Academic/professional Twitter use
Tips for beginners

Twitter can be a great tool to interact with the public and fellow scholars and engage in public scholarship. If you've never used Twitter or have been primarily using it for personal connections, creating a professional Twitter account can be daunting but doesn't have to be.

Building your profile

- Create a **handle:**
  - Your handle is unique to your Twitter account and cannot be shorter than four characters or longer than 15 characters, and must only contain alphanumeric characters (letters A-Z, numbers 0-9) or underscores.
    - ☐ Look like a "real person," not a bot, by using a handle reflecting who you are. Some examples for a hypothetical person named "Dr. James T. Robinson" might include:
    - ☐ @RobinsonJames, @JTRobinson, @DrJRobinson, @RobinsonJim, @ProfRobinson
    - ☐ You could also use something related to your scholarship, such as @TudorHistoryProf or @BioMedResearch, or @JTRPhilosphy; this can help if your first and last name are pretty common and all the possible handles you've tried are taken.
  - Note that your handle can be separate from your **display name**:
    - ☐ Your display name on Twitter can be up to 50 characters long and include special characters and even emojis, helping you to stand out from the crowd. Some Twitter users frequently update their Twitter display names to reflect current affiliations, events or moods.
- Verify your handle, if possible.
- Use a professional headshot or at least a well-framed picture that is actually of you (as opposed to your pet or an avatar) to let people know you're not a bot.
- Add a background or cover image — this can help show a little personality; bonus points if it reflects your institution or department or pertains to your area of study.
- Fill out the bio/profile description. This will help people know who you are and assist your colleagues and institution in finding you to follow your account or seeing that you are safe to follow-back. Consider including:
  - Where you work or professional organizations (you can tag your department and/or university if they have an account).
  - Your area of study/research interests
  - Professional contact information
  - Location
  - Pronouns
  - A link to your department profile, or a blog, if you maintain one professionally, or even your lab's website, if you're in STEM research.
- Consider finding one or two Twitter profiles of people who are doing social media the way you would like to, and use theirs as a model for yours.

Building a following

- Cultivate a following by following in turn:
  - Find and follow colleagues, collaborators, departments, and leadership at your institution.
  - Find and follow scholars in the field that you know from conferences.
  - Find and follow people who taught you or the department/institution where you earned your degree(s); they often love to see what you've done in the ensuing years.
  - Vet your Follows and Followers:
    - ☐ Take time to review your followers and the people you are following once in a while. Things you should look for include:
      - ○ Do they post regularly about content relevant to you?
      - ○ Does their profile look like they're a real person (picture, description, background, colleague from real-life, etc.)?
      - ○ Are they embroiled in any turmoil or scandal online?
      - ○ Are they giving a few too many unsolicited "hot takes?"
    - ☐ It's typically a good practice that if someone follows you, then you follow them back, but this isn't strictly necessary or even productive; you might have a random person who isn't in your field or at your university following you because they enjoy your work, or you might have picked up a bot or a troll. Don't feel obligated to follow all of your followers. If someone follows you and something in their profile or tweet history makes you feel uncomfortable, you can go further and mute or even block them.
    - ☐ Check to see what lists you are on and remove yourself from any you don't want to be associated with. Sometimes these lists are created to "argue" with BIPOC & Queer academics.
- Be active and post consistently. You probably won't get hundreds of followers in your first few months, no matter how many people you follow. It takes time and active engagement to grow your account.
  - You'll find that the things you like and engage with on Twitter will also affect the content of your feed, so don't be a passive observer.
  - You may not find the time to tweet every day but set aside time each week for creating content for your account, and get in the practice of scrolling through and liking and retweeting things that are interesting or relevant to your area of study.
  - Once you're more comfortable on Twitter, your voice should be the dominant voice on your accounts. Retweeting is good but be sure to post your own content as well.
- Tweets, retweets, quote retweets, replies — what does it all mean? Learn about the different methods of tweeting.
  - Mention someone in a Tweet (using @ followed by their handle) to congratulate or thank them, begin a public conversation, or attract their notice to one of your tweets that's also relevant to them, but don't abuse the mention function or you may be marked as a spammer.
  - Learn about the @reply (at-reply) function to be aware that where you place the @ mention within the text makes a difference in who will see the tweet.
  - Celebrate successes; retweeting and congratulating peers for their accomplishments (awards, publications, tenure, etc.) is excellent Twitter content.
- Use hashtags and mention people and organizations appropriately and often, as this increases the breadth of your audience.
  - Hashtags (#) help people find similarly themed tweets, and you'll want to use them strategically. The internet is full of advice about how to hashtag; while it's good to know some of these basics, it's best to model accounts that are relevant to your field, as every specialty's practice is slightly different. Use them to participate in Twitter chats related to the things you study.

