



# Write It Well

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## Twitter: A Write It Well Guide



Twitter is an online service that enables individuals and companies to share free, short messages with the public. (See [this webpage](#) for an overview of Twitter and its terminology, and [this page](#) for an overview of using Twitter for business.)

Twitter posts are called *tweets*. They have a maximum length of 140 characters. Twitter eliminates some writing challenges – you won't have to worry about paragraph organization – but its limited space also creates some risks. Read on if you could use some suggestions for what to write and how to maintain a professional tone as you tweet.

### Professional-Sounding Tweets

No tweeting guidelines can be carved in stone. Twitter is still new to many people, it hosts a staggering array of audiences, and it evolves quickly. But here are four suggestions for presenting a professional image on Twitter:

1. Ask yourself if a tweet is the right format for your message.
2. Use active language and contractions to keep your tweets short.
3. Give your readers all the information they need.
4. Be casual, but come down on the side of standard English.

**1. Ask yourself if a tweet is the right format for your message.** Saving your reader's time is crucial in all business writing. Concise writing is mandatory for tweeting, and some messages just don't fit naturally within the service's 140-character limit.

Step back if you're struggling too long to stay inside the character limit, or if the maximum length feels too

brief for what you have to say. Instead, try turning your message into a blog post or a page on your website, and then post a tweet including a link and simply stating your central topic – e.g., “Check out <http://bit.ly/urllurl> for all the events we have planned in March at the new Potrero location!”

**2. Use active language and contractions to keep your tweets short.** Twitter's a casual place. Its informality makes it natural to use contractions like *they're* and *it's*, even if you're writing about your business. An apostrophe saves you at least one space and one letter.

You can also save space in tweets by avoiding passive language – e.g., by tweeting “The committee will announce the winners tomorrow” rather than “An announcement of the winners will be made by the committee tomorrow.” That second statement has 70 characters. The first only has 49. Active language saves space and the readers' time, and sounds more dynamic.

**3. Give your readers all the information they need.** Whether you're writing a tweet or text for your website, put yourself in your readers' shoes and ask yourself if

they'll have enough context to follow your idea.

How much context is enough? That depends on your message and your audience. The important points are to remember that your tweets are visible to the public, and to keep comprehensibility in mind when you're whittling a tweet down to 140 characters.

**4. Be casual, but come down on the side of standard English.** In the *New York Times* in April, John Metcalfe cautioned that a "small but vocal subculture has emerged on Twitter of grammar and taste vigilantes who spend their time policing other people's tweets – celebrities and nobodies alike."

These language police target "tweets with typos or flawed grammar, or written in ALLCAPS." Sloppy language in a tweet can therefore be risky, while

maintaining standard spelling and punctuation on Twitter can help you stand out in a good way.

On the one hand, it's shorter to type an ampersand (&) than the word "and." And someone breezing through Twitter may prefer "info" to the long word "information."

On the other hand, you may activate a reader's pet peeve if you type "tomorrow nite" rather than "tomorrow night." (That correct spelling only takes up one extra letter.) It may also confuse or distract some readers if you tweet "I cant w8!" rather than "I can't wait!"

For a general U.S. audience, Twitter works best when you balance careful writing and informality. Standard English and a casual tone tend to be the safest rules of thumb for professional tweets.

## Brainstorming Your Business Tweets

It can be tricky to stay inside a tweet's uncompromising 140-character limit. Still, the short format does let you pick your own topics. So what should you tweet about?

That's up to you. But any time you have writer's block and need to publish something online to maintain your professional visibility, try recommending something on Twitter.

First, the service lets you recommend other people's tweets. *Retweeting* is when a user clicks to add someone else's tweet to their own Twitter stream. It's a way to tell your Twitter followers, "This tweet's worthwhile."

The "RT" letters in the following Twitter post are a signal that Mary Cullen (M\_Cullen) retweeted (RTed) [the following tweet](#) by Jason Fried (jasonfried):

RT @jasonfried: Jargon is insecurity.

