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[Home](#) > How academics can use Twitter most effectively (essay)

## How academics can use Twitter most effectively (essay)

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Two of the most important debates we have been having in academe in the last few years center on the issues of contingent labor and public engagement. At first, they would seem to be disconnected topics.

The contingent labor debate reflects the poor conditions of the tenure-track job market, even while much of the rest of the economy has recovered. The public engagement debate, meanwhile, comes in two forms: 1) a perennial lament that academics are bad writers [1] and 2) asking whether public engagement should count for tenure and promotion [2].

But those debates about contingency and public engagement are not as separable as they would appear. There may be much bad academic writing, but there is a flourishing ecosystem of public writing by academics online and in little magazines. And yet many of our most successful public scholars are graduate students, contingent faculty or Ph.D.s working outside academe. They have honed public voices by writing for major publications -- in fact, some have even founded those publications or work to edit them [3].

Such actions are, at least in part, a response to academic precarity. But their success has shown that there is an audience for erudite criticism and lively, timely and accessible academic work. Precarity helped create the new public scholar; in a twist of fate, the success of contingent voices in finding an audience for their work may have now helped to raise expectations for those occupying scarce tenure-track jobs.

Recently, a committee of the American Sociological Association recommended [4] that colleges and universities consider allowing public engagement,

including social media presence, to count for tenure. But others worry that administrators with a love for quantification and standardization might make public engagement mandatory, and that the tenure requirements of 2025 (assuming tenure still exists) might look like this: one book, good teaching, a record of service and at least three viral articles. Of all the unreasonable metrics by which we are judged, imagining someone caring about how many Twitter followers we have conjures a special sort of dread.

You can, of course, be a publicly engaged scholar in many ways, but the anxieties about Twitter seem particularly acute. It is sometimes reviled as a waste of time to be avoided [5]. But it is most often treated with puzzlement. I am asked with surprising frequency how a site that only allows you to communicate in 140-character bursts could have any use for conducting academic conversation. Even more than that, I am asked, “Do I have to join?”

The answer is no, you do not have to join. If you’re happy with your career as it stands and don’t want to do it, then nothing needs to change. Furthermore, I personally have no interest in having anything I write on Twitter judged as part of a promotion portfolio. I, too, stayed away for years, seeing only downsides. But when I became contingent, I decided I had nothing left to lose. Since then I have found it enormously helpful, both personally and professionally. I don’t need Twitter itself to count for anything, but it facilitates activities that already count.

For those who remain skeptical of the value of Twitter or apprehensive about using it, then, what follows is a guide based on the kinds of questions I sometimes get about how to make Twitter work for academic purposes.

### **So What Is the Point?**

First, it allows academics and people in other knowledge industries to interact directly. Twitter is the preferred social network of journalists because of its open nature and capacity to convey breaking news. Editors and writers working outside academe are accessible there, making it a place where you can go to talk to smart and thoughtful people outside your regular professional networks.

If and when your area of expertise intersects with an issue of public concern, Twitter is the place where you can share what you know and try to find someone to let you write it up at greater length. Academics know things that the general public doesn't; journalists communicate with the public, and Twitter is the best place to talk to them. Princeton University historian Kevin M. Kruse, who uses Twitter very effectively, has described being on Twitter as a way of conducting "global office hours [6]."

Second, academics move all over the country for work -- or don't have work at all. They often live in isolation from other people who share their research interests. Twitter is a good way to find those people out there who do share them. If you don't use private messages, your conversations will be seen by those who follow both of you, so others can chime in with ideas as well. Twitter improves on office hours in that many of your colleagues from around the world will be sitting there with you. After Twitter, academic conferences become places to talk in person to people that you already know online -- and probably even consider friends.

### **But How Can You Say Anything in 140 Characters?**

Most people who have never used Twitter know it as the social media platform with a strict character limit. That limit dates back to the founding of the company, when people used SMS text messages with similar limits. But there are now many ways around that restriction.

First, if you reply to your own tweet, deleting your handle (the name that begins with an @ symbol), you'll get a sequence of tweets that appear in the correct order to your readers. Number them if you like and pretty soon you're the Wittgenstein of social media. These are known as Twitter essays and some folks are quite good at them. They allow you to respond to comments in real time and get conversations going.

You can also attach pictures to tweets, so you can do a screen capture of a piece of text and comment on that, giving you paragraphs to work with in a single tweet. Recent changes now mean that links, pictures, GIFs, quoted tweets and handles no longer count against the 140-character limit, so there's quite a bit of flexibility.

To be sure, the medium does encourage some kinds of writing over others. It values pithiness and wit. But forced concision isn't always such a bad thing, especially if you want to train yourself to write for a broader audience than just other academics.

Here are some good practices:

1. Share links to what you read online. If you've found an article interesting or useful, send a link. If you have something to add or highlight, add some short comments.
2. Share what you read offline. Much online conversation is driven by what people can share online, but academics still read a lot offline as well. One thing we can add to public conversation, therefore, comes from our engagement with those sources. Take a picture or a screen grab of a journal article or book you're reading if it makes a contribution.
3. Work out ideas in progress. Once you are connected to colleagues and others, you can share syllabi, early versions of writing and so on.
4. Share what you write. Some academics want to join Twitter to give their writing more reach. That will really only work if you actually engage with Twitter for purposes other than self-promotion. But by all means, if you do publish something, let people know and be available to talk about it.

### **How Do I Get People to Follow Me?**

First, don't worry much about it. You're not aiming for popularity, just the right interlocutors.

