Tips for scientists using social media

Why blog about science?

A science blog or micro-blog (like Twitter) allows you to:

- create your own web space and profile for you to manage, on your terms

- connect with peers, other researchers, potential employees and the interested public

- keep these people up to date with your research or news in your field of science, and allow them to offer their comments, support and ideas

- inspire others to become interested and involved in science

- get feedback on your analysis in a public forum

- source, share and securely archive content that interests you

- improve your writing skills.

Blogging can have rewards too; science bloggers are often invited to speak at conferences and as experts in the media, not because they are the most knowledgeable and decorated in their field of science, but because they have learnt to communicate their science clearly and concisely.

Is social media right for you?

Blogs and micro-blogs are a cheap and easy way to create a web presence. However, that doesn't mean you should start one for the sake of it.

The following seven questions are adapted from Darren Rowse of ProBlogger to help you figure out if it's worth creating a blog or signing up to Twitter.

1. **Why do you want to create a blog?** Is it to log your work or life, disseminate information, critique or start conversations? Choosing one message or topic to focus on will give your blog an easily searchable identity.

2. **Who do you want to communicate to?** The answer to this question will help you figure out the tone, writing style and content of your blog.

3. **Do you enjoy writing?** If not, blogging may not be for you, as it is predominately a written medium. Having said this, you could consider creating a video or audio blog.

4. **Are you passionate about your topic?** If you are only slightly interested in your blog's topic, it will be difficult to log in each day/week and come up with fresh, exciting posts and commentary. Choose a topic you're passionate about, and it will be easier and more fulfilling to update.

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2

5. **Do you have enough time?** Starting a blog doesn't take too long but you need to set aside regular time to do it well. Likewise, updating can be quick but you need to update regularly, as well as moderate and reply to comments in a timely way.

6. **Are you a social person?** Expect to receive and reply to comments. Some conversations will be critical, so be ready to respond. Your blog is a way to start conversations, so don't ignore criticism.

7. **Are you honest and transparent?** These two qualities are vital for all social media. People on the web like to dig further into stories. If they find you out then your credibility can be tarnished. Be accountable and disclose conflicts of interest.

Top tips for tweeting

- **Keep it short.** If you are stuck for space, delete redundant words such as 'very' and try to limit your tweet to 120 characters to allow people room to retweet it.

- **Make it easy to read.** Watch spelling and grammar, and correct punctuation. Avoid ALL CAPS as it comes across as shouting. Use quote marks if you're quoting a source.

- **Write as if you are writing a newspaper headline.** You want to grab people's attention. Use strong, colourful, everyday nouns and verbs. People will be more inclined to retweet your tweet if it is superbly written and grabs attention.

- **Rewrite if necessary.** If you're linking to a blog post or an article on a website that is not your own, you don't have to use their headline if you think you can write a better one.

- **Check your tweets before publishing.** Tweets cannot be edited once published, but they can be deleted and rewritten if you notice an error immediately. However, planning before publication and correcting errors in follow-up tweets is better than deleting something which has already been published and seen by your followers.

- **Don't just tweet to promote yourself.** Tweeting about your own work is great, but constantly overselling yourself will turn people off, and you will become invisible to them.

- **Engage in conversation:** Twitter is as much about the conversation you have with others, so don't be afraid to @mention others on relevant topics, and to respond to people who interact with you.

- **Retweet with careful consideration.** You are displaying your editorial judgement to the world, and what you retweet reflects on you.

- **Credit others.** If you're retweeting someone, credit them for their work—it's common courtesy
    - More twitter jargon here

Using hashtags

A hashtag is a word, or string of words, prefixed with the hash symbol '#'; e.g. #HurricaneSandy.

Twitter uses hashtags to categorise tweets. People can use the Twitter search function to see a list of all tweets that include a particular hashtag. The hashtag is like a filter. Hashtags can be used:

- If your tweet is related to an event or a conference; e.g. #iwa2012busan

- If your tweet is related to a disaster or a natural phenomenon; e.g. #HurricaneSandy, #TotalSolarEclipse

- to give context; e.g. #coalseamgas

- as a meme (a common idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person); e.g. #TGIF, #fail, #todo.

For more advice on tweeting, consider registering for Science Media Space, a three-week online course on social media for scientists that provides tips, practice activities and feedback:

sciencemediaspace.com.au

science media space

Top tips for writing a blog

- **Make it personal -** write in the first person. The web is a one-to-one medium, so get personal and say 'you' and 'I'. Say 'you' a lot more than you say 'I'. People want to know how what you are saying is relevant to them. Use active rather than passive voice:
    - I found…
    - We have …..

- **Write meaningful, short headlines.** Try to use fewer than eight words and make the first two words 'information-carrying' (i.e., words that give a strong indication of what you are writing about). People scan from the left-hand side of the web page, so they are likely to focus on just the first couple of words of each heading they see.

- **Write less.** People rarely read all the way through a page so keep your posts short and include your key points in the top 20% of your post. Keep paragraphs and sentences short. Stick to one idea per sentence

- **Use lists, images and tables.** Where possible use lists, images and small tables to break up your text.

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Top tips for writing a blog (continued)

- **Show numbers as numerals.** Write numbers as numerals, not letters (e.g. 23, not twenty-three), even when the number is the first word in a sentence or bullet point.

- **Write meaningful link text.** Ensure your text explains the links you are clicking through to.

- **Make sure each post can stand alone.** People can land on a blog post from a search engine or from a linked website. Don't assume that they have read any earlier posts (although you can link to earlier posts). You may also have to re-explain abbreviations and jargon.

- **Proof read.** People will judge you on grammar and spelling. The incorrect placement of an apostrophe, or a 'their' instead of 'there' can undermine your credibility.

- **Post regularly.** Post at least once a month, but not just for the sake of it, still make sure you have something meaningful to say.

- **Get an unbiased opinion.** If possible ask someone objective to read your post for content before you post it. Once it's out there it's difficult to completely remove and comments you might regret can be reposted elsewhere.

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sciencemediaspace.com.au

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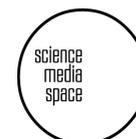
When communicating through social media

✘ Don't just talk **at** people – aim to actively engage with them.

✔ Ask questions to encourage interaction and discussion.

✔ Interact with other pages / people (comment, share, retweet).

✔ Respond politely and respectfully to comments. Sometimes it is best to just ignore.

✔ Maintain your professionalism. Don't let your emotions rule when posting or responding to comments.

✔ Use spell check – it only takes a minute.

✔ Be consistent: check your site regularly and build a cohesive social media presence.

✘ Don't post sensitive or confidential information – if in doubt leave it out.