Know what you're getting into

Being successful on social media can come with many benefits, like boosting the visibility of your publications, projects, and awards and increasing your connection and dialogue with scholars in the same field globally – especially helpful in an isolated field and/or a global pandemic. It can serve as a recruitment tool for incoming scholars and initiate and continue public conversations around science and research.

However, [increased visibility is a double-edged sword](#) — it also can result in increased scrutiny and criticisms, which could escalate into trolling, harassment, bullying, and doxing.

- Review/Update Contact information
  - Check all of your social media contact information — often, we've not updated this information in a long time, and our privacy needs change over time. Consider removing information involving specific locations (physical addresses) and direct contact (personal phone number or personal email addresses).
  - Update CV — many academics don't realize that their CV may contain addresses, phone numbers, and direct emails. If your university has posted your CV on your university profile, consider editing it and removing personal information.
- What motivates you to use Twitter as a scholar?
  - Take time to think about your purpose for using this platform and identify your goals and core audience.
- Stay on-topic on your professional accounts:
  - Don't veer too far outside of your expertise on social media, or you may find your feed becoming unruly and followers dropping away.
  - Be a good citizen and be aware of institutional realities. Although you may see many folks on Twitter say things in their bio like "opinions my own," or "views don't represent the institution," don't consider that a get out of jail free card. Statements like this don't invalidate or change contracts you may have signed with the university or other agencies. You should still take the same care with your words that you would in person. To the extent possible, depending on your field of study, consider reserving controversial or political opinions for a personal account, not your professional persona.
  - Beware of using Twitter to air grievances against colleagues or complain about students; there could be consequences for this, as sharing student information would be a FERPA violation, and there are established HR procedures for working through professional differences.
- Bring the same skills and passion to Twitter and public scholarship as you do to your more traditional scholarly work. Think of social media as complementary to your other professional work; you get out of it what you put in.

What happens if something gets out of hand, or "Help, I'm being trolled!"

- Screenshots: If the activity in online spaces escalates from criticism to harassment, consider making an archive of screenshots of any tweets or direct messages that made you feel uncomfortable. The screenshot should include the handle of the user who sent or posted the message; this documentation may be needed later by administration or law enforcement. A screenshot will last even if the user deleted the original message or account.
- Disengage/go quiet: if harassment escalates, take a break from social media. It's completely okay to turn off your notifications and step away from the site for a few days.
- Communicate:
  - If you have professional affiliations listed on your social media (i.e., Wonderland University, American Federation of Wonder), communicate the circumstances to those affiliates. These places or people may begin receiving harassing calls/emails.
  - Communicate with your direct supervisor.

Further reading

- Becoming a Twitterstorian: Social Media, Scholarly Communication, and Professional Practice, *Clio and the Contemporary*
- The weird and wonderful world of academic Twitter, *Times Higher Education*
- A Beginner's Guide to Joining Academic Twitter, *Medium*
- How to Go Public, and Why We Must, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
- The risks and rewards of engaging in public scholarship, *Inside Higher Ed*
- Academic Twitter, *Twitter*

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