given system is a serious measure of your reach. In the end, you are judged by what you write and post, not necessarily when you wrote it or who was listening at the time.

*Time since last update.* This number is always going up, and your job is to keep it consistently low. It needn't be an obsession; define your own schedule.

*Readers/reading ratio.* This number should be high, but it becomes less meaningful as you approach a few multiples of readers to reading (AKA followers to following).

*Retweets, likes, and favorites.* The number of people who actively (retweet, pass on) or passively (like, star, favorite) associate themselves with your content is a very reliable relevance score. Some argue that it is the most important number.

You may score yourself using these numbers, or try services like @TwitterGrader or a similar Facebook app to help you determine your statistical relevance. A grade is a shifty, feckless number and should be treated with skepticism. As previously noted, your influence or reach is all about what action you provoke.

The key question is, "How would you rank yourself as a member of the community?" What measures would you use? For example, what is your average tweet length? Does that matter? When are you most active? Remember that there is a global audience, and even a late night or early morning message can be well received.

Yep, still writing.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2581126160>

Balance these measures with a survey of the links you post. What is your *link quotient*? How many of your messages contain links as the primary content? Some folks write entirely so that they may link, and some folks read exclusively for that purpose.

By linking a lot, you are serving a niche, just as if you were writing poetry or sending disaster conditions. Certain people tune into specific types of content, making relevance measures as much about who is reading as they are about numbers.

Your reach is a combination of all of these factors. Your relevance is ultimately determined by the reaction of your audience to your message. Identify your regular correspondents and try reaching out to them individually.

We just used my app @Big\_Words to find @AdamJackson and @LauraW in the IMAX theatre. <http://big-words.org> [iTunes]  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1733375093>

This can be done privately or publicly by mentioning them or their link. When you connect with a fan like that, you are invoking influence and truly understanding your audience.

# Repeat

## It Worked for Shakespeare

There is a great controversy about retweeting. Some say that it is the devil's work, others claim it to be the one redeeming feature of Twitter that will save democracy. It does clog the tubes somewhat, but there is no denying the value of good links and ideas bubbling up over time.

Don't expect that if you follow the suggestions below, each message of yours will get repeated somehow. These are hints to keep you succinct in a way that keeps repetition in mind, not secret marketing techniques.

Instead of considering retweet our enemy, look upon this feature, or habit, as an opportunity. Enable the practice, try it out yourself, but refrain from simply copying what someone else has said.

## Enable Repetition of Your Message

It takes approximately  $n + 3$  characters to retweet something, where  $n$  = number of characters in your username. That's using the minimal "RT" format of retweeting. In general, this means that you should aim for a 120 character message, maximum.

However, it is considered genteel to reference someone by using *via*, *by*, or even *from*, including parentheses and sometimes (gasp) quotation marks.

Of all the retweet syntax I've seen, I like "tweet text" -@username the best. That's how I'd implement.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1171665635>

The truly old-fashioned way of quoting someone is to give the proper room (viewable on some clients), using carriage returns and the like.

Enabling repetition means making your mark (or your personal brand) small from the start. The organization I helped create with @ravenme and four other friends I met through Twitter, called "iPhone Developer's Camp," was immediately shortened to iPhoneDevCamp.

@iPhoneDevCamp and <http://iphonedevcamp.org> are fairly short, yet somewhat descriptive (if nerdy) names. Even Wiki-speak isn't short enough for the short form, however. We reduced it again to serve as a tag for this year's event, our third: #ipdc3.

I can't control how people view that tag, but it enables repetition in a way that my username does not. It's shorter, it's portable across hashtag systems, and gets picked up by more robots because of that.

The best way to get repeated is to repeat yourself. Even Shakespearean plays follow a three-act format in which the central message is repeated in each act. The third time is indeed the charm, as I continue to learn.

Examine my attempts to announce my departure from corporate life. Version zero got almost no attention:

@gruber This is my last week as an engineer for Adobe – declaring independence on July 4th with @TheBook and @DollarApp.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2405969763>

Version one was a minor hit:

Celebrating Independence Day by resigning my corporate post in pursuit of the American Dream.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2474934560>

Version two was a little more heartfelt, and won some sympathy:

Ahh geez, it's breaking my heart to leave Adobe! So many great people here and such a fine place to work, but tough choices make a man.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2505894971>

Version three landed on the mark, and was launched with confidence via @BirdhouseApp after much reflection:

Last day at Adobe, so long and thanks for all the Flash!

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2641808164>

So the message itself was slightly snarky, but also from a well of nostalgia. Balancing that was tough, and so was staying positive. The decision to leave was mine to make, but it was “bittertweet” indeed.

That last message got a fair number of retweets, but a larger number of original responses. It is this type of repetition (casual inclusion of your name or link) that you want.

## Repeat the Words of Others, Adding Your Mark in the Process

I often repeat what a friend has written, but fix the grammar, shorten it to fit the username, or add the URL. This kind of repetition has more value than simply copying and pasting.

Your mark could be a better, shorter URL. It could be your chosen symbolic character. It could be an emoticon. Whatever it is, you'll need to repeat that mark many times for it to be recognized in the first place.

Real-time stock conversations. Follow me and prefix tickers with \$ (e.g. \$GLD) to have your tweets indexed!

<http://twitter.com/stocktwits>

You can work with the lead-in characters or the trailing characters, or both.

[audio] Craziest Thing In World Happens to Area Woman  
<http://bit.ly/NJxjg>

<http://twitter.com/TheOnion/status/3302711139>

Your finishing touch will be recognized. Exploit other people's haste.

## Exploit the Twitter Effect

The *Twitter effect* is an epidemic of attention on a particular topic within a very short amount of time. This can be seen when a major event occurs, but it can also be created by a very focused and prolific subset of users.

*Movie studios try to harness “Twitter effect”.*

www.reuters.com/article/entertainmentNews/  
idUSTRE56G74H20090717

This is similar to the *Digg effect* (previously the *Slashdot effect*), in which a topic reaches more eyes as it gets more diggs (special kinds of links which get voted on, or “dugg”), thus resulting in even more diggs. The Twitter effect is different, in that each tweet is “pre-dugg” in proportion to the author’s audience.

Each tweet carries with it the reputation of the author. With Digg or Slashdot or another service, it doesn’t necessarily matter who likes your post, but on Twitter it matters greatly who retweets you.

When your message is retweeted by one popular user after another, it will cycle through a cascade of Digg effects, resulting in a long tail of retweets by their followers. This happens over a much shorter time span than with Digg, because the audience is more mobile and reading closer to real time.

Where the Digg effect is multiplicative, the Twitter effect is exponential.

This effect is compounded greatly when the subject is intrinsic to the Twitter service. Tweet about anything related to Twitter, social media, or technology and the people will find you and reply. It’s a good way to get started.

We, the repeating audience, are the classical chorus. We promote the best and mock the rest:

WOW!!!! UNBELIEVABLE CRAZY CELEB TWEET FROM  
DIDDY HIMSELF!!!! RT @iamdiddy: I love sweet tarts!

<http://twitter.com/TWITTERTRACKER/status/2542038613>

The more you write, the more new people you can reach. The more you write, the more fodder your fans have to promote you.

There is such a thing as writing too often, however. If you are asking yourself whether you’re writing too frequently, you’re probably close to annoying somebody. Whether you care is another question.

# Mention

## Stamp Your Own Currency

This [REDACTED] technology is so powerful, I am going to open source it once the [REDACTED] goes public. [REDACTED] will never be the same.

<http://twitter.com/chockenberry/status/848832152>

You absolutely cannot mistake Craig Hockenberry for anyone else. First of all, he's wicked tall (6'7" or 2m). Also, he's got a strong, loud physical voice. This translates clearly in his long- and short-form writing.

The above quote was taken from a time when there were strong restrictions on what iPhone developers could discuss in public, the so-called [REDACTED] days. Craig and his friend, writer John Gruber, would trade comedic but vague references to iPhone over Twitter to mock their situation.

Working on [REDACTED].app. Makes it much easier to write about the [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] Kit and how I used them in [REDACTED]

<http://twitter.com/chockenberry/status/848822083>



What these two guys do better than anyone I know is “make their mark.” One overt, one subtle, they are both effective styles.

## Design Your Mark

Your mark begins with your username (or nickname on your system of choice). Choose a descriptive one, but use as few characters as possible. The username @gruber is concise, @chockenberry is characteristically large.

I could have chosen any characters I wanted when I signed up for Twitter that first day, but I chose my name, *dom*, because I’d bought dom.net 10 years prior, and *dom* is more descriptive than *d* at a mere 200 percent character cost.

The drawback of choosing a real name as your user/nickname is that references to you are difficult to distinguish from noise or references to someone else of the same name. Folks with common names like @morgan and @phil experience this all the time in real life, and it’s the same online.

Be distinctive, but crisp with your new name. Think of it like a custom license plate. Consider it a stage name. Make up a pseudonym. Just try to stay away from inside jokes that are difficult to explain.

After your username, your most important set of characters is your URL if you have one (usually omitting the www; i.e., <http://dom.net>). If you are really on top of your game, you’ve thought about a custom URL shortening service, like @daringfireball.

Fake Walt Mossberg Answers Reader Mail: <http://★df.ws/dgl>  
<http://twitter.com/daringfireball/status/2659698511>

The name itself, daring fireball, begs a question, tells a story of John’s childhood imaginary friend.

You’re not going to go appropriate an entire symbol overnight, but there are other marks you can start making right away. Emoticons are an entire art form of their own.

Craig makes them tall, of course:

:-)

How do you make happy faces?

:)

:>)

8)

@Sara !!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ^\_^

<http://twitter.com/crystal/status/3240659570>

If you had to choose just one keyboard symbol to represent yourself, which one would it be? Is it available across all keyboards? Claim it!

Δ

ðøm

Check out this concept: the *irony mark*.

§

(See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony\\_mark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony_mark))

Throw a cesura (double-pipe) in there: ||. The cesura is an actual thing in literature (poetry), as well as musical notation. It's a more distinctive way to denote an audible pause that breaks up a line of verse, which would otherwise be achieved by a comma, semicolon, or a dash.

Use these techniques because every character counts. The number of characters you use is inversely proportional to number of subsequent references possible. In other words, the more characters you use, the less space for others to forward and comment at the same time.

## 120 Is the New 140

As previously mentioned, the phenomenon of the retweet is key motivation to keep it simple. If you can limit your message to around 120 characters, it can be reposted as-is with your username alongside it for attribution.

@briansolis "120 is the new 140." <http://bit.ly/ggDDZ>  
<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/1282413449>

If 120 is the new 140, then 100 is the new 120. This allows you and another person to get the mention.

*Please retweet.*

These two words will get you picked up by retweet-bots, and your message will automatically be re-transmitted by them. A transparent trick, but the principle is sound: Be polite, and do not demand attention, but request it. Using the entire phrase "please retweet" takes up space that can be reused or compressed by the next writer.

As with anything in social media, the manual effort is what you must value and reward. Anyone who takes the time to share something that you wrote deserves some form of recognition.

*The story of #FollowFriday.*

[http://mashable.com/2009/03/06/  
twitter-followfriday/](http://mashable.com/2009/03/06/twitter-followfriday/)

Think of the "mention" as good karma. In fact, you can literally do a good deed with a simple mention, like reporting a crime to @stolenbikesbos.

Umm... I was promised good karma?  
<http://twitter.com/bmf/statuses/1679742448>

## Post One or Two Replies, then Take It Offline

@dom Oh I hope you see this, so I can tell you directly: Thank you so much for Twitter. I love it, I really do. I owe you at least 1 beer.

<http://twitter.com/wilw/status/1174571008>

My policy is only to reply in public if I am educating my audience or if I'm recommending someone to follow, like Wil Wheaton above. Otherwise, I reply in private and sometimes give my e-mail in the message for further discussion.

The strategy of direct-messaging people with your e-mail or other contact information instead of following has a derivative effect: When they just want to simply respond, they'll do so in the medium, publicly. This enables another mention for you.

Take this series of posts from me and DJ/composer @BT:

@bt 1.618 helps me write @thebook – thanks!

<http://bit.ly/o92hO> [YouTube via @adamjackson]

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1423106945>

RT @dom: @bt 1.618 helps me write @thebook– thanks!  
<http://bit.ly/o92hO> [YouTube via @adamjackson] THANK YOU MAN!

<http://twitter.com/BT/status/1423111004>

Being new to Twitter, @BT started following me after that (he was at around 1,000 followers then). This gave me the opportunity to direct-message BT with a request for him to perform, which worked out:

Check out the music of @BT, our @iPhoneDevCamp performer!  
<http://www.btmusic.com>

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2762545270>

This got picked up by a musicbot, @BearHub, which made its way onto @BT's radar, and behold another retweet.

RT @BearHub: dom : ((( BT MUSIC 2.0))) (from dom):Check out the music of @BT, our @iPhoneDevCamp performer!  
<http://bit.ly/tPe2V> (Its aunnn!)

<http://twitter.com/BT/status/2767719855>

What a strange, rehashed mess that is! But BT's style completely shows through; the phonetic spelling of "on" is his emphasis. All of this action started with a single mention.

Kick A\*\* iPhone dev show Yahoo campus. Geeks are my peeps=WIN. I ate about 200 bugs=FAIL lol. Me+Server=WIN  
<http://twitpic.com/ccn1u>

<http://twitter.com/BT/status/3066033218>

Another fine strategy is to syndicate yourself using a second or third system, like Twitter > Facebook > Google Wave. This takes the conversation elsewhere immediately, and enables another audience at the same time.

Provide space for others to help spread your message and link you up.

## Dial

### Search for Silence, Volume, and Frequency

Consider the metaphor of the radio, where you listen to one channel at a time, and sometimes there is crosstalk between the channels. It can be enjoyable, right? The mash-up, that is the unintentional but beautiful combination.

What the mash-up artist does is establish the conditions for creativity and then trust to nature. Creativity is the daughter of passion and inspiration.

### Pipe Up Just When It's Quiet

Everyone loves the peanut gallery, the people who sit back and heckle the speaker with some pointed wit. Twitter is like a giant game of improvisational comedy: there are no rules except that you should make people laugh or think, and preferably both.

With this massive social media machine always on, always producing, where do you find solace? You're going to turn to a book, that solid, familiar, physical thing of comfort. You're going to read that book and forget about the noise.

That is because books are full of good words well placed. It turns out that good writing is hard, and the publishing industry is in place largely to filter out the writing that is not good.

That writing was pushed onto blogs, and now it is being crammed into 140 characters. But poor writing cannot fit into 140 characters. Weak writing has no place here, it does not survive. This is evolution, this is sink or swim, this is game time.

So, how do you know when you are dialed? Seek a state that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called “flow”: Concentration and absorption with the situation and the task at hand. Forget about the reader. You are the reader. Completely omit judgment and write for the pleasure of writing. The lesson is again: Nothing. You must know nothing, you must think nothing. Only the words are there.

When your mind is quiet, you are ready. Sometimes your mind simply will not shut up. Sometimes your “voice” feels like it is shouting. It might be loud inside, but when you shout on the outside it is a lot louder.