That said, Twitter functions a bit like soapbox preaching -- you shout your message into the ether and see if it generates a response. If people like what they hear, they may start to listen, and you can gather a crowd of followers. The asymmetrical nature of Twitter means that you can talk to people even if they don't follow you. But you can expand your audience by doing these things:

1. Have a good, descriptive Twitter bio. State your field of study and your interests. You can pin one tweet to the top of your personal page that will always stay there -- use it to link to something you've written.
2. Share other people's work. Tag them when you do it. If it appeared in a magazine, tag the institutional account of the magazine it appeared in, and they'll probably retweet it, too.
3. Share your own work. If people like what they read from you, that's the most likely reason they'll follow you.
4. Talk with people. If they learn from the conversation, they may follow you.

5. Use meaningful hashtags. #ScholarSunday was started by [Raúl Pacheco-Vega](#) [7], and people use it to describe scholars they follow and the reasons why. My discipline of history also has #Twitterstorians when you want to reach those who don't follow you but who might have alerts set up for the hashtag.
6. Follow plenty of other accounts -- that too will help them find you. Don't only follow people who follow you. That's tacky. But if someone does follow you or interact with you often, consider following them, too. If someone you know in real life follows you, follow back. If you can't stand their behavior on Twitter, you can mute them without unfollowing.

Most important, try to add value to the public conversation. That doesn't mean being serious all the time, and it certainly doesn't mean being dull, but bear in mind that you have no obligation to respond to everything that becomes a topic of discussion or debate. People will come to you because of the additional expertise you have. Over time, take satisfaction in the quality, not the quantity, of your followers.

### **What Should I Avoid Doing?**

1. Don't, under any circumstances, complain about your students. Twitter is a public forum. They're students; they're learning.
2. If you're tenured or on the tenure track, don't complain about your job conditions. They may well be very frustrating, but other people are really suffering.
3. If you're a graduate student or contingent, be careful. Prospective employers will read your feed and may see you as a complainer if you talk about the state of academic labor. You may want to lock your account when you're on the job market.
4. Don't complain about your employer. I have heard of at least one case where this has been an issue for administrators making tenure decisions.
5. Don't expect replies every time you try to jump into a conversation. Journalists and celebrities with large followings (even academics who have a lot of followers) get more replies than they can respond to, and it isn't rude of them to ignore you.
6. If you write something and others start sharing a link to it, you can retweet a few of those outside endorsements. But don't just endlessly retweet nice things people write to you about you or your work. We get it, you're wonderful, everybody loves you. Unfollow.
7. Don't try to be too cool. Journalists on Twitter are almost certainly much cooler and more fun than you are. Their first words were expressed in memes and emoji. By the time you figure out the joke well enough to riff on it, it will probably be stale. Sad! But you just have to deal with it.

But you should avoid two fundamental things above all else. First: don't be on Twitter all of the time. To pick up Kruse's global office hours analogy: office

hours come to an end. Some people, especially journalists, have made Twitter a kind of second home and find that being on it constantly helps improve their productivity. But it's probably too distracting to be compatible with academic labor. So be conscious about the way you want to use it.

Second: don't be horrible. Twitter is widely acknowledged to have a problem with abuse. Especially if you take stands on divisive issues, it may find you. Unfortunately, women and people of color tend to attract more abuse, on Twitter as in other areas of life. Because it's a public forum, random accounts (often called egg accounts because they haven't even bothered to replace the default avatar image -- an egg -- with their own) may tell you what an awful human being you are or how dumb your opinions are.

Don't engage; block immediately. If you block someone, they won't be able to see your tweets. Or, if you mute them instead <sup>[8]</sup>, they won't know anything has happened, and they can yell at you all day long without it registering on your peaceful conscience.

But obviously, don't be part of the problem <sup>[9]</sup>. Many incorrect opinions are better left uncorrected. Incorrect opinions do not automatically impugn an adversary's character. Tone can be hard to read in writing; disagree without making things personal, especially with colleagues. Even if you do have to field abusive encounters, remember that other people will be supportive and that Twitter is far from simply a torrent of abuse. Many academics at all stages of their careers find a great deal of emotional support and a sense of community from it.

### **So What Can I Get Out of It?**

Twitter is an odd platform for academics, to be sure. But if soapbox preaching trained its speakers in the techniques that could effectively gather an audience, Twitter can do the same. For now, it is the best way to speak, and try to find, an interested public. It is the place to give away your ideas until, perhaps, someone offers to pay you for them.

You may learn about academic opportunities there. You may learn about things you should read or people you should know. You may get good career

advice or emotional support in difficult times. You may find ways to write for blogs. You may find ways to write for magazines. You may find ways to have your work translated.

You may just enjoy it. It is not in itself an academic pursuit, but it has made me a better scholar and a better writer -- 140 characters (plus images, GIFs, quotes and emoji) at a time.

**Section:**

Technology <sup>[10]</sup>

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**Links**

[1] <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Most-Academics-Will-Always/237077>

[2] <https://theconversation.com/should-writing-for-the-public-count-toward-tenure-63983>

[3] <https://scholcomm.commons.mla.org/semipublic-intellectual/growing-up-in-public-academia-journalism-and-the-new-public-intellectual>

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/09/08/sociologists-discuss-how-departments-should-consider-social-media-activity-and-other>

[5] <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/why-academics-should-not-make-time-social-media>

[6] <http://www.processhistory.org/kruse-twitter/>

[7] <https://twitter.com/raulpacheco>

[8] <https://theringer.com/mute-dont-block-on-twitter-sales-pitch-de85a817e938#.y9ety8iwe>

[9] <http://www.kellyjbaker.com/writing/the-men-who-email-me/>

[10] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/technology>