

# How **tweet** It Is

## *Twitter for Interpreters*

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Look at the Internet. It is a different place. It has its own culture, its own set of moral cues, its own rules of engagement. All of that looks daunting when you think about joining the conversation in this amorphous place we call “Internet.” How do you talk to people on this or that social media site? What are all these acronyms? And why does everyone keep typing out parentheses and colons all the time? The questions can begin piling up quickly.

Tweet. It is not a four-letter-word, but sometimes interpreters treat it like it is. Those of us who spend our time on wooded trails or in historic homes can feel a bit intimidated by the technology. But the concepts behind micro-blogging, the technical term for what we do on Twitter, are as old as human communication. Imagine sitting in a dusty small town in the American West in the 1870s. How would you communicate with a friend of yours back in Philadelphia? You would walk to the train station, draft a message, and have it sent by the wonder of electricity across the country like a lightning bolt. In 1870, nearly 10 million messages were sent across America’s telegraph wires. Over the course of the next decade, that number would triple. And when you wrote one of those messages, you would need to be brief, packing as much meaning as you could into

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as little a space as possible to make your dollar stretch further. Packing real meaning into tight, quick spaces is something we’ve been doing for a long time.

Twitter is no different than something we as a culture and as interpreters have been doing for centuries: distilling our messages into bite sized, meaningful chunks. In the case of Twitter, those chunks are 140 characters long. In just 140 letters and numbers, you can help facilitate emotional and intellectual connections to a place. You can ask a provocative and interpretive question about a person. You can inject your site’s meanings into a broader narrative.

### **The Power of “Just” One Word**

One of my favorite tweets was written by Wright Brothers National Memorial (@WrightBrosNPS) in July 2010. It helps shines a light on the deep power of Twitter as an interpretive medium:

*Today in 1969: Just 66 years after the Wright brothers’ first flight, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walk on the surface of the moon.*

That one sentence packs a wallop. It does so many things in so few words. First, there is the intellectual connection to the moon landing: we understand that Armstrong and Aldrin walked on the moon in 1969. But the tweet goes further. When the tweet layers in the Wright Brothers connection, and when it uses the word “just,” it pushes toward an emotional connection. We can feel amazement, joy, or reverence that man went from first flight to walking on our nearest celestial neighbor in “just” 66 years.

The word “just” becomes the key. With four letters, the tweet transforms from a simple statement of fact to an opportunity to ponder and wonder, an opportunity to reflect and meditate on mankind and our ceaseless potential.

Every word in an interpretive tweet matters. Using powerful words, emotional words, cerebral words, or sheepish words all can convey

different meanings. Regardless of the meaning you're hoping to help a visitor find, that connection must happen fast. The addition or subtraction of even four simple letters can mean the difference between a rote recitation of fact and interpretive gold.

### Press # for Interaction

One of the powerful tools interpreters have hanging from their utility belt is the provocative question. A well-placed question can offer a visitor the opportunity for reflection and introspection. That question can let the visitor see themselves within your landscape. It can transport them in time and let them feel the past.

But one of the things many of us fail to do is offer the opportunity to respond to that provocation. We don't always offer our visitors the moment to encapsulate and express their answer to our questions. But in an interactive medium like Twitter, they will respond. The culture of Twitter is centered on personal expression. They will open a dialogue. How can we make that easier?

In a tweet, the setup and delivery of a question needs to be concise. But helping visitors to begin finding their own answers to these questions isn't that difficult. Imagine these two examples of a tweet with an invitation to interact:

*In 1854, escaped slave Fred. Douglass felt #July4th a "gross injustice" to his bro's & sisters in bondage. What does #July4th mean to you?*

and

*US's choice to declare #Warof1812 led to destruction of White House, siege of Baltimore & around 20,000 dead. Why do countries choose war?*

Both of these tweets accomplish two tasks in a scant 140 characters. First, they prime the visitor with a short tidbit to mull over, a set of given circumstances. Then, they ask an open-ended question for visitors

to think about and respond to. But most importantly, they offer the means of response: the #hashtag. By adding a number sign before a string of characters, you've made a small symbol (a tag) for this conversation.

But other Twitter users are making #hashtags and starting conversations as well. The hashtag #July4th tends to crop up in late June every year, with people planning parties, buying fireworks, or talking about what they're eating at the cookout. This is an opportunity for an interpreter to join a conversation already in progress. You can jump on a bandwagon and join the discussion that people are



already having which might relate to your unique place or story.

Picking up on a hashtag is not always easy. Many corporations have run afoul by using hashtags insensitively or unknowingly. Entenmann's, Pennsylvania-based makers of baked goods, saw a hashtag conversation they wanted to join in July of 2011—#notguilty. Their tweet was creative enough:

*Who's #notguilty about eating all the tasty treats they want?*

But the #notguilty the tag referred to was the verdict in the Casey Anthony trial. To avoid these sorts of social-media faux pas, use a hashtag search

engine (like [whatthetrend.com](http://whatthetrend.com) or [tagal.us](http://tagal.us)) to make sure what type of conversation you're stepping into.

### By the Way, the Statue of Liberty Says "Hi..."

Many of the places that we help visitors to understand, appreciate, and connect with have cult status within our communities or our nation. Twitter can be one of those places where that status shines through. Who wouldn't love it to have their local zoo reply to something they say online, even if that reply is something as simple as, "Way to go!" or "Glad you loved your visit!"

Twitter can give voice to our special places. When Independence Hall replies to a visitor's comment on Twitter, it can feel like the bricks themselves are speaking. When the Cobra in the cage at the Bronx Zoo jokes about touring around New York City while he is missing, suddenly everyone starts looking under their seats in the subway for an errant snake. And when the Statue of Liberty says a simple "Hello" to a user in a tweet, it seems like she's set down her torch for a moment to wave to that person. That is a deep responsibility to exercise. But it is also an amazing opportunity to help our visitors connect to our places in new ways, to think about our places more deeply and interact with our places more fully.

We live in an interactive world. Our visitors crave interactivity. Whether we present them with engaging questions, or simply say "Hi," microblogging platforms like Twitter offer us opportunities to engage our audiences in new and creative ways. They help us to take our message beyond our physical boundaries, beyond the visit and into the daily lives of our communities. Enough talk; go forth and tweet!

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