## Understand the Use of CAPITALS

When you use all caps, it reads like you are shouting. Casually or mistakenly, doing this a lot is not cool. Doing this selectively on purpose, however, is hilarious. Craig Hockenberry (creator of @Twitterrific) has a special name for his caps lock key. He calls it “CHOCK LOCK” and he uses it like a weapon.

@atebits CHOCK LOCK IS FREE AND OPEN SOURCE BUT IT WILL COST YOU TO LEARN HOW TO USE IT

<http://twitter.com/chockenberry/status/>

@atebits STEP 1 FORGET WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW AND THEN LEAVE IT AT THAT

<http://twitter.com/chockenberry/status/1121880322>

Folks have started to appropriate this.

@chockenberry I thought there was something missing from Twitter. Turns out it was CHOCKLOCK.

<http://twitter.com/architechies/status/3096926150>

Eventually, everyone pipes down and goes for grammar and punctuation to make a strong point instead.

Selective use of capitals is not only effective, but highly stylistic. It is done to provide emphasis or to enforce meter or symbolism.

"FTW" : 2007 :: "THAT IS ALL" : 2008

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/788491028>

Build your own use of capitals; they are the most basic alternative to the characters you have already chosen. When used properly, they can tickle the awareness instead of stepping on a toe.

Good thing a diabetes convention is going on next to WWDC, because tomorrow is gonna be TOTALLY SWEET.

<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/830107837>

The stream of updates you consume is a stimulus network. Scale your sensitivity along with the people you read. Construct your digital nervous system by first understanding your own habits.

## Discover Your "Office Hours"

Take a look at your time-of-day stats. They're probably similar to mine (<http://tweetstats.com/graphs/dom>), mostly during the day, with a small spike at night. What gets interesting is when you



examine the times you think you are most busy versus the times you actually are writing.

What you are searching for is silence. Find those moments when you are usually inactive, and explore them. Understand why you aren't writing then, and whether there is actually anything worth writing about at that time of day or day of the week.

This is a method of determining your own comfort zone. If you note that you are writing a lot during a certain time of day, you could consider that time your "office hours," when advice, responses, or interaction may be found.

You can even schedule your tweets, for example. I don't go for this myself, but if you're curious, follow @Twaitting. If you're a visual person, living in your calendar perhaps, there is a service to project your activity in a more comfortable form factor, called @Twistory. See mine at <http://www.twistory.net/user/dom>.

Setting expectations for "office hours" can be important to your audience.

Hey guys, I know some of you thought I might have died in the past few hours because I haven't tweeted, but I'm here.

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/2556413958>

Discover for yourself which knobs to tweak: volume, noise, and frequency. When you're setting any of them wrong, your audience will tell you (or remain conspicuously quiet). When you are set right, your writing will be clearly heard above the crosstalk.

The difference between success and failure is perseverance. Perseverance is marked by focus and obsessive determination. The secret of focus is having tiny goals. I had to learn this lesson the hard way, by tweaking all of the knobs at once.

When I set out to write this book, 40,000 words seemed like a tremendous amount. After producing the first sample chapters, I barely pecked away at it for weeks until I did the math on how many words per day I needed to produce to hit my deadline.

Writing 1,000 good words a day is about as hard as it sounds, but I'm here to tell you that it's possible.

1000 words per day. 100 words per hour. That's about 17 words every ten minutes. Here's mine.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/2556040532>

This book took three years to research and three months to write. I'd never written a book before, so I was in a full sprint to get it done early so I could edit before submission.

At first, I spent all day getting into the right mindset to write, then crank out 1,000 words between sundown and when I crashed that night. This did not last, as you can imagine. I got slightly ill, putting me behind schedule as I lost one day to sleep. So much for that approach.

The next approach I took was to try writing just 100 words an hour over the course of the day. This helped, as I continued to research and add fragments to the section on literary forms. It became tiresome, though, and lacking in flavor.

But even that “small” goal wasn't enough. I found myself breaking it down further. How many words fit in the average sentence, anyway? It turns out: on the order of 10.

When you break down your goal into such discrete parts, the practice of writing becomes more fluid. You move from goal to goal, marking time in words. With this goal-based approach, I was able to hand off more material to my early readers, and get the feedback I'd been lacking.

Here is the trick of this chapter: Dial in your environment and trust to creativity. The next lessons will give you more discipline; for now, just ignore the challenges and “rules” and seek balance.

Being *dialed in* is just a euphemism for being all set, ready to go. Create the conditions for great writing. Remove obstacles, replace broken workflows. Add paper, remove paper. Increase tolerance for noise, decrease it. Play with all the dials.

Being dialed in is about feeling content in the space you are inhabiting. There is always something to complain about, so just be happy for the moment.

Make the social network your happy place. Wherever you are, especially if you are in the middle of nowhere, you can reclaim

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that pastoral feeling. The short format is a potential grain-field of idyllic observations from remote locations, the bucolic, rustic scene.

*... an interesting article at CNN.com about how farmer's [sic] like Steve are using Twitter and other tools to bridge the urban-rural divide and get us thinking more about where our food comes from.*

<http://blog.twitter.com/2009/07/twittering-from-tractor.html>

Social media is what you make it. If you bring focus and will-power, such will be returned to you.

## Link

### Deduce the Nature of Short Messages

The SMS or short message service protocol was written mostly by a man named Friedhelm Hillebrand in the 1980s. He sat down one day and wrote out a bunch of sentences by hand, counting the number of characters in each and finding the average. He found it to be around 160, and wrote that into the specification.

That limit and other important constraints are what define the short form, but there is one aspect that completely defies that constraint: hypertext. When words are marked up with special symbols, their meaning changes.

Traditionally, semiotics has been the realm of literary theorists. The hyperlink broadens that realm, welcoming anyone and making places for things like periods in the middle of words. The effect of hypertext on literature is only just beginning. Start to notice changes as the message format evolves.

### Study the Anatomy of a Single Message

When you send a tweet, up to five things can immediately happen: an SMS is sent, an API notification is sent, an e-mail is sent (as with direct messages), most URLs are shortened, and a Web page is created.

An SMS itself has a certain anatomy: text, a colon, and more text, possibly containing a hyperlink. This optional hyperlink is also activated in most other social media systems; it is the one piece of hypertext that is present across every medium.

The API notification contains the entire contents of the message along with everything else Twitter knows about the context of the message. This includes timestamp, method of sending, a location (optional), and the author's profile information.

(In the case of a direct message, an e-mail is sent containing your name in the subject line, your message, your name, and your username in the body, alongside links back to several functions on the Twitter site.)

Your message is simultaneously archived. The page itself continues to evolve, but the basics include your words with hypertext @mentions and hyperlinks, your linked username and your full name, a linked profile picture, possibly a hyperlink to the method of sending, as well as a "favorite" link that users can use to mark your tweet and an optional link to the location from which it was sent.

This process is completely automatic. The surrounding hypertext anatomy is a powerful multiplier.

## Share the Power of Hypertext

There is a philosophy behind hypertext: A word changes its meaning when it is linked. This word has a new relationship to the reader and to the link itself.

Even the most basic of cellular devices activate hyperlinks. Whether this hypertext is a link or a phone number (which can be dialed by selecting it), what is critical is the experience of going from one application on a device to another. The value comes in saving steps and time when switching contexts.

Hypertext, still a young technology, is a medium that continues to evolve literature as we know it. Words have ceased existing on their own, and by necessity form connections to more than just the context of this particular sentence.

By linking @mentions (and #hashtags in some cases), Twitter is the world's easiest and fastest way to produce hypertext. Remember that while the mobile data network is omnipresent in America

and Europe, for example, the developing world will be confined to SMS for some time to come. Much good can be done in these places via tools like Twitter if the constraints of SMS are kept in mind.

Cell phone usage here is massive and the velocity is increasing.  
#iraqtech  
<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1565324670>

Short links are essential for sharing hypertext while still leaving space for information about the link. Own your short links via [bit.ly](http://bit.ly) or another social service. This generates long-term value as statistics about your readership emerge.

But remember: Links can expire.

Just as there is a common currency in the economy of words, there is also a derivative currency of the hyperlink. Terse content will inevitably be judged by the quality of its hypertext. To build value, find a relevant reference. Show your sources.

## Change the Meaning of Words by Linking Them

When I link the word *love* to a definition of the word *bate*, what happens to the word *love*? Not much; perhaps a kind of contradiction. What if a more suitable connection is made, to the word *you* or even a link to you or your site?

Now the link carries meaning.

What we have then, are three dimensions of text in the short form: the character, the line, and the link. In the realm of the character are grammar, spelling, syntax, and all the shapes. Lines and spaces define the negative domain, while the link is composed of a very rigid formula but contains nearly infinite possibility and meaning.

*Click on any word.*

<http://lingro.com>

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I created the @work account during my brief period of severance from Odeo. Originally, it was a private account, used to communicate with coworkers on a secret project. That project completed, I recycled the posts and opened it up to see what would happen.

I soon noticed that @work was receiving an incredible number of mentions. This is because people tend to shorten “at work” as a status message to “@work.”

The result is mostly people complaining about being at work. The @work account has a tremendous *relevance score*, because of all these mentions. I could do anything with that stream of incoming links. Search engines perceive those incoming links as value.

Search engine algorithms are written to mimic human cognition, but they haven’t yet caught up with the short format. This is because we are literally changing the meaning of words by linking them, and it’s not even clear to us yet as humans what that really means.

# Word

## Expose the Possibilities in Phraseology, Poetry, and Invention

*There is nothing wrong, really, with any word, but some are better than others.*

—Strunk & White, *The Elements of Style*, p. 77

For all of the talk about social networking as a force for viral marketing, guerilla messaging, revolution, et alia, in the end we are just talking about words strung together in sequence. At a certain point, one must examine one's own vocabulary, literary style, and approach to form word-by-word.

A simple approach would be to examine each of the literary forms that fit within 140 characters of hypertext. There are quite a few techniques for short composition that aren't strictly poetical, almost too many to describe in a style guide.

Take then a few for contemplation, a few for reference, and a few more to inspire. The following should help you choose the right pattern or compositional form, build your own words if need be, and use poetry as a guide.

Quick are the eyes that feed upon our words, and fickle. We must be memorable. Find unique phrases and constructions. Find a favorite word and use it differently.



Find out which words make your audience react.

*That would make a great tweet.*

Style. Mode. Tone. Manner. These are all words to describe words. This is like using melody to describe music, or drawing to describe art. Mode can be rhetorical, satiric, pastoral, didactic. Tone can be formal, informal, playful, serious, seductive, terse, sarcastic, all of these things at once.

Read on for a brief refresher from grammar school, poetry, and creative writing. There are many more words that apply to classes of other words (such as *kireji*). For the sake of brevity, these are omitted, but do make for rewarding study.

Similarly, there are many terms for larger literary works (e.g., *Künstlerroman*, etc.) that warrant review, if one were to consider the combination of short-form messages as a whole to be a new work altogether.

As a series of updates, the most casual fit for short-form writing is the style of a journal. Call it a blog, diary, or memoir, there are many similar forms and the examples are endless. This seems to be the most common form of quick writing.

It is said that real life is stranger than fiction. If that is true, then there is certainly no need for extra hyperbole. This trick is used quite frequently in the short form, almost to the point of melodrama.

Folks, the short format does not leave room for the epistle. You won't be writing a novel, a epic poem, or a canto. There is no room for foreshadowing, allegory, or subplot. Do not burden the reader with embellishment or exaggeration.

Paraphrase instead. It's become hip to rewrite a longer work in 140 character increments. A pair of college freshmen have dubbed this "Twitterature."

*Presented on the following pages is the beginning of a literary movement.*

Dwell for a moment on the attraction of Cliff's Notes. Who among us hasn't rifled through at least one copy, detailing a starkly abridged version of one or another thorny tome?

What is Twitterature if not the Cliff's Notes of Cliff's Notes? I submit that it is much more than that; many distinct and persistent literary forms may be reduced to 140 characters without dissolution of their essence.

For example, it's possible to indicate a flashback within 140 characters. It may do to simply use the word "flashback" in the course of writing.

Symbolism may be possible to represent in 140 characters, but there remain a few challenges to telling a larger story. How will you identify the foil in your short? What passes for hubris in SMS? I'm hard-pressed for a good characterization of utopia in 140 characters.

These are just a few of the challenging forms (try surrealism, mythology, or allegory for an instant headache). Going further, we must decide for ourselves what makes a viable pattern language. We build our own short code collaboratively.

The French call this *Oulipo*: a loose gathering of writers creating works using constrained writing techniques. We decide together, in small groups at first, what is acceptable according to the constraints. When an innovation appears, it takes the form of a pattern.

## Design Your Own Pattern

Stout Ice Cream: heat to boil 2/3c stout/2T molasses; cool. Beat 4yolk/6T sug; +c milk&cream/stout. Freeze/mix frequently~5h or use machine.

<http://twitter.com/cookbook/status/1294812553>

Twitter pioneer Maureen Evans (partner of @Blaine, one of the original 14 creators) minted this technique after years of poetical posts as @Maureen. Her reward for ingenuity is the forthcoming print edition of @cookbook from Artisan Books.

Which pattern language will be appropriated by the short form next? Can the detective story work in such a space? What about the mystery, the thriller, or the stageplay?

There are few guides to the creation of a word pattern that aren't specifically about poetry (*Western Wind*, David Mason and John Frederick Nims), music (*Games for Song*, Ben Vigoda), or architecture (*The Timeless Way of Building*, Christopher Alexander). There is one treatment of pattern design that lends itself to the short form, Scott McCloud's trio *Understanding Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, and *Making Comics*.

McCloud has boiled his advice down to five key topics, which I once paraphrased:

"Moment, frame, image, word, flow." -@ScottMcCloud, *Making Comics*.

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2674427536>

This means something for writing as well as comics. Take each choice, one by one. Choice of moment relates not just to the moment you choose to describe in your message, but also the moment you choose to deliver that message.

I should twitter more so @dom stops stealing all my lines.

<http://twitter.com/meredith/status/843695984>

Choice of frame is critical: How big is the scene you are painting? What exactly is the perspective of the narrator or protagonist in this tiny tale? Here are two extreme examples of frame, both from the city of San Francisco.

I'm on Fillmore. Literally. <http://yfrog.com/791esgj>

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2727905867>

This is a test. This is a test, of the outdoor warning system. This is only . . . a test.

<http://twitter.com/mat/status/2407936692>

In *Making Comics*, McCloud has a fundamental obligation to discuss the image. In the short message form, it is optional. Choice of image is twofold: First, you may choose to employ imagery within your message.

We'll see SMS usage increase as Twitter reaches the developing world. SMS = seed. Web = earth, water, light.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1650708437>

Second, remember your profile image is perfectly mutable.

A beautiful use of our Profile Image API: <http://twibbon.com>

<http://twitter.com/bs/status/2743571084>

For a truly professional example of profile image manipulation, follow @mantia.

For us, what McCloud calls “choice of word” is paramount. There are many methods for finding fresh words (a good thesaurus is built into the Mac now—hint, hint), but the simplest is always the best: Just read more.

Some prefer invention (which is addressed later). Others still eschew all advice and rely on instinct.

I do not choose words, words choose me.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/3238074177>

Once you have moment, frame, image, and word, you have a choice of flow. You may continue the thought in another message. You may divert to another form, like e-mail, direct message, or Google Wave.

To get a sense for how your flow is perceived, read back over your messages every once in a while. Focus on the lead-in. The first couple of words are your most valuable signals, the prime real estate.

Here are a few triggers, and their references:

- ◆ *It turns out* is the scientist's lead-in for a conclusion of fact or research.
- ◆ *I guess* allows the writer to follow with a more questionable statement.
- ◆ *So* picks up where a conversation died down but is not forgotten.
- ◆ *Well* is a passive-aggressive term that predicates argument. "Well, you're wrong and here's why" is the subtext.
- ◆ *Yep* interjects the subsequent statement into the middle of a discussion, implying a "Really?" before it.

These verbal patterns vary from culture to culture, but McCloud's instruction provides the recipe to create your own pattern or code.

Rather than reiterate every lesson from McCloud's work here, I simply urge that you (re)read *Making Comics* or take the 17 minutes necessary to at least watch his TED talk from 2005.

*Media provide a window back into the world we live in.*

[www.ted.com/index.php/talks/scott\\_mccloud  
\\_on\\_comics.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/scott_mccloud_on_comics.html)

Here's a pattern from my college days at Swarthmore. The media in this case was a garnet-colored tray made of a scratchable compound, the writing tool being whatever pointed implement of inscription was available at the time.

The pattern started with the word “Try.” Historically, it was used for heckling the sexual prowess of other students, such as “Try So-and-so.” The pattern evolved into sarcasm and allusion as the semesters wore on.

There is one dining hall on campus. Chances are, you’d pick up a tray with an inscription of some kind, and if you were lucky there would be something thoughtful like “Try irony” or “Try forgetting.”

*Try sleep.*

Try this pattern: Mad Libs.

I [verb] you.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2712354832>

From the silly to the sublime, there are just so many patterns that will fit into small places. One that I’ve been waiting to use is the Homeric epithet, such as “swift-footed Achilles.” What are the epic terms for today’s everyday heroes?

It’s critical that we develop a pattern language to attack the problems of distributed, social media as it evolves out of traditional channels. We must try everything, and standardize what works. The inspiration for this comes from Christopher Alexander’s *A Pattern Language*, written to guide builders, planners, and architects.

Alexander presents problems needing to be solved when building anything, along with a possible solution to each, gleaned from eight years of research. Having only had half as much time to study the short form, I can’t go as far as to propose a solution to each of the challenges here.

I do hope to point out the interesting, creative opportunities and present my own approach to as many as possible. The biggest challenge and opportunity of the short form is the topic coming next. Once you have settled on a comfortable pattern, explore the distinguished and timeless activity of invention.

apostrophy — n. The incorrect use or omission of an apostrophe.

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/828608606>

‘Dunch’ or ‘linner’?

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/1837442032>

@gruber lupper

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/1837623014>

“improssible” — @robey

<http://twitter.com/rael/status/2410680198>

He moves like a tiger and a crocodile combined. A tigerdile.

<http://twitter.com/NathanFillion/status/3081807952>

## Build Your Own Lexicon by Inventing New Words

Performant explained: 1. People know what I mean. 2. There’s no better word 3. Profit

<http://twitter.com/bmf/status/1702722644>

Let’s begin with a caveat: Everyone can be an author, but it takes a special type to become an inventor. We all want to be original, but take heed not to suck in the process. I’m looking particularly at words with the “twit” prefix or suffix. Please get over this, people, “twit” has a negative connotation.

Having said that, there are some fairly reliable techniques to inspire invention. The first and most popular technique is the acronym. Use of acronyms and acrostics has evolved (again out of IRC) into modern-day hashtags, previously discussed.

“Text speak, rather than harming literacy, could have a positive effect on the way children interact with language.” <http://bit.ly/tqYYq>

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/1250004482>

Late lat3 l8.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/460793>

Acronyms, Wiki-speak, leetspeak, and other nerdy frameworks aside, there is an opportunity and a cost to creating new words. Writing creatively, we have the opportunity to fight “conventional” language.

Zen and the Art of Prefixing Your Title With ‘Zen and the Art Of’

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/1634320274>

Relentlessly avoid the use of jargon and familiar, hackneyed words or phrases. At this point, I’m comfortable saying that the word “fail” has had its brief moment of ascension and deserves a proper burial. Isn’t there a more colorful expression like #head-desk we can use instead?

Currently watching Indiana Jones and the Faildom of the Failly Fails, starring Faillison Fail and Faila LeFail.

<http://twitter.com/beep/status/998194038>

Let us cease to indulge such metaphors as “low-hanging fruit” or “touch base.” Obvious sports analogies are grating, but so is flamboyant diction like “dawn of a new [whatever],” or the common “light at the end of the tunnel.”



Ask yourself whether you know the literal meaning of Latin phrases like *et cetera* and *status quo*.

*cogito ergo sum*

I think therefore I am.

*coito ergo sum*

I sex it up, therefore I am.

Here is a basic “rule of thumb” (heh, sorry couldn’t resist): if you can’t translate it, don’t use it.

We use this kind of language because it is easy, and we have all gotten lazy. Are these outdated phrases and unnecessary clauses really useful any longer? Where is the creativity in tangling together a collection of ready-made phrases, set in order by someone else long ago?

Anyone who’s read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* knows where George Orwell saw this habit heading: Newspeak. He predicted that sanitized language, safely wrapped for individual enjoyment, would dehumanize us.

In his appendix to the novel, “The Principles of Newspeak,” Orwell warns again that our use of language governs the way we think.

*The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible.*

—George Orwell, “The Principles of Newspeak,” 1949, p. 305

Machine-like repetition of common idiomatic speech isolates thought from expression. Clear passion, strong writing, and creative ideas are the treasures of a childlike mind. Think and write clearly, never mind the comfortable phrases of our fathers.

I love when TV alerts me to the special one-hour must-see event I've been waiting for.

<http://twitter.com/erinmalone/status/3080878971>

Read “Politics and the English Language,” an essay written by George Orwell in 1946. The danger he perceived, even back then, was that a conventional or vernacular use of a phrase might overpower its precise meaning. This is the same danger that brands like Kleenex, Xerox, and Google face today: If they are overused out of context, their original meaning deteriorates.

If you do find yourself “stuck in a quagmire,” I believe that the habits of poor writing are curable. In “Politics”, Orwell fit his advice into six rules to help you avoid most errors in judgment:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Be particularly “on the lookout” for the idiom. These are figures of speech with a common or cultural meaning that is often not widely-used-enough to warrant such repeated references. Some are tired and bootless, like “kick the bucket” or “pain in the ass.”

Planning for failure means never having to say “mission critical.”

<http://twitter.com/bmf/statuses/2032190295>

Some can even appear vaguely ironic and comedic, such as “jump the shark” or “pop a wheelie.”

All of my tweets are just popping wheelies for @thebook.

<http://twitter.com/PowerofNo/status/2672873139>

Alongside the antique expressions, create new clauses and turns of phrase. Try the following inventive approaches.

*Neologism.* Coin a word related to your field of interest. Making up words is normal in children but seen as eccentric in adults, so keep it somewhat scientific.

*Oxymoron.* Express something in a figure of speech that combines two normally contradictory terms. “Jumbo shrimp,” “extremely normal,” and “common delicacy” are a few paradoxical terms, defying intuition.

Maximum Overkill is when you have too much fun.

<http://twitter.com/woodside/status/2058286896>

*Personification.* Representing a thing or an object as a person is almost too common a device to use creatively, but it’s always funny to hear the way people talk about their laptops, or their video game characters.

Sara got the mushroom that makes her little so she can fit in all the little holes. Then she died.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/24866>

*Hypercorism.* Nicknaming results in words like “movie” for moving picture, “telly” for television, and “Aussie” for Australian. Other examples include duplication (“John-John”), and diminutives like “Abe” for Abraham. Widely used in Russian, this form is typically used for terms of endearment.

Playing with Celly

<http://twitter.com/rayreadyray/status/31109>

*Metonymy.* When a business executive becomes “a suit” or horse races become “the track,” metaphor has taken one step further and become a common name.

Driving the Bruiser - always a pleasure, always an adventure.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/44037>

*Charactonym.* This is a name of any kind that suggests the personality traits of the character. Perhaps the best example of this is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* foil Mercutio, whose very name suggests his mercurial nature and his tragic end.

... My name is Buzz, and I'm a Twitterholic.

<http://twitter.com/buzz/status/2414913>

*Portmanteau.* At the very heart of word invention is the purely elemental collision of two word forms. "Troubulous" is a marriage of "trouble" and "garrulous" to mean "gossipy, meddlesome speech." "Unobtanium" would seem to be a fictional element with supernatural properties, decaying swiftly into "handwavium," or "Element 404" (after the HTTP 404 Not Found error).

microhoo

<http://twitter.com/rabble/status/667618402>

When out of ideas, redefine an existing term. The short form, itself the lovechild of SMS and RSS, changes the meaning of some common words. Twitter canonized the word "tweet." Facebook added a definition to the word "poke." Together we invent a new online dialect.

*how about changing "twit" to "tweet" - the "official noun" is "Twitter Update", but that's boring ...?*

Excerpt of a letter from Blaine Cook to Craig Hockenberry,  
considered the origin of the modern definition of 'tweet',  
San Francisco, CA Jan 11, 2007

*Etymology.* In our day, search provides an instant anthropology of words. About 90 percent of the time that a word or term seems original, a quick Twitter search shows a few references already. Although it is somewhat banal, Urban Dictionary has been around long enough to amass a fair chronicle of some of the freshest new words. Of course, they've recently started tweeting as @urbandaily.

*Litotes.* A sentiment expressed by denying its opposite is a special figure of speech, the classic example being "she is not so unkind." Another example, made famous by a former colleague, is the magnanimous reaction "I don't have a huge problem with that." Use litotes for a splash of irony. Try to pull off double litotes with a statement like "I couldn't disagree less."

*No, no, I don't disagree!*

—Jon Feldman, Cambridge, MA March 4, 2000

*Malapropism.* Substitute an incorrect word for one with a similar sound for comic effect. Screw up a figure of speech. Deliberately mix metaphors, as a means to simultaneously make use of the meme and scoff at conventional speech.

*It's not the heat, it's the humility.*

—Yogi Berra

*I made a wrong mistake.*

—Yogi Berra

*Phonetics.* Beyond the technique of "writing the way you speak," there are common and uncommon ways to represent the actual syllables of speech as a substitution for dialogue. Use it for emphasis, or the superlative.

BUT PHOTOSHOP YOU'VE BEEN DOIGN QUITE GOOD TODAY  
AKSHUALLY WHY DID YOU QUIT ON ME THIS TIME JERK

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/2762702125>

There are instant literary memes popping up all over social networks, like the comedy tag.

Pink River #failedwesterns

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/2695930827>

Another is the deprecating (or anonymizing) robot-as-self concept. I'm thinking first of @beep, the Unstoppable Robot Ninja. Observe also @semaphoria and her bot-family: husbot and the kid-bots. These newly-coined expressions provide some cover for the true and revealing details of our real lives.

*Anachronism.* To deliberately create an error in chronology, like retelling a historical quote with a modern reference, provides room for inventive irony. Plundering our collective consciousness this way are the rascals at @HistoricalTweet.

Twitter, We Have a Problem. <http://bit.ly/nwOmp>

<http://twitter.com/historicaltweet/status/3182673988>

*Aposiopesis.* Write a sentence that is deliberately broken off and left unfinished.

Being a Dad is— “a piece of cake?” interrupts the wife.

<http://twitter.com/simplebits/status/852934837>

While you're being visually disruptive, use contrast, disparity, divergence, and polarity to create conflict or tension, deliberate dissonance or discord, contradiction or denial.

I just found out that my secret is out.

<http://twitter.com/meredith/status/5344809>

*Epitaph, obituary, inscription, legend, elegy.* Think of the 15 percent of us who participated in Michael Jackson's memorial via Twitter, or the million-plus people who became fans of his Facebook page.

Don't simply write in English, but try hybrid or macaronic words (using a mixture of languages). In linguistics, this is called code-switching, the study of which has a name as well: *morphology*.

Traditionally, the study of word structure and identification requires time and a certain canonical usage or inclusion before new words are adopted. As we accelerate towards the real-time Web, inclusion of new language must match velocity.

Join the word design collective. Remember that we have not simply one line to work with here, but many. For example, a tweet can technically comprise 139 lines (if read using the right client, like Tweetie for example).

Recent advice, summarized: Write your way out of a thinking block—because you'll never \*think\* your way out of a writing block.

<http://twitter.com/hotdogsladies/status/2018628138>

## Poetry Is a Guide

*[Twitter]'s a kind of nonfiction poetry, where you can't directly develop a major idea and have to insinuate it, sculpt it with tiny arguments.*

[www.thestranger.com/seattle/  
Content?oid=1774875&mode=print](http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=1774875&mode=print)

Let us collectively raise the level of discourse online. What starts as a relentless tide of simple-minded chatter resembles the most perfect wave of literary turbulence under the right conditions.

It starts with you, the reader. Expect more genius, accept less nonsense. Vote with your eyes; there is no excuse for following someone who is boring, obvious, or brutish. There are so many undiscovered authors to read instead!

You'll know your words are close to poetry when they start to achieve musical or incantatory effects when combined. What is beautiful or "melodic" to the eye is entirely subjective. Only a few definitions agree.

In such a short space as a status update, how do we distinguish between poetry and other wordplay? When you start using particular forms and conventions to suggest alternate meanings in words, you're dabbling in poetry. If you do so to evoke a particular emotional or sensual response, chances are you are using a poet's craft.

*Poetic diction* is the term used to describe the middle ground between actual poetry and lyrical prose. Poetry is the most capricious of literary arts. The common layperson hardly concerns his- or herself with poetry until confronted with the blank slate 140 characters long.

Creating resonance between rhythm or rhyme patterns is easy with the space of several verses, but how are we to do so in the space of one verse? What is the result when we start to shorten verses and shrink the basic components of poetry?

There are but two basic components of poetry: meter and rhyme. Of the two, only meter seems intrinsically necessary. Discover the limits of meter at a smaller scale. It is technically possible to exceed your character count with your syllable count, especially when you get into numbers and symbols. There is a vast playground of meter in the short format.

Plant a little poetry. Grow your vocabulary. Prune a vine of verbs as you stroll through the carefree youth of literature's new body. Here now are a few words from creative writing class.

*Haiku*. 5-7-5 is just the beginning of this rich and diverse form. Study its ancestor, the *renga* (a kind of collaborative poem).

joining twitter was / almost inevitable / I'll halt not the march.

<http://twitter.com/irenekaoru/status/5732856>

*Couplet*. One of the most general forms of poetry requires using the same meter for both lines, usually sharing the same rhyme. Try marking this by adding carriage returns.



Global warming bad.  
Local warming good!

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/53688392>

*Tercet.* With three simple lines of poetry, you're stretching from couplet and stanza into a more identifiable poem format.

The original Twitter poet is @Noah Glass. A modern-day Beat poet, his bio reads, "i started this".

Driving this blue steel dog, pregnant and lumbering. Bumping Justice. Burning biodiesel. My style is drunken whale." {why I follow @noah}

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1455656159>

What Noah does is intertwine metaphor, simile, and stylistics to create a kind of personal mythology.

A metaphor is a *something*, where a simile is *like a something*. The difference is in use of analogy. Metaphors can have classes, such as nautical metaphors or technical metaphors.

I have surfboard wax on my sportcoat. How metaphorical is that?!

<http://twitter.com/sacca/status/85752572>

Simile also operates *as a something*. A simile is a metaphor, but a metaphor is not necessarily a simile.

*Ballad.* How could we tell if something is a ballad or not, within 140 characters? Narrative in nature, poetry of this style must appear unpretentious and non-farcical. In larger spaces, the ballad follows a quatrain format, with a self-contained story. Shortened, merely the title may suffice.

Ballad of the Last One Standing.

<http://twitter.com/work/status/3260615839>

*Sonnet.* At first glance, it may not seem possible to fit a sonnet into a tweet. However, the standard definition is fourteen lines with usually around ten syllables per line. Technically, it's possible but I haven't seen it yet.

Now we get into some of the more specialized forms, many more than may be mentioned here. The steps beyond the common forms above lend a special credence to the writer, but also require a bit of indulgence on the part of the reader.

In the realm of technique, there is the *eye rhyme*. Height, weight. Fruit, biscuit. Try also the *half rhyme*. On, moon. Bodies, ladies. These work especially well in the short form, because it is largely read, not spoken.

*Clerihew.* The poetical form with the whimsical name is a four-line biographical poem invented by Edmund Clerihew Bentley. The lines are humorously irregular in length. The rhymes, often quite contrived, are structured AABB.

*Did Descartes*

*Depart*

*With the thought*

*"Therefore I'm not"?*

—*Games Magazine*, 1983

If such rhyming constraints do not please you, give in to blank verse, where you have meter, but no rhyme.

*Dull not device by coldness and delay.*

—William Shakespeare, *Othello*, II, 3

A few more examples and we can move on from the strictly poetic form. The first is a favorite, because it is subtle but easily identifiable as poetry: the *chiasmus*. This is the product of inverted

grammar (prepositional phrases and gerunds in reverse order) or meaning.

*His time a moment, and a point his space.*

—Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle I

*Our blood to us, this to our blood is born;*

—William Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well*, I, 3

In the days of yore, poetry was used to issue a complaint or grievance. If you're going to bitch someone out, you might as well be lyrical about it.

The same thing goes for the dark cousin of complaint: the *lament*. To truly honor someone, take a minute to compose a *dirge* (funeral rite), or a *requiem* (religious remembrance).

*Impatience waiteth on true sorrow.*

—William Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, iii, 3

*Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief.*

—William Shakespeare, *Loves Labors Lost*, V, 2

On the lighter side, some smaller comedic forms include the *limerick*, the *one-liner*, and the *pantomime*.

[dips quill] tap tap. scritch scritch scritch.

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/3255903475>

*Monometer* works, with a touch of hypercorism.

*the meadows*

*with orchids*

*and mossies*

—Erik A. King

*Monostitch.* The simplest is sometimes the most effective. A single verse can be given a title and dubbed a poem.

*On Ridgetop Butterflies in the High Sierras*

*Granite colored fritillary fighting yellow tiger swallowtail.*

—Erik A. King

In the interest of brevity, the remaining poetical and prosodic forms that fit within 140 characters are left to your discovery. Immerse yourself in language, become fluent again. After years of a mind in mothballs, emerge to master one small portion of vocabulary, etymology, or poetry.

## Part Three

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# MASTER

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I once surfed the entire Web in a weekend. The year was 1993, the browser NCSA Mosaic, using the network of Swarthmore College outside of Philadelphia. Every click seemed to find its way back to *Links from the Underground*, handmade HTML from my classmate Justin Hall.

He is largely credited with being one of the first bloggers, if not the first blogger. We taught a class together, not for credit but for fun, on how to build personal Web pages. I've helped create more than a few "virtual communities" in the intervening years, and I've never met a "master" of such things.

I don't consider myself a master, either. I'm not sure mastery of social media is possible at this stage. Maybe once we have evolved filters and tools to counteract the deluge, a few fleeting moments of comprehension will emerge.

I could recognize mastery if I saw it. I think it begins with tolerance, in the sense both of consumption and acceptance. The master will have a high tolerance for noise in the system, and be able to quickly filter.

The wise ones will also accept new people and different ways of doing things. The great ones will exhibit compassion and use their powers for good.

We can also see virtuosity in one aspect of social media, or what @ravenme calls "small society." Managing multiple accounts, delving into free speech or law, cultural anthropology of walled gardens, these are all unexplored mines of precious illumination.

Twitter's inventor @jack is still the reigning champion. His discipline is astounding. Jack's austere style is based on the principles of simplicity, constraint, and craftsmanship. He uses SMS a lot.

A picture of me in the c-130 & armor: <http://twitpic.com/3l8pe>  
(via @heif) #iraqtech

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1560332791>

Mastery could be marked by acute comedy. I always knew Ellen Degeneres would be good at Twitter.

I'm thinking of new terms for twitter. This is a 'litter' . . . it's a twitter that's a lie.

<http://twitter.com/TheEllenShow/status/1333063298>

@DarthVader is the original gangster.

Away for a few days & when return I have 50K+ followers. Pretty meh for a backwater world. On Coruscant I've got 1.2 trillion.

<http://twitter.com/darthvader/status/1331223007>

There are the extremes in any direction. Follow @AdamJackson if you dare; he's approaching 50,000 handwritten tweets in two and a half years on the service.

I wrote 7,000 words today. People say quality over quantity but I'm just writing and enjoying it. I can simplify later.

<http://twitter.com/adamjackson/status/3217590281>

A few more of my favorite moments.

Too beautiful to Twitter.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1451819831>

Thinking a thousand unsent tweets.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1200936655>

Door hinge rhymes with orange.

<http://twitter.com/ravenme/status/975687290>

biz telling me they considered calling twitter “twitch” at first . . .

<http://twitter.com/JohnDonvanNL/status/1228550742>

@GQ\_Germany The idea rose out of a desire to share what I was doing with my friends in real-time from anywhere, while sailing, walking, etc.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1228516983>

I don't know what to tweet

<http://twitter.com/hodgman/status/990900681>

just checking to see if that one hundred and forty character thing is real or just some stupid rule to boss us around but they don't mean i

<http://twitter.com/StephenAtHome/status/1443145233>

yep they mean it

<http://twitter.com/StephenAtHome/status/1443145354>

I feel like I could spend all day curating Stephen Colbert's tweets:

this is not supposed to be its own tweet. it's a support-tweet for the previous tweet. good job, previous tweet.

<http://twitter.com/StephenAtHome/status/1577669822>

Another day could be spent discussing updates from Lawrence Lessig, who fights for network neutrality (freedom from restrictions on content, platforms, or equipment used in broadband communications).

neutral message

<http://twitter.com/lessig/status/2012564751>

The preceding quotations were taken from my favorites list, hundreds of tweets long. For more sources, check the Recommended Reading, particularly “Not Quite What I Was Planning” and <http://twitterwit.net>.

For an ongoing list of greats, you may subscribe to this list: <http://twitter.com/dom/favorites>. There are many lists of great writers to follow, and an appendix in the back of this book. Geekdad has a great list, to start you off:

<http://wired.com/geekdad/2009/05/100-geeks-you-should-be-following-on-twitter>

To truly master this new means of expression, you must exist simultaneously in real life and the small societies of your social network. Mores will change to permit this. We have already witnessed teams of teenagers sitting next to each other, texting.

this isn't rude, this is the future

<http://twitter.com/StephenAtHome/status/1443154590>

Eating a banana with my left hand and typing “Eating a banana with my left hand” with my right hand.

<http://twitter.com/dunstan/status/166650932>

These little devices find their way into our every activity. We must be vigilant for abuse and addiction. A single message can change the world, for good or ill. The following section provides a mantra for find your own path to mastery of the short form.



While we were down I twittered the meaning of life. Oh well  
<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/207848632>

## Tame

You must be patient. You must watch and learn. You must remember your audience. The pressure is on to follow back, but don't. Stay true.

multitasking is a myth. do one thing, do it well, move on to the next. something to strive for.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/744936012>

If I have a heart attack, I'm totally suing blogs.

<http://twitter.com/hotdogsladies/status/783894016>

## Cultivate

A great orator sometimes chooses an audience member to address, to help invigorate the conversation. It may help to think of someone to speak to directly, even if you're not referring to them in your message.

Today, Twitter's filled with more White Whine than Woody Allen in a hot tub full of chablis.

<http://twitter.com/hotdogsladies/status/767788763>

I have the perfect number of projects so that I can procrastinate on everything by getting everything else done.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1035391076>

Now you know the secret of my life

<http://twitter.com/vigoda/status/1035392099>

## Branch

Twitter is what everyone's doing. A real-time repository of state for people, events, & things. A personal news wire of sorts.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/848124664>

Someone is always there to read and listen. There is always an audience for anything. Never doubt that.

"Shut up or I'll blog you."

<http://twitter.com/ijustine/status/357941462>

# Tame

## Apply Multiple Techniques Toward the Same End

I'm going to put my internet addiction in a lock box.

<http://twitter.com/erinmalone/status/1352425596>

The entirety of human emotion is experienced at every moment. Nothing makes that more clear than a simple search on the passion words:

*Love.*

*Hate.*

*Think.*

*Believe.*

*Feel.*

*Wish.*

<http://twistori.com/>

These words trigger an emotional response every time. Strong media has been demanding our attention for decades. We've now

reached the point where an entire generation has known instant visual and auditory gratification since birth.

This stimulus effect is changing society. It has been driving consumption on the desktop, and now strong media in the pocket is creativity and productivity as well.

## Technology Will Consume Us If We Don't Learn to Control It

It's wonderful what you miss when you don't watch TV.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/621386572>

Broadcast television is a push medium. We work around this with DVRs and On-Demand premium networks, but push is the reality in most places. I turned off cable video service two years ago and replaced it with Internet video, a pull medium.

I took this drastic step because it was clear that television as we knew it was sapping my family's productivity. Also, there were only a few shows that we liked, and those could increasingly be found on rent or for free online. Technology tamed: from a push model to a pull model.

Twitter and blogs are like YouTube, but for text.

<http://twitter.com/Case/status/3208590404>

We don't always consider text to be a powerful medium. Either we forget about hypertext, or we think words are somehow harmless. My case in point: e-mail. If you're curious about how to tame e-mail, I recommend Merlin Mann's Inbox Zero approach. His technique is to treat your electronic inbox as you would your physical inbox: Keep it empty by placing items elsewhere for later action.

Taking comfort in the fact that email is doomed.  
Doomed!

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1290815377>

I'm not a big fan of e-mail, preferring instead the short form for most communication. So what's the equivalent to Inbox Zero for social media?

Birdhouse Zero™.

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/1855177213>

John Gruber and I both use an app for iPhone called Birdhouse that allows us to compose tweets and thoughts ahead of time. I have a few tweets still stored up; I haven't achieved Birdhouse Zero yet. Neither has @Tweetie developer Loren Brichter.

What you don't post with Birdhouse may be more interesting than what you do. #didntpostwithbirdhouse <http://yfrog.com/0tw2ej>

<http://twitter.com/atebits/status/1950483852>

Like @BT, I do think it's possible through simple persistence to silence both your inbox and your outbox.

Anyone that's created ANYTHING revolutionary has banged heads with the impossible and fearlessly willed their creation into existence anyway

<http://twitter.com/BT/status/2150786245>

I've discovered a cycle of focus and distraction, interest and disgust, curiosity and frustration. There are twelve stopping points along this circular path, as in the way of the clock.

## Discover the Antidote to Each of 12 Stages

sitting in the bosom of twitter

<http://twitter.com/Adam/status/44488>

### 1. *Curiosity*

In the beginning, you either see what'll happen if you post, or may just be curious about the lives of others. Usually this starts when a new contact of yours joins. We all know what curiosity does.

The antidote to curiosity is currently unknown. Actually, I don't want to know the antidote, so please don't discover this.

### 2. *Interest*

After you're hooked, there is sometimes something that keeps you coming back, like a funny or a friend. This can lead to distraction or, worse, can cause disinterest in what's going on around you.

The antidote to interest is meditation. Make your next interest be yoga, tai chi, or breath work.

### 3. *Novelty*

Once in a while, we find something in social media that we would never find in traditional media. Sometimes, it's something we might have seen elsewhere, but is unique when placed in that instant, online context. This causes obsession, like candy.

The antidote to novelty is the familiar. When you keep looking for new things but don't find them, discover a new way to look at an old thing.

#### 4. *Excitement*

It's completely natural for someone to get enthusiastic about what they read and write online. The issue here is when we run into people who are way too excited about #whatever. We've all seen it, and we've all gone off the deep end about something.

The antidote to tragic excitement is time off. Get some perspective, leave the offending partier for a while, or just let whomever is annoying you die down.

#### 5. *Inviting Everyone You Know*

Don't invite everyone you know. Let's just start there. There are certain people you shouldn't invite into your social network. They're the same people you wouldn't invite out for coffee or give your e-mail address.

We all invite everyone we can, because this new technology is exciting and the value is in connection. Just remember: each new follow/friend has a cognitive cost. The antidote to inviting everyone is to ask yourself whether you'd leave someone else to add this new person.

#### 6. *Optional: Inviting the Wrong Person (Skip to 9)*

When you do invite the wrong person, the experience becomes instantly annoying. There are social implications to kicking them out, they know how to track you now, there are complications. It can really suck—and I am understating this.

When you have been stung by this experience, you'll need to reinvent yourself. The antidote to this problem is to start over with a lightweight persona that is either transitory or minimalist. If you don't want to start over, you can either block that person or filter them out.

Another alternative to starting completely over is to simply reset your follow count to zero.

Idea: Start fresh. Unfollowing everyone on Twitter in the next couple of days, and following new, interesting people I meet. Learn.

<http://twitter.com/danielbru/status/3083447306>

### 7. *Massive Use/Addiction*

Define Internet addiction for yourself (or ask @erin-malone), but we all face information overload. The Real-Time Web is so rich that it rivals television in persistent, overwhelming stimulation. There is no question that signs of obsession exist, especially regarding Twitter at this moment.

The antidote to addiction is substitution. If you are addicted to posting every thought, try writing a book. Trust me, after National Novel Writing Month (@NaNoWriMo) you will not want to write again for at least a week.

If you are addicted to reading updates, try reading actual books. It gets hard to read long form after all of those small snippets, but the discipline is rewarding.

Another antidote is to physically socialize. Put yourself in situations where it's hard or awkward to type.

To break the addiction, get a great notebook.

Discovering that I can type faster on my iPhone than I can write in my notebook. Not sure how I feel about that yet.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1430843884>

### 8. *Slight Abuse/Accidental Use*

I just lost a follower.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/237>

This is inevitable: the oops-that-was-supposed-to-be-a-direct-message, or the overly glib announcement that costs you a bit of your audience.

The antidote to this problem is to break the workflow that caused it. If you're doing it over SMS, try another tool.



### 9. *Annoyance/Frustration*

It's easy to get annoyed by constant interruption or temptation. Set some rules for yourself to keep from having to take more drastic measures.

Ignore it during stressful times. Turn off notifications for a while.

### 10. *Cutting Way Back*

We all need to take a break from time to time. The fear is always that we will miss something. At certain times, we need to take a break, and we think we can't. But we must.

Put the network down. Just put the network down and walk away.

### 11. *Going Dark/Taking a Break/Going Private*

Okay, you didn't follow that last bit of advice, and now you're completely fed up. To hell with this, you say, "I'm going private."

New Lesson: "Private Twitter Accounts Explained" [50THOUSANDTWEETS] <http://bit.ly/pxihk>

<http://twitter.com/140Lessons/status/2228158400>

Maybe you screwed up big time and now your ego is crushed. Only time or great accomplishment may counteract this trouble. Talk to a friend in real life.

### 12. *Acceptance/Renewed Curiosity*

Maybe you've talked to someone and that conversation has led you back online. Perhaps you've found more time, or you've forgotten the hassle from before.

You can accept social media as a force in your life, or you can deny it. There is a certain subset of writers and thinkers who have nothing whatsoever to do with the short format and still compose wonderful work and solve big problems.

If you find yourself getting sucked back in, and you don't want to be, you'll need to learn to say "No" a thousand times. Get comfortable with "No."

Of course, I would advise that you heed that curious impulse, but sometimes we cannot. If you can, though, remember that you'll experience that same cycle again.

These stages of involvement and disengagement are not unique to Twitter. Every social media service is vulnerable. Twitter only accelerates movements from stage to stage, and marks each transition with a quote.

A major strategy to avoid the consequences of overwriting is to operate more than one account. To do this, you'll need an advanced tool or set of Web browsers to operate efficiently.

## Manage Multiple Accounts Effectively

"Birdfeed is, without question, the Helen Hunt's rain-soaked breasts of iPhone Twitter clients. <http://birdfeedapp.com/>" - @erikprice

<http://twitter.com/buzz/status/2382875467>

Coming in Tweetie 2.0: • In-app email sheet • World peace • Everlasting happiness

<http://twitter.com/atebits/status/1343994063>

Most good social media tools support multiple logins. Others that I use include @Twittelator, @TweetDeck, and the classic @Twit-terrific. For general purpose multiple-account management of Web apps such as Facebook, I recommend what are called site-specific browsers, such as Fluid for Mac.

Use every tool you can get your hands on. Decide for yourself which ones are great and which ones are merely handy. Learn every quirk of the great ones, and learn the limits of the handy ones.

Sometimes the limits of a tool are as important as the various constraints of the short form. You will discover which features are

important to you (e.g., hypertext, mentions, archives, searching, etc.). You will know that these features are important, because you'll experience loss when those features are absent.

Twitter sucks? Change up your friends! Choose a subset of those you follow for use in another account.

Life is too short to waste time on things that suck.

<http://twitter.com/bmf/status/2327155291>

## Remember: It's All about Timing

Comedy is timing. Politics is timing. Everything is timing. Your tweet will be judged in the context of everyone else's message at that moment. Consider your best moment of the day, and imagine it before it happens.

If you really have something important to say, consider some lessons learned from the public relations world: Never release on a Monday or a Friday (if you can help it). If you can, aim for Tuesday, mid-morning or early afternoon.

So apparently everything new comes out on Tuesdays now. Kind of sucks because Tuesday's my drinking day.

<http://twitter.com/gruber/statuses/1277828167>

Take Apple, Inc. for example, perhaps the masters of getting attention. Their major e-mail campaigns are sent on Tuesdays. If they can control the date of an announcement, it usually comes on a Tuesday morning.

In the future, I will only plug on Tuesdays, and only in groups of threes. If this offends you, you may unfollow now. END WARNING

<http://twitter.com/hodgman/statuses/1342632903>

# Cultivate

## Meet 140 Characters, Each with a Unique Story

To observe fine, short subjects, collect your own list of 140 writers to follow. Find them in a pointed search for a favorite word. Discover them in person and drive them onto your platform.

It is humanly possible to follow more than 140 people, but right around 140 seems to be the cognitive limit for reliable two-way communication with a set of regular writers.

### Create a Culture of Fun

Beyond issues of perception, you should be actually enjoying yourself, and inviting others into your hilarious world.

Eat this, CNN: <http://bit.ly/onion-moon>

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/2697513679>

This seemed like an obvious opportunity to retweet two of my favorite writers:

DO NOT RE-TWEET THIS! (via @rainnwilson) (via @capt\_dope)  
(via @NathanFillion)

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2809340537>

I haven't met @capt\_dope yet, but I gotta say that's a dope username.

I've never learned anything listening to myself talk.

<http://twitter.com/kingsthings/status/1640750933>

Have fun, and also show respect. Even if a celebrity or someone you don't know doesn't respond to you, befriend you, or even acknowledge you, imagine that they are listening, because it is possible.

I happened to be watching one day when a noted thespian re-joined the conversation on Twitter. He'd joined much earlier, which is how I found him, but had stopped using it for a while. On impulse, I decided to encourage him. Here's our conversation:

Yay @MatthewModine is back! One of my favorite actors.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1723822667>

@dom - thanks Dom.. I am humbled.. how do I get more people on here? not sure If I can get on @oprah just yet :-)

<http://twitter.com/MatthewModine/status/1723958718>

@MatthewModine best way is to keep writing and engage your audience just like this! Let's bring <http://bicycleforaday.com/> to SF.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1724066808>

@dom - Will you help? Get all your friends to to ride bikes? We can ride and twitter.. ha

<http://twitter.com/MatthewModine/status/1724177549>

@MatthewModine yeah! what's funny is that I used to bike and twitter in SF back in the early days – I was addicted. P.S. Follow back.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1724221056>

And later, his retweet of another account of mine, which I used to bring the conversation to another audience:

@work “If you don’t stop thinking on the job, I’m @gonna to have to ask you to leave.” [iTunes] <http://bit.ly/6B1oY> (via @MatthewModine)

<http://twitter.com/MatthewModine/status/1724669277>

The spark that ignited this conversation was a single moment of imagination: What if he was in the same room right now? What would I say?

## Imagine Your Audience

Imagine just one of them; sometimes that makes all the difference. @MatthewModine wasn’t following me at the time, but by mentioning him I pinged his proverbial radar and he became part of my audience for a moment.

Your audience is your support network, your backup. You should promote the best of them individually, and often.

To start a revolution, just add @rabble.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1937121804>

Define the concept of a group for yourself. My true readers are the ones getting notifications every time I post, via SMS or push. Or they are the ones subscribing to just me and a few people. It’s more likely that they are listening, you see.

When speaking, a great orator will sometimes single out one audience member to “talk to.” This same method works well for the short form. Focus on understanding that person’s situation.

## Focus on Learning

The essence of learning is teaching. Leadership means choosing an apprentice, showing someone the way. It is not enough to have learned wisdom yourself, or to have wise ways. Any teacher will tell you that an idea is never fully understood until it must be passed on.

*A little learning is a dangerous thing.*

—Alexander Pope

This invisible press that we carry around with us is a learner’s tool. The way we learn with it is by using it. This is constructivist learning, pioneered by Sir Jean Piaget. Constructivists propose that we generate knowledge and meaning from our experiences, as opposed to being vessels for the transmission of knowledge. This is a psychological theory.

When applied to education, constructivism requires an implementation. I was taught by Piaget’s student, Dr. Seymour Papert, that *constructionism* is the intersection between the theory and the physical practice of making tangible objects in the real world.

It is perhaps debatable whether typing text is “making tangible objects.” With multi-touch interfaces and highly immersive mobile applications, however, it’s hard to argue that we’re far removed from touching and manipulating symbols and letters. I personally feel closer than ever to the actual text itself when it’s in my hand.

Text is tangible.

thanks @Dom for tweet #2. An image of the actual snail mail tweet: <http://flickr.com/photos/abbyalexandra/3213349454/>  
<http://twitter.com/SnailMailTweet/status/1134010142>

Papert, a double-doctorate in mathematics, built his learning theory around a “math land” in which learners draw their own conclusions about physics, or engines, or programming. I began learning this way in elementary school with a drawing tool he invented called LOGO on the Apple IIc.

What we have now is a “word land,” where our conclusions about our experiences are tapped into tiny devices we carry about with us in the world. The consequences of our words are immediately wrought. If that’s not schooling, I’ve learned nothing.

We are cultivating the world’s largest educational system, one learning story at a time.

Didn’t know this: “goodbye” is a contraction of “God be with you.”

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2940446845>



## Branch

### Steady, Organic Growth Is Most Manageable

One hallmark of success is a potent readership, whether in number or influence. It's easy to "please your base," as they say, but to achieve further reach always seek alternative sources of social income.

Get rich slowly. History is full of winners who became losers because they couldn't handle the sudden windfall appropriately. Our lives are set up a certain way, and even positive change can be stressful.

Social revenue is the same way; a quick surge of attention can inflate expectations and provide a false sense of security and support. Don't believe your own press.

### Don't Let Success Go to Your Head

At a certain point, you will reach a number of readers that you think is a lot. You'll say, "Gee, I'm popular" and you'll get an ego boost. You will, just wait for it.

gaining followers, muhahaha

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2087>

Now I'm getting greedy. I want more followers. Like a cult. We'll have an outfit that identifies [sic] us, and everyone gets to be the Pope.

<http://twitter.com/NathanFillion/status/1929065654>

It can happen by sheer addition of people to the platform over time. Followers come and go in waves. It can happen from a casual mention by another popular writer. When you breach your number, do not be gleeful or boastful. It's fine to mention it, even reward a new reader, but don't go beyond that.

Focusing on any one metric of success is a mistake. Think instead about how you will serve this growing audience. What will you do to keep their literary vote? Remember, what is easily gained is easily lost.

Take nothing for granted. If you do experience an upswing in readership, capitalize on it. Reach out to your new readers, captivate them.

## Do the Same Thing, but Differently

Branching is about keeping the essence of what you do, but adding one more activity that adds depth to the experience.

You can branch your style, your process, your audience, or your perception. Changing any of these takes conscious effort and some degree of sustained energy, or you will revert to the comfortable and practiced ways.

Treatments for style include poetry, imagery, allegory, symbolism, irony, and invention.

The ultimate irony: someone was arrested for arson at Burning Man

<http://twitter.com/meredith/status/233198082>

Branching your process can be as simple as adding or removing a step. It can mean thinking twice before posting, or it can mean posting with greater abandon. It can mean sending to e-mail for review. It can mean posting in one place and then retweeting from your main account.

Splitting your audience is a good way to test a new concept. For example, @dom and @thebook are currently following 44 users in common, and are followed by 676 users in common (data: <http://whofollowswhom.com>).

That means roughly half of @thebook's current followers also follow my main account. Those common followers are part of my core readership, which I discovered while branching.

To change or branch your perception of your own writing is at once the simplest and hardest thing for an author to do. It is simple because there are no external requirements. It is difficult because there is very little anyone else can do to help you achieve it.

@japhy does not refer to himself in the 3rd person.

<http://twitter.com/japhy/status/3088317780>

Try games: <http://mashable.com/2009/03/28/twitter-games/>. Try new apps. @BooyahTeam does three things simultaneously: they appropriate a word, build value and community on top of other social networks, and try to make it fun. Same thing can be said of @FourSquare.

"You know it's a good game when you stop talking to play." -@chockenberry

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1510873009>

Branch out so that you don't get stuck in your own particular worldview.

We tend to watch and consume only the news sources with which we agree. We can counteract this phenomenon. Traditional

news media has become a polarizing force, selling debate to increase viewership. Consistently defy this with compassion and empathy.

Persistence is a virtue.

## Never Stop

The writer's worst enemy is inertia. Stay light, stay agile, and never cease writing. Boil your process down to as few steps as possible, and then practice those steps until they are rote.

*Thinking is the activity I like best, and writing is simply thinking though my fingers.*

—Isaac Asimov

When you are writing well without pause for thought, you have achieved mastery of the short form. Ten posts of ten words = 100 words. Those 100 words can become 1,000 words if you chose to expound upon them.

A picture worth a thousand bucks. <http://yfrog.com/ehaaui>  
<http://twitter.com/NathanFillion/status/2769214321>

Branch into comedy. The punchline is the perfect fit for 140 characters. There are many forms: cliché, adage, mantra, motto, platitude, quip, saw, witticism, aphorism, apothegm.

"I forgot my mantra."

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/187435992>

One tool widely used is the comic aside, as in, "Little does he know . . ." or "Unbeknownst to me at the time . . ." The implication is that you, a character in this scene, are talking to the audience directly. Think of Ferris Bueller.

*Oh, and about the car: It is so choice. If you have the means,  
I highly recommend picking one up.*

—Ferris Bueller, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (John Hughes)

Much of Twitter could be considered a comic aside.

The boy has now seen Han shoot first. My job as a father is now complete.

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/2212594114>

89% of being a Dad is protecting your nuts.

<http://twitter.com/simplebits/status/2131272070>

What a funny head we live in.

<http://twitter.com/bs/status/1690261707>

Passing through Beaver, UT. Let the jokes begin.

<http://twitter.com/marklukach/status/2604019062>

My personal favorite small comedy form is meiosis, like “The Recent Unpleasantness” or other intentional understatement.

@BT is playing what appears to be a laptop of some kind . . .

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2433664045>

Branch into archaism: thou, thee, thy, hath, wrought, forsooth, bloom'd, wont.

*I need a calmative!*

—Abe Simpson

Satire is timeless.

Symbolic tweet.

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/3221615397>

Bon mot, the instant social commentary, requires a bit more subtlety.

“What’s up?” “Not bad.” An exchange I hear several times a month that makes me wonder where exactly humans are headed.

<http://twitter.com/hotdogsladies/status/1709652149>

Apropos of nothing.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/3220772689>

Fabric softener? I hardly \*collapses\*

<http://twitter.com/al3x/status/2801458660>

“The difference between a good haircut and a bad haircut is about a week.” -Rob Dull

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/37773>

Self-deprecating humor, while pessimistic, is highly effective in 140 characters.

Eating a sandwich. #unfollowfriday

<http://twitter.com/jonathancoulton/status/1739446081>

I have taken down my own site by tweeting about my blog. Does that count as a victory or a failure?

<http://twitter.com/jonathancoulton/status/1383287231>

There are entire volumes one could write about comedy in the short form. Beyond the comedic arts, there are other equally dense paths to follow. Branch into philosophy.

Little do we know what awaits us.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1767704974>

The purpose of branching out is to control your own growth and influence. When you actively seek a new audience or try new things, the most daring of us will notice, and you will be ready to dazzle.

It's been my lifelong ambition to be at the right place at the right time.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1741298648>





## Part Four

# EVOLVE

When I was 10 years old, I got my first job selling and delivering newspapers to my neighborhood on a bicycle. The Sunday edition was so big I needed to make two or three stops back to the house to do it all. I delivered those words come snow, rain, or shine.

Now the Sunday edition is about the size of a daily edition from back then. The daily edition looks like an insert to me. Print dwindles in direct proportion to the growth in online traffic.

Since the infancy of the Internet, the world of “traditional” publishing has seen a reckoning. Slowly at first, and now with incredible acceleration, news and content moves online. Increasingly, the freshest writing starts online and finds its way to print later.

Recommending “In Defense of Twitter”. <http://bit.ly/8uE28>  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1596509543>

This can take the place of traditional news sources. It can be enough to simply trust your social network to bubble up news of interest to you. In some cases, it will even come up a few times before that news gets picked up by traditional media.

Watch this happen and take note of reliable sources. Build your own evolution meter using the following four instructions.

## Filter

When you create a list of people to follow, or when you start to filter that list, you are developing your own digital nervous system. You are building your own tiny Internet, defining your sphere of influencers.

@Elwood @Vigoda @Varese @Case @Sacca @Jack @Merrill  
@Bs @FactoryJoe @Ravenme @Schwa @Gruber  
@MarkLukach. #TopMen.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2298293481>

Evolve in a way that makes search a seamless part of your process. Change the type of people you follow, or the way that you follow them. Save searches or pipe them into a news reader.

Enjoying a search on the words “140 characters”. <http://search.twitter.com/search?q=140+characters> (via @thebook)

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1448950223>

Change your behavior to share information more efficiently. It may take a week or so to set up all your feeds and have them pointing in the right places, but once you do, it's fire and forget. The result makes you look hyperproductive and omnipresent.

@just\_me\_hi Predicting that advanced filtration devices will allow us to follow more people via @Twitter in the future.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1311368411>

Once you set up one of these filtration systems, tuned in to the proper channels, they rarely break down because they are built upon open standards.

## Open

One evolutionary direction that is easier than it sounds is to become a software developer in this space. Simple use of the API, combined with knowledge of how the Web works, will inform your use and your understanding of what's to come.

Even if you don't use it all, it's important to understand how the developers of these services think about their own product. They, too, use these APIs and programming methods. The names they have for things are very informative.

Appropriate the language of open source and the commons. Copy freely.

## Imitate

When you think you're being original, search. Don't search to optimize your own results (that's a perpetual time-waster); search in order to find.

This tweet is For Official Use Only.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1339428164>

Whether or not you think your data is valuable, Google and Microsoft do. They are fighting for the chance to index, dissect, and repurpose your content at this very moment.

Twitter in real life means short, sharp thoughts.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/3203976232>

## Iterate

Be conscious about your use. Think about how you use that service uniquely. What is it about the way you use it that is different from anyone else? Finding a new use for something is actually an approach to patenting.

Short form is about other media as well as text and hypertext. It is an instigator of rich experiences. Everywhere we go, we'll start to see the shortening of hypertext and references to online identity.

my tweet-friend @dom is NOT boasting when he tweets: @dom  
My superpower is prescience. <http://bit.ly/tiadQ>  
<http://twitter.com/JohnDonvanNL/status/1609529316>

My friend Jon is still coming to terms with the fact that people refer to him by his Twitter handle rather than his real name in public.

# of times random folks called out "schwa" at me while walking back to hotel: 2  
<http://twitter.com/schwa/status/3082258475>

The 800 number used to be the essential tool for businesses. Then it was an e-mail address, then a web site, and now I'm seeing Facebook URLs and Twitter handles on billboards. The world of business and advertising evolves to inhabit our smaller world.

How Google Wave Shrinks the Short Form. <http://bit.ly/5wBzQ>  
(@thebook)  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2005404123>

We as producers and consumers, writers and readers evolve even faster.

Replacing the word “click” in my vocabulary with the word “tap”.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1149732740>

Evolution of your style will take time, but there are ways to hasten your perception of the change: filter, open, imitate, and iterate.



# Filter

## Teach the Machine to Think Ahead

*He's rapping too hard...*

—Rob Dull, about Dr. Octagon, June 4, 1999

Social media updates and news tickers of all kinds become overwhelming at some point; this is inevitable. News and information systems are giant machines many times bigger than the human. We must apply equally powerful machines to match this power.

I build filters, both for myself and for my readers.

Struggling mightily with focus today, as a variety of awesome projects progress rapidly around me.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1672468407>

Dom.net started out as a personal site, then graduated to become a blog. It now has found a home as an aggregator for all of my social media. I very rarely update the source code to that site, because it acts as the perfect funnel for all of my productions. The product of 13 years of tiny tweaks and changes now needs very little maintenance.

I've spent the past few years removing various features and design elements. This practice of simplification and minimalism is called *undesign*. I try to focus completely on the content itself.

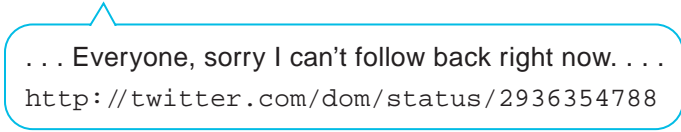
What I want to present is a *smart timeline*, a hypothetical stream of information that suggests new and interesting content in context without effort from the reader.

I've built my updates into everything. This creates an index for myself, but also presents a clear index to my visitors.

Another example, m.dom.net, began as a news filter, syndicating a sample of sources that I have found consistently relevant. The most that I've done to that site in the past two years is to skin it and optimize it for the iPhone.

This limits my exposure to random distractions and reduces the time to load my news. Also, I can provide that reference to anyone who wants to follow the news I digest.

Stepping back even further, the principle method to limit exposure is to search instead of subscribe. You can even subscribe to a search instead of subscribing to a user. This discipline starts by not subscribing at all.



... Everyone, sorry I can't follow back right now. ...  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2936354788>

Follow temporarily. This is a great method for quick communications via direct message, or to coordinate a meeting for example. Some folks accept Facebook requests and then remove that person right away, just to keep up appearances.

Be very deliberate about following new people. In some cases it means leaving one person to follow another. In another sense, extending is all about what you write.

An important lesson is to immediately unfollow/unfriend people who offend. Don't hesitate; become a good judge quickly by remembering three simple rules:

1. *Reserve judgment.*

Following or leaving someone is not permanent, nor does it necessarily reflect upon your opinion of them as a person.



## 2. *Preserve balance.*

For every new person you add, consider removing someone else.

## 3. *Conserve energy.*

This is your time we're talking about, and social media is supposed to save you time, not add a distraction.

As we experience the economy of words, we are trading stock in each other's ideas, just like a literary mercantile exchange. You can bet those brokers on the floor have evolved highly sensitive news filters and trusted inside sources.

@lessig is standing up for all of us, by simply asking to read. follow this man.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/2046475172>

Dr. Lawrence Lessig isn't a programmer as such, but he understands code (in fact, he wrote a book called *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*). His argument is that "code is law"; we govern ourselves as we submit to programming.

We must take control of our own code. I learn as much as I can about software engineering, even though I'm an English major at heart. I've never regretted learning to read and write code. I've found that everything I build empowers me, even if I don't ship it to the public.

## A Little Programming Goes a Long Way

Build a system that creates connections, and you will inevitably be connected with persons of substance.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1884434592>

Imagine the perfect sieve, letting through only the properly formed updates, from a momentarily relevant subset of your circle.

This insulation absorbs negative social radiation but permits freedom of movement as we operate in the perfect vacuum of small space.

I'm looking for the ultimate social filter, with the following features that I have not seen anywhere yet:

***Search:***

- ◆ On keyword, by user's updates, back through time.
- ◆ On keyword, by a union set of more than one author.
- ◆ Across social media systems for a given author.

***Live Filtering:***

- ◆ Against time of day for an author or set of authors.
- ◆ By permitting only updates containing certain words.

***Notifications:***

- ◆ When someone signs up to get my notifications via push, SMS, or speedy delivery.
- ◆ When someone favorites an update of mine (or "Likes" it).
- ◆ When people that I follow (or friends of mine) use a specific word.

Twizeet.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1261179145>

The perfect filter will be an artificial intelligence engine that learns from everything you write and everyone you follow. What we'll see in the coming years, as social media infiltrates public life, is a kind of augmented intelligence. Where the impulse may have been to search for something on the Web, I increasingly witness folks asking friends online for such data.

I wanna know how Leia got the Death Star plans in the first place.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1159263430>

Filters are human- and machine-like. For a few examples of evolving filters, check out @TweetDeck, @TwitterFall, @TweetTabs, or Twitter for Busy People (@bluejava).

What these systems do is break up the normal flow of information.

## Breaking Things Is a Path to Learning

Kids are all about trial and error; that's a big part of how they learn. As adults, the consequences of failure are much greater, but the method is still effective.

Breaking news: @dom admits to being childlike . . . i've been saying this for years.  
<http://twitter.com/japhy/status/1598532138>

What we must do is increase our tolerance for failure, or decrease the risks. Create a high-pass filter against the great swings of mood and anxiety.

*On a good day, we fail in a really excellent way.*

—Brian K. Smith, MIT Media Lab, December 29, 2008

Learn from every mistake; add and remove rules from your filtering system. This low-pass filter is a rule of three that @mager applies to e-mail:

### *The Problem*

*E-mail takes too long to respond to, resulting in continuous inbox overflow for those who receive a lot of it.*

*The Solution*

*Treat all email responses like SMS text messages, using a set number of letters per response. Since it's too hard to count letters, we count sentences instead.*

*three.sentenc.es is a personal policy from @mager that all email responses regardless of recipient or subject will be three sentences or less. It's that simple.*

*\* See also: two.sentenc.es, four.sentenc.es, and five.sentenc.es.*

—@mager

There are such maxims for every medium. Program yourself, in a continuous process of improvement and refinement.

Still learning. Always learning.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1851134163>

# Open

## Give and You Shall Receive

"My words are open source."

-@tmtek

<http://twitter.com/thebook/statuses/2697659814>

Twitter was designed first as an open medium, built on open source code. All it takes is a handful of altruistic software developers to publicize their blueprints to bring massive change. Of course, open source was just the beginning of the Twitter story.

Openness was built into the experience from the beginning, and the entire API strategy was an early attempt to open up even more.

Awesome from @dom "do one thing well" #140tc

<http://twitter.com/jstrellner/status/1926604934>

Social networks are founded on the principle of openness at some level. Either you are opening up to your friends, to family, or to the public; the only way to participate is to give some information at the start.

Openness is not an accident. It is a conscious, daily decision. There is a scale of openness, from simple use of open standards to radical transparency. My personal standard is to remain somewhere in the middle.

The more transparent you make things, the greater sense of empathy you create, the more you minimize conflict.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1228188413>

Dom.net and m.dom.net were both built on open source, and I've also published any changes that I make for the benefit of the community. Each of the projects that I choose is evaluated based on how open I can be about the results.

Being open source has taught me an important lesson:

## Go Positive

You get what you give. Social media systems are designed to mirror our behavior in real life. If you come to a party with a sour face, complaining, you'll end up with the complainers on a couch against the wall.

This goes double when you operate in the open source community, which is essentially built upon the generosity and goodwill of others. Open source may mean free, but that doesn't mean valueless. We are talking free as in "priceless."

I TWEET FOR FREE.

<http://twitter.com/PowerofNo/status/2780129544>

Social media enjoys some of the same characteristics of open source. It is reputation-based. As such, messages are essentially priceless (or without price, which isn't the same thing but has the same effect of making messages hard to monetize).

There is a guiding principle in software: It's tough to cut a feature before shipping, but harder to remove that feature once it's out. The same goes for writing: Once you publish something, it is very difficult (if not impossible) to retract.

The short form, like public source code, is also indeterminate. An end to your story is perpetually out of reach. The writer's job is to keep us constantly engaged, waiting for that next clue for entry into your microcosm. What tiny detail will you let slip to complete your picture?

Much of the conversation about the value in short-form writing centers around a question: How do we know that a person is being authentic with their personality? Peter Steiner created an adage with his 1993 cartoon of two dogs, one at the computer, saying:

*On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_the\\_Internet,  
\\_nobody\\_knows\\_you're\\_a\\_dog](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Internet,_nobody_knows_you're_a_dog)

Lawrence Lessig suggests in *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* that this happens when users are not forced to identify themselves. Because your social identity is tied to every message, this doesn't seem as true anymore. In fact, it seems that if you're a dog on Twitter or Facebook, everyone's going to know.

Of course, we still haven't learned the identity of the user behind @DarthVader, so there are obvious exceptions.

The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant compared to the power of the Block Button.

<http://twitter.com/darthvader/status/2553941922>

You can easily tell whether a person is worth following by reading their recent messages. What seemingly inconsequential note provides the evidence of authenticity? What ineffable quality carries that information?

@BT is pondering our perceptual ability to “intuitively” distinguish BS and authenticity. Anthropological? survival? How do we just “know”

<http://twitter.com/BT/status/3077124744>

I don't believe that there is a universal formula for figuring out whether a person is good to read or not. If there were a formula, it would be possible to game it, and we've seen no evidence that the mass-following schemes or other attempts to manufacture relevance fulfill their claims.

What I've given are merely words to describe the problem, or start asking the right questions in conversation. If you do think you've discovered some equation for discovering a writer's value, please keep it yourself. Personally, I'd rather enjoy a mystery.

tree

[http://twitter.com/common\\_squirrel/status/2952278886](http://twitter.com/common_squirrel/status/2952278886)

The answer surely isn't in one place, in one service, or in one perspective.

## Never Limit Yourself to One Platform

It's easy to become entranced with the social phenomenon of Twitter. However, Jack reminds me regularly to remain open to new platforms. At some point, your ego and talent will scale past the constraints of a single service. It's okay to grow out of your platform.

Someone should make a LinkedIn activity tracker. Whenever someone suddenly updates everything there, they quit their job a week later.

<http://twitter.com/mathowie/status/2854381818>



My personal behavior is to treat social networks as tiers. The first tier of small society for me is the status update. My second social tier I consider “classic” social networking (like Facebook). Conversations based on my updates frequently blossom in this second tier.

Have a plan as to how and when you will open up to more detail or more depth of character. What’s next? What’s original? What’s fresh?

Starting to think I shouldn’t post smart things because it only ends with a billion retweets.

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/3078293278>

A new system will force you out of old patterns and make it easier to see the perspective of a new person in the system. So easy it is to forget the value of a clean slate. Jumping platforms will give you the perspective of a new reader of yours.

Another advantage to multiple platforms is *backup*. During the course of writing this book, I’ve had to employ FriendFeed more than a few times just to find references of my own that Twitter Search or Google were missing.

Concern for multiple platforms and use of open source increases momentum and bootstraps small societies. The only way our team of ten volunteers was able to construct the Official Obama ’08 iPhone App in three weeks was to use @schwa’s open source code. Six of us were alumni of iPhoneDevCamp, itself built on the principles of the open source community.

This leads to the biggest lesson I’ve learned from my involvement with Twitter (and iPhone) since the beginning. If your idea is truly original and revolutionary, you’re going to have to pretty much ram it down people’s throats.

More than being open, you must be promotional. Great ideas will only be ideas until they are shared and acted upon.

# Imitate

## There Is Nothing Original, Except in Arrangement

Social media is one giant improvisational comedy, completely unplanned and unscripted, yet beholden to certain rules and expectations that make it highly entertaining even when it's a complete train wreck.

The best improv troupes practice not imitation of style, but imitation of process. As you go about finding writers to emulate, watch how they react when they make a mistake. Examine whether they acknowledge it, and how. If you're going to learn from someone, they should gracefully learn from their own mistakes.

Learning is imitation, from our very birth.

## Become an Apprentice

The frontier days of master and journeyman have all but disappeared, as our lives demand interaction with more and more people. Even if the structures of apprenticeship no longer exist, the relationship is even more practical than before.

The effort here is to imitate not the voice or style of your subject, but the entire way that person operates. We want a targeted study of someone's motivation.

*I want 3 months of "I'm madly in love with this person's thinking."*

—Seymour Papert, Cambridge, MA, April 29, 2000

My favorite activity is to find someone that I know is a good thinker, and give them a taste of the messaging Kool-Aid. What then happens is mutual growth: You witness their learning curve, and they see you as a source of inspiration as well.

As your subject establishes their voice, you can bring your experience to refine it.

## Take Someone Else's Style One Step Further

The *overheard* meme on Twitter and elsewhere has taken on a life of its own as a comedic style. It began as a way to denote that you've just heard something you can't attribute.

Overheard in Starbucks:

—Does The New York Times print *\*every\** day?

—Yes, of course.

—Oh my god, why would they do that?

<http://twitter.com/gruber/statuses/2360298646>

It began with a contraction: *OH*. Very convenient, this pattern was soon abused to the point where it's not clear whether the author has technically overheard these things. It becomes interesting to guess whether the quotation was directed at the author.

OH: Is this the weekend we're spending together, or the weekend you're spending with Twitter?

<http://twitter.com/bmf/statuses/2248703580>

Perhaps the quote was even uttered by the author.

OH: "Its [sic] funny because your face is funny."

<http://twitter.com/mantia/statuses/2110117111>

Or was it overheard at all?

"OH: Ohio"

-@gruber, Spring 2008

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/3234478339>

In modern parlance, OH has become an instant set piece. We imagine the author with a shocked look or stifling a laugh as they report on someone's bon mot.

## Create a Caricature of Yourself

Narrate the action indirectly and describe what is in the minds and emotions of your subjects. Speak as a particular character or maybe the invisible narrator or even the all-knowing narrator who speaks from above by commenting on the action.

Parody yourself. Try the Jack Handy style.

Sometimes I cry, not because I'm sad, but because I forgot my sunglasses, and the bright sun makes my eyes water.

<http://twitter.com/bmf/status/2900647940>

There is the ever-popular "fake" style.

Weird to be the most famous person on Twitter that nobody knows. Humbling and yet also exhilarating.

<http://twitter.com/fakesacca/status/2045369274>

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Attempt the trickster style. When you find the ways to imitate yourself, you have a supple weapon against critics.

"You Kirked it!" - @Case, on my shenanigans.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1770827121>

Great musicians will attest that most music is either inspired by, or directly imitates, the work of previous generations. It has been my experience so far that a great deal of short-form writing appears original simply due to the fact of its presence within 140 characters. Find a style that works elsewhere, and adapt it. This will benefit us all.

# Iterate

## Practice a Sequence of Tiny Adjustments

Branching is the slow process of finding a new way to do something, a new style, or a new audience. Iteration means keeping the same style, but making (or reverting) one small change at a time.

Writing in hypertext is an elementary form of programming. When you symbolicate words then linked and compiled by a machine, you are producing software. It's that simple.

Software engineering teaches us to make one or more small changes, test, and repeat. This isn't about testing your audience. This is about challenging yourself with scientific discipline. Adopt an agile, experimental methodology to control the pace of evolution.

Find a way to harmlessly test.

## Write Everywhere and Often

Practice your talent in any possible milieu. Here are some unsuspecting places:

- ◆ Lead sentences
- ◆ News tickers

- ◆ Photo captions
- ◆ Art titles
- ◆ Postcards
- ◆ Headstones
- ◆ Headlines
- ◆ Business cards
- ◆ Sticky notes
- ◆ Back of your hand (careful, this comes off looking a little crazy)
- ◆ “Kicker” or ending sentence

The same idea can be displayed in each place, but the expression will change slightly for each environment. Try iterating through by describing a comedy sketch, or a quote from a favorite movie.

What I really need is an iPhone app that understands the binary language of moisture vaporators.

[http://twitter.com/gedeon/status/2943150627](https://twitter.com/gedeon/status/2943150627)

There is a game in this message. First: figure out the reference (*Star Wars: A New Hope*). Next, remember the correct term that's been replaced (droid). Now: solve for irony. *Droid* is short for *Android*, the name of iPhone's competition.

## Games for Words

Together, we weave one tremendous choose-your-own-adventure story without end. Traveling this mercurial excuse for a plot line requires a tolerance for non sequitur. For this skill, look to casual gaming.

Dr. Ben Vigoda's *Games for Song* is a collection of timeless recipes for musical improvisation. There are warm-up activities,

games for one person, games for a group, and a kind of pattern language for describing segments of music in a jam.

A game for words could be similar. What recipe would you use to implement my friend Raven's idea:

We can't stop laughing about the Twitter Potlatch idea we're considering. Lose as many followers as possible in 24 hours.

<http://twitter.com/ravenme/status/3083548694>

How would you warm up, with a few ambiguous swear words perhaps?

LazyTweet: I need some English swear words that also have non-swear meanings. . . .

<http://twitter.com/gruber/status/3078176542>

Of course games needn't always be destructive or capricious. Serious learning can take place inside a game.

Playing a life-sized game of Tetris; moving.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/34770>

## Ignite Change

Threadless Twitter Tees have changed the short form for me. Now something I write can be nominated for a t-shirt design, voted on, and selected for print. This has caused me to think twice before many a post. For example, the efficacy of the URL becomes dubious.



Here's one that deserves wearing, in my book:

Liberated. Justified. Hopeful. Ready.

<http://twitter.com/willotoons/status/3089208701>

A seemingly simple change, addition, or extension can have a profound effect.

Reading "Brain-Twitter project offers hope to paralyzed patients".

<http://bit.ly/uJexB>

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1595931580>

A casual reference to one's own state can inspire deep reflection in others. The eight-year-old daughter of my friend Andrew has cerebral palsy (CP). While he was developing @Twittelator, Emma tested it out, of course, and searched for "cerebral palsy" on Twitter.

She came across an inspiring message from 2,000 miles away.

I am 40 years old and I have Cerebral Palsy. I live a happy and productive life. I have a REAL job, a REAL husband and I do yoga . . .

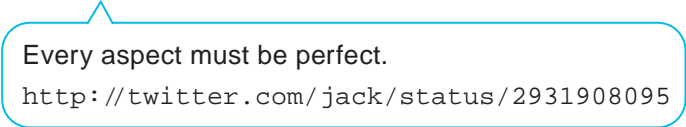
<http://twitter.com/sophieouellet/status/1436725570>

Our young heroine put down the device, achieved lotus position, and sat for some time. Her father was patient, waiting for her feedback. Upon stirring, she announced, "Dad, I want to start doing yoga."

Andrew describes this as a life-changing moment for his daughter and the family. What began as a simple test ended up

having a profound effect on a very special user. This example demonstrates the power of context in casual messaging: You never know how your message is going to be read.

Be the change you want to see in the world, in tiny increments that only you can witness.



Every aspect must be perfect.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2931908095>

## Part Five

# ACCELERATE

*Roads? Where we're going we don't need roads.*

—Doc Brown, *Back to the Future*  
(Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale)

When practiced correctly, daily writing in the short form will accelerate your life. This begins with your speech. As you write more and faster, new words will find their way to your tongue.

Any act of creation disciplines the mind. Once you have achieved that discipline, you may begin to intensify. Acceleration demands focus. Gaining speed increases awareness of what is right in front of you.

One serious warning: Don't speed up as you are about to change direction. Always accelerate out of a turn. After you have mastered a style and evolved it past the commonplace, then it is time for a dramatic burst.

Last night I carefully timed my run so I could see the fireworks downtown. I realized: this is what it feels like to be Super Mario.

<http://twitter.com/cabel/status/1895345765>

## Increase

“Do more” has been a mantra of mine since New Year’s Eve 2001. I found the message printed on a custom bumper sticker, lying on the floor as we left a party. The idea that one should not only do better, but do *more* struck me as a call to action.

The message has a number of meanings to me. First, it refers to productivity: Do more with each day. Then, for me, the concept relates to doing more for others. No matter how much we donate to worthy causes, regardless of the energy we spend, it always seems that we can do more.

## Fragment

After Twitter and Facebook comes Google Wave, a completely new system of communication that brings a more real-time feeling to the Web. Having worked inside the beta sandbox for some time, it’s clear that Wave brings the acceleration of the short form to the creation and publication of long form.

Wave allows users to see what is being typed as it is being entered, viewing edits as they happen. What we have as a result is shrinkage: Shorter times between updates are now possible. Wave can transform your text in real time, with the translation robot “Rosie.” My updates can be translated to the reader’s native language as I type, changing the translation as I input each new word.

Any time we see an acceleration of real-time transmission like this, we witness a revolution. We began with the telegram, then e-mail, texting, instant messaging, Twitter, and now multi-party live typing and translation.

Acceleration naturally takes you out of the short form itself. The concept of “status” is interesting only while there is stasis to be had. At the vanishing point of status is presence.

The future of Status is Presence.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/294838912>

"@dom Naw, the future of presence is status ;)" - @al3x, Sept. 26, 2007

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/3234434621>



# Increase Do More

*Most people need structure in their lives.*

<http://oedb.org/library/college-basics/hacking-knowledge>

Three suggestions form the structure of my philosophy on how to increase your presence online.

## Produce a Series on a Short Subject

As previously noted, thoughts that require multiple messages can fall flat for a variety of reasons. There are ways to string together multiple messages to make a larger point, however. One technique is to title the message.

Here is my attempt to bring some structure and truth to the myths of my productivity, each message preceded by the words “Do More. Tip:”.

1. Disable television service & go Internet + @Netflix. Ask for a speed upgrade. I get 23mbps down, 2.8mbps up w/ @ComcastCares  
<http://twitter.com/dom/statuses/1017571992>
2. Regular, vigorous exercise. Animus sans et corpore sanum; I do my brightest thinking with sand in my ears and @surf overhead  
<http://twitter.com/dom/statuses/1046698474>
3. Work only in short bursts, up to 4 hrs. Saves energy, drives focus. "It's better to burn out than to fade away." -Neil Young  
<http://twitter.com/dom/statuses/1063513555>
4. Have less. Spend time making space. You won't have to clean, organize, or maintain that stuff again! Plus, giving feels good  
<http://twitter.com/dom/statuses/1082549819>
5. Always be writing. Get multiple Twitter accounts if you must. Try every style and every writing tool.  
<http://twitter.com/SnailMailTweet/status/1134008143>
6. Carry less. Ditch extra keys, shrink your wallet or bag, and leave the laptop. Live life in the cloud.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/statuses/1203897341>
7. Do fewer things better.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/statuses/2328475572>
8. Be Not Afraid.  
<http://twitter.com/dom/status/3204219231>



It's not clear how many tips remain at this point, but I can imagine two more right now:

9. *Always stick to deadlines, even if others don't.* Your word and your words are all you really have.
10. *Over-communicate.* With a few trusted minions, it is acceptable to increase your electronic parcel delivery rate. This is especially important while building trust in a new organization or peer group, and helps set expectations.

Your rate of acceleration is judged by your peers in relation to their rates of change as well. It's important to set external benchmarks for all to employ. Create mile markers.

## Manufacture Velocity

Check first thing in the morning, last thing at night. These are the moments of first and last inspiration.

Get things done first. If it inspires you, think about how you will write about this when you are finished.

Create accounts for projects you want to succeed, but haven't yet. That way, when one of them gets @BoingBoing'd you'll be ready.

Our version of "Cantina Band" just made @BoingBoing!  
<http://bit.ly/1ueyFZ>  
<http://twitter.com/sixteenfeet/status/2934237171>

There is a proven method to increase density: Line up several big announcements at once, and prepare each one meticulously. This isn't always recommended, as it reduces the punch of each message individually, but it does result in a perception of density, like any rich content.

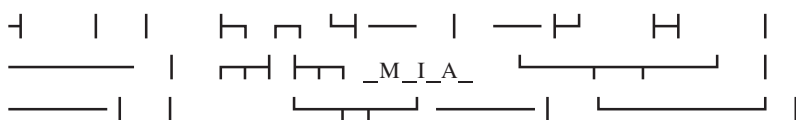
There are several dimensions in which to increase tension, using literary techniques like dissonance, symbolic techniques such as the ellipsis (...), and flow techniques like the time between posts.

Thankfully, there is also more than one way to increase one's volume. At first, in the sense that a person's collected messages represent a "volume of work," one technique is to simply post more total messages. In the sense that each message can "get louder," there are the obvious (USE CAPS) and the subtle.

Though less effective, the subtle technique has the benefit of being far less disruptive to the eye. Try the `_underline_`, the `*star*`, or my favorite, the en-dash (`-`) , which is longer than a hyphen (`-`).

Remember to rely as much as possible on the characters found on the keyboard+shift palette. This will guarantee that your message will be readable on any system. For example, `||` (double-pipe) is great, `»` (option+pipe) is not. The reason is that the optional symbols are, well, optional on some systems. They don't translate universally.

Optional symbols can be quite effective under some circumstances, for some audiences. In fact, they lend a certain distinction amongst subsets of users (I'm thinking specifically of emoji and ASCII artists).



[http://twitter.com/\\_M\\_I\\_A\\_/status/2091113537](http://twitter.com/_M_I_A_/status/2091113537)

Without changing any of these things, you can simply increase the number of characters that you use. Start by using the full URL where possible. Move on to add larger words, or character strings.

Without changing your style at all, you can simply add a platform to your social portfolio. Beyond the basics of Facebook and Twitter, there are many "specialty" networks that support short messaging (in fact, most of them do, but not as a primary feature).

## Exceed Constraints

For each constraint on a service like Twitter, there is a workaround to disengage it. Discover the ways to write more than 140 characters at a time, for example.

You can technically tweet longer than 140 characters, but 250 is still a very short form. <http://bit.ly/17N0kB>  
<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/2655272465>

Just remember: Not all clients support more than 140 characters, and SMS systems certainly won't go above 160 any time soon. Services like @TwitLonger provide a two-way link between the truncated text and the longer text. These two links provide their own increased value, but the cost is a stunted mobile experience.

Plant words like seeds. Increase is not about excess, but about proliferation.

*The act of creation is almost always self-affirming, and the act of consumption so rarely is.*

<http://al3x.net/2009/07/18/fever-and-the-future-of-feed-readers.html>

# Fragment

## Do It Smaller

This final chapter returns to the simplicity principle. If you can do everything else, and consistently say it in fewer words, you are ready to fragment. Splinter messages into separate shards, sharper with each division.

You've built a network of influences, and an audience of listeners. You've studied multiple literary forms, found the right pattern, invented a turn of phrase, and evolved into hypertext and other short media.

Now smash it completely to bits and start again with a new style. Collide with a new platform or a new regime, pull yourself out of comfortable patterns, and shrink yet again.

### Decrease the Size of the Atomic Unit, the Message

This method is intended for use in any medium, whether it be text, sound, or video: Find the moment that captures your imagination and put a word to it.

Let that word simmer. Put it somewhere and come back to it later. Do not let "writer's block" take hold. Just keep writing.

When you have a truly fitting word, consider just posting that one word.

Most times, words need phrases, sentences, and structure to add meaning. Perform a free association with that word: What word comes next? How does this word fit in a phrase or a sentence?

Once you have a phrase, simply adding action to that phrase (or a subject) will provide sentence structure. Pick up *The Elements of Style* and pick your sentence apart. Perhaps your phrases merit separate sentences. Soon you will discover a paragraph has grown around your word.

This entire book was written using a similar system derived from the short form:

Fragment. Then there is a sentence. Sentences become paragraphs.

Inch by inch, a book is written.

<http://twitter.com/thebook/status/1411198930>

## Embrace Ambiguity

Leave your message open to multiple interpretations. Sometimes it's okay to drop the non sequitur, or the mystery.

High tide. Saltwater for lunch. Low tide.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/115053>

The future will see short message services jumping boundaries previously thought to be culturally secure: the insides of Senate chambers, the other sides of borders, deep inside the heart of places only text can go.

Go there, and write about it.

Doing exactly what I wish to be doing in this moment, and nothing more.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/162973832>



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## The 140

These 140 people have public accounts that I would follow if I had to wipe my following list and start over. This is just a beginning. Please choose for yourself.

<u>M_I_A_</u>	common_squirrel	japhy
24klogos	cookbook	jennycool
aarong	crystal	jennydeluxe
adambhb	current	johncleese
adamjackson	danielbru	johnndonvannl
algore	danielschorr	jonathancoulton
aplusk	daringfirefeed	jonathan360
apstylebook	darthvader	jqadams_mhs
arnoldkim	digiphis	kenahoo
atebits	doctorow	kevin_nealon
barackobama	domainr	kevinrose
bbctech	dotboom	kevinspacey
bdamer	dougw	kidgamereviews
beep	dtrinh	kingsthings
biz	elwood	laughingsquid
blaine	emarin	lessig
bmf	erinmalone	lindseyleej
brendacopeland	ev	lonelysandwich
bs	goldman	mager
bt	google	mantia
buffalax	googlebooks	marklukach
buzz	gruber	markmorford
case	hodgman	marsrovers
ceedub	hotdogsladies	mashable
chockenberry	ijustine	mat
cnnbrk	io9	matthewmodine



matthowie	revmsg	tfln
maureen	rr	the_real_shaq
meangrape	rules_unbornson	theellenshow
meredith	sacca	theonion
michaelbfarrell	sara	threadless
mightyleaf	sarahksilverman	tinybuddha
morgan	schottsvocab	tonyhawk
nathanfillion	schwa	tristan
nelson	scottmccloud	tw1trrtracker
noah	scottsimpson	tweetreport
nprnews	scribnerbooks	twitterlit
oprah	sector9	twittelator
phil	semaphoria	twitterapi
phish	simplebits	varese
polarbearfarm	smallsociety	vigoda
powerofno	someecards	whitehouse
ptraughber	spam	whurley
radiobabe	starwars	willotoons
rael	stephenathome	wilw
rainnwilson	stevej	wordnik
ravenme	stop	

## Author Accounts

These accounts are a selection of those operated by the author, demonstrating the various styles examined in this book.

appld	gonna	strum
big_words	heading	surf
bookapp	picking	swarthmore
camp140	readin	thebook— <i>updates</i>
dollarapp	realizing	<i>regarding this</i>
dom— <i>primary</i>	sixteenfeet	<i>book</i>
<i>account</i>	sloat	work
iphonedevcamp	smurfing	
getting	spearpoint	



## Glossary

- &** A prefix or suffix in replacement of the letters *and* or *anned*.  
Ex: *b&*, meaning *band* or *banned*.
- age** A verb suffix used to create a noun or denote action, used with the form “to be” to replace the verb itself. Ex: *pwnage* means “the act of dominating in play.” Derived from words like *breakage* and *drainage*.
- ed or -’d** A noun suffix used to create a past participle verb. Ex: “I’ve been BoingBoing’d,” meaning “An article of mine has been featured on BoingBoing.net.”
- ness** An adjective suffix used to derive a noun. Ex: *leetness* meaning, “the quality of being leet.” Also used in the superlative, as in *lulzness*, meaning “laughing very hard.”
- xor** A verb suffix replacing *-er* or *-r* to create a noun in the superlative. Also *-zor*. Ex: *fixxor* meaning a great fixer of things.
- zorz** A verb suffix used in the superlative. Ex: *pwnzorz*, meaning “having been massively owned.”
- API** (n) Application Programming Interface.
- apostrophy** (n) Incorrect use or omission of an apostrophe.  
Credit: @gruber.
- ASCII art** (n) American Standard Code for Information Interchange, representing numbers, letters, and symbols in the transfer of text between computers. Artwork is created by imaginatively arranging a collage of symbols in order to represent pointillism, shapes, or lines.
- automagically** (adj) Automatically and without explanation.  
Inexplicably.
- avatar** (n) Representation of one’s identity outside of oneself, usually in a digitally mutable form.
- bar** (n) Substitute for data of any kind. Reference to FUBAR, an acronym.

**barcamp** (n) Gathering of like-minded people engaged in the sharing and encouragement of each other's ideas on a given topic. Loosely structured event. See [barcamp.org](http://barcamp.org).

**bittertweet** (n) A bittersweet tweet.

**blogroll** (n) Links to weblogs in a sidebar or other design element on a Web page.

**board meeting** (n) A break to go surf, skateboard, or snowboard together and talk about important issues.

It's not a Board Meeting if it's just you out there.  
Those are Office Hours.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/235682432>

**code** (v) To write statements or declarations in a human-readable programming language. The act of programming. Also: hack, script, program.

**code or source code** (n) Collection of statements or declarations written in a human-readable programming language. Text file with such statements. Language of instruction and governance of a machine.

**copyleft** (n) Creative commons or other non-copyright license. The opposite of copyright.

**cromulent** (adj) Acceptable or normal. Reference to *The Simpsons*.

**currency** (n) A measure of one's influence and relevance in a social network.

**debug** (v) To locate and correct errors in a computer program.

**dialed** (adj) To be well-situated and focused. Colloquialism.

**DM** (n) Direct message, a private communique. Not indexed for search. Available via SMS, e-mail, RSS, and API.

I am very satisfied with my decision to move away from @ replies, and more into DM's. You all should try it . . . it's great.

<http://twitter.com/marklukach/status/3118877228>

- DM** (v) To send a direct message or private communication from one user to another. Syntax: d username message.
- dunch** (n) A portmanteau of *dinner* and *lunch*.
- emoji** (n) Any of the standardized emoticons used in Japanese text messaging.
- ergonomics** (n) The study of a person's efficiency in a working environment. In reference to the avoidance of repetitive stress.
- FailWhale** (n) An illustration of red birds hoisting a white whale out of the water with a net. Used as decoration in an error message during outage times on Twitter in 2008.
- favorite** (v) To mark as a favorite.
- festoon** (v) To decorate, as with a chain or garland of flowers, leaves, or ribbons.
- foist** (v) To introduce or insert surreptitiously or without warrant. Ex: *We don't want to foist this workflow upon our users.* To impose. Also: dump, drop, force.
- follow** (v) To subscribe to messages on Twitter. You are *following* someone if you have elected to receive updates whenever that person posts a message to the timeline.
- follow** (n) Act of following someone. Ex: *Thanks for the follow!*
- followholism** (n) Addiction to following more and more people.
- foo** (n) Substitution for data of any kind. Also: bar.
- grok** (v) To understand completely. Reference to *Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert Heinlein.
- hack** (n) A clever or quick bit of programming. Also: patch, script, solution.
- hack** (v) To program quickly or with abandon. Also: code, crack, break, solve.
- hackathon** (n) Gathering to program quickly or in a social setting. Also: contest.
- hashtag** (n) A string of characters preceded by the # symbol. Also label. Linked to a search for those characters.
- haxor** (n) An elite hacker.

**hosure** (n) A state of failure or breakage.

**impossible** (adj) A portmanteau of *impossible* and *improbable*, meaning somewhere in between the two. Credit: @robey.

**kireji** (n) In Japanese poetry, a category of words supplying structural support or closure to a verse. Ex: ka, kana, -keri, and ya.

**lat3 or l8** Meaning “late,” “later,” or “I’ll see you later.”

**leet** (n) A type of coded writing in which Latinate characters are replaced by numbers, symbols, or other characters in a recognizable pattern or homoglyph. Creative misspelling, intentionally abnormal grammar, or artistic substitution. Encrypted communication. Also elite, advanced, privileged, or leetspeak. Ex: *n00b*, *l33t*, *l8*. Levels of leet are recognized in degree or grammatical of spelling abnormality: rocks, rockzorz, Я0XX0ЯZ.

**linner** A portmanteau of *lunch* and *dinner*.

**lolspeak** (n) A dialect of leetspeak, with an emphasis on deliberately childish grammar to denote excitement or happiness. Ex: “I can has” meaning “I do have”. Also: typo.

**lupper** A portmanteau of *lunch* and *supper*.

**meme** (n) Element of culture or behavior passed from one person to another by imitation. A unit of ideas or beliefs.

I AM NOW OFFICIALLY A HAIRILIOUS MEME ON THE TWITTER  
<http://db.tidbits.com/article/10001>  
<http://twitter.com/chockenberry/status/1114609707>

**mention** (n) An instance of your username included in a tweet, preceded by the @ symbol. Available via RSS, API, and Search. An informal group.

**mention** (v) To place the @ symbol in front of a username in a tweet. Links to the user’s timeline. When performed at the front

of a message (or marked using the API), links to another tweet. The latter is also called a *reply*.

**non-trivial** (adj) Not easy to solve or implement. Hacker parlance for difficult or time-consuming.

**niche** (n) Subset of a society or market.

**n00b** (n) A new person. Short for *newbie*, someone who is unskilled, inexperienced, or uninformed.

**Odeo** (n) A podcasting company from the mid 2000s. The collection of employees who developed Twitter as a side project.

**office hours** (n) Reliable time during which a person may be reached for discussion.

**omg** Meaning “oh my God.”

**open source** (adj) Software for which the source code is freely available and may be redistributed with or without modification.

**own** (v) To dominate in play. Ex: “He just owned you” meaning “He just defeated you embarrassingly.”

**performant** (adj) Having the characteristics of high performance. Reference to software quality.

**poke** (v) To annoy, distract, or provoke online. Also: nudge, ping.

**presence** (n) The combined status, avatar, and activity of a user in a digital space.

**pr0n** (n) Slang for pornography. A deliberate misspelling/leetspeak symbol substitution applied to the word *porn*. Used to circumvent language or content filters. Also refers to ASCII art depicting pornographic images, or images of hardware internals.

**pwn** (v) Accidental or deliberate misspelling of *own*. When spelled this way, can be used to mean *back*, *crack*, or *break*.

**radical transparency** (n) The act of sharing critical details about the real-time status or health of a project or organization.

**reply** See *mention*.

**RT** (n) A copy or facsimile of another tweet, with attribution. Also retweet, forward.

**RT** (v) To copy or approximate another tweet, attributing the author. Also retweet, shout-out.

RT @dom: If U R tweeting rllly well rt now, chances R U'll end up in @thebook: @ravenme @mantia @phil & @nathanfillion. Let it B known.

<http://twitter.com/EWILSON76/status/3086507257>

**shortened URL** (n) A link to another, longer URL. Long URLs are shortened automatically on Twitter.

**SMS** (n) Short Message Service.

**SMS** (v) To send an SMS.

**source code** See *code*.

**status-sphere** (n) The collected presence of social media users. The greater social network online.

**successtrophy** (n) A crisis of success. “When the servers buckled under so much traffic, it was a complete successtrophy because our investors saw the need to keep funding.”

**suxxor or suxorz** (v) or (n) To suck, or the act of performing poorly or having a bad experience. Opposite of *roxxor*.

**tag** (n) See *hashtag*.

**tag** (v) To mark a string of characters with the # symbol. To label.

**teh** Article used to replace “the” in the superlative sense, as if one were typing quickly and made a mistake.

Teh is teh new the.

<http://twitter.com/blaine/status/1338283>

**terse** (adj) Sparing or abrupt in the use of words.

**tigerdile** (n) A cross between a tiger and a crocodile. Credit: @nathanfillion

**TMI** (n) Too Much Information.



**T9** (n) Predictive text used in mobile phones without a full keyboard.

**trend** (n) A topic or word in heavy use during a certain period of time. Trends show up in the sidebar at Twitter.com and are accessible via the API.

**trend** (v) To appear on the trending topics list.

**troll** (n) A noisome or habitually disruptive figure. A beast or other undesirable person.

**tweet** (v) To post an update to the Twitter timeline. Also twitter, post, update, write.

**tweet** (n) An update in the Twitter timeline. Available via RSS, API, and Search. Also update, twitter, post.

This is today's tweet.

<http://twitter.com/schwa/status/3113340856>

**tweetup** (n) An in-person meeting for users of Twitter. Spontaneous gathering or party. Also meetup.

**Twichter Scale** (n) Percentage of Bay Area residents who feel an earthquake. Credit: @nelson.

**Twitter effect** (n) Phenomenon of accelerated or epidemic attention on a particular topic, instigated via Twitter.

**twitterish** (adj) Of or relating to Twitter or the ways of tweeting. Twitter-like.

@dom isn't tweeting about tweeting about @thebook about as twitterish as it's possible to be right now?

<http://twitter.com/shlmmmer/status/3227155471>

**Twittersphere** (n) See *status-sphere*.

**twoosh** (n) A tweet that is exactly 140 characters long. Additionally, a tweet of that length that is achieved without edits before posting. Credit: @rensch.

- twtr** (n) Early name for the Twitter service.
- uber** (adj) Outstanding or extreme. Also: super.
- undesign** (n) A technique of removing design elements or denying feature additions to software. Not design. Also: minimalism, nihilism.
- update** (n) A message or post relating to the status of an individual or thing.
- update** (v) To post a message or submit a report regarding one's state at the moment.
- vex** (v) To upset or enrage.
- warez** (n) Stolen or traded goods in violation of copyright or other license.
- w00t** (excl) An expression of momentary joy or exaltation.
- wordie** (n) Bookish person, lover of words.
- wordnik** (n) See *wordie*.

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**DOM SAGOLLA** helped create Twitter with Jack Dorsey and a team of entrepreneurs in San Francisco. He also helped engineer Macromedia Studio, Odeo, and Adobe Creative Suite, and now produces iPhone applications with his company, DollarApp.

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