At Write It Well, we're big fans of plain English – partly because unnecessary, undefined jargon can make it sound like you're straining to impress a reader. This great tweet packs that idea in a nutshell, and we would have missed it without M\_Cullen's retweeted recommendation.

A tweet can recommend pretty much anything – e.g.,

1. Your company's products or services
2. An event
3. A webpage you want your clients to see

4. Someone else's recommendation of you

1. A tweet can be a free, public sales pitch for your company's products or services [fill in the blanks]:

Need help doing [\_\_\_\_\_]? XYZ Company can help you [solve that challenge]. Check us out at [http://bit.ly/urlurl!](http://bit.ly/urlurl)

2. Event recommendations can showcase your professional connectedness and current expertise:

At the Conference for Experts in Portland, today's panels on #[topic] were absolutely superb.

3. Try flagging a webpage with outside information that you know well, and that may intrigue your clients:

Elizabeth Reyes brilliantly summarizes the essentials of #[topic] at <http://bit.ly/urlurl>.

4. And if someone compliments you online, a tweet lets you be gracious and proud at the same time:

Username94107 wrote a glowing review of us on Yelp at <http://bit.ly/urlurl>. Thanks very much!

Your recommendation tweets are a chance to applaud someone else's work, or do a little honest bragging. And if you're searching for a topic, recommendations often make engaging tweets to read!

## Suggested Reading

Carr, David. "Why Twitter Will Endure." [\*New York Times\*, January 1, 2010.](#)

The article is a good introduction to Twitter. Carr writes that he initially found the endless volume of tweets "overwhelming," but he came to think of the service "as a river of data rushing past that I dip a cup into every once in a while."

Carr also quotes Clay Shirky, author of the social-media book *Here Comes Everybody*, as saying, "Anything that is useful to both dissidents in Iran and Martha Stewart has a lot going for it; Twitter has more raw capability for users than anything since e-mail."

Fogarty, Mignon. "Grammar Girl's Strunk & Twite: An Unofficial Twitter Style Guide (in which every entry is < 141 characters)." [\*Grammar Girl™: Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing\*, December 10, 2009.](#)

These compact guidelines include helpful, beautifully reasoned suggestions for symbols and first-person pronouns in tweets.

Metcalfe, John. "The Self-Appointed Twitter Scolds." [\*New York Times\*, April 28, 2010.](#)

Metcalfe profiles Twitter users who hunt for spelling and grammar mistakes in others' tweets. He warns that "the number of Twitter accounts devoted to pointing out other people's language foibles does seem to be growing."

## One Last Question: Is Twitter Bad for the English Language?

Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg of the University of California–Berkeley doesn't seem to think so. Around 19:35 minutes into [a May 27, 2009, interview with Michael Krasny on KQED's radio show \*Forum\*](#), Nunberg pointed out that neither instant messages nor text messages sealed a death warrant for civilized communication. The same thought applies to Twitter:

Every technology of communication has been seen as the imminent end of English, from the telegraph to the telephone.... And now you've got all these people saying ... "The text message spells the end of the English sentence: the basic unit of human thought."

The sentence has been around for a long time. It's done pretty well for itself. It's not going to suddenly crumble because kids have taken to texting each other with their thumbs instead of passing notes under the desk in algebra class.

In fact, the requirement of having to pack your message into 128 or 140 characters should make it pithy and condensed – all the virtues that Strunk and White taught us about.

Good English is a best practice for many, many businesspeople. Very traditional business writers can still use Twitter to send messages in whatever focused writing feels natural to them. If you doubt that tweets are suitable for business communication, think about using the service as a way to practice sharpening your thoughts.

Twitter offers a free opportunity to publicize your time-conscious messages. Each tweet can be a sort of typed-down, concise elevator pitch for any business idea you have. With some thought, you can use your writing on Twitter to project a highly professional image of yourself and your organization.