How it works

Twitter is an online social networking and microblogging service. Twitter users broadly fall into four groups: those who tweet about their personal life, those who tweet about their work (@BarackObama), institutions/organisations (@TheKingsFund) and pseudo-users (@PigeonJon or @Queen_UK).

The main feature of Twitter is its tweets, which are short bursts of information written by anyone with a Twitter account (in 140 characters or less). To hear what people are saying in their tweets, you have to follow them. This means that all of their tweets will appear on your Twitter timeline for you to read, together with the tweets of others you follow, in time order.

GETTING STARTED

1. Set up an account on www.twitter.com. You’ll get a username that will be preceded by @.
2. Write a short biography. It should help users decide whether to follow you or not. If you’re tweeting about your work, mention what you do. If you’re tweeting about your personal interests, list them. You can amend it at anytime.
3. Post a tweet. It can be anything under 140 characters.

Tweets: Content beyond words

As you read other people’s tweets, you’ll see the following idiosyncratic features. These features are code that tell Twitter how to behave. It takes some getting used to...

Hyperlinks: Regularly used to direct followers in the direction of interesting websites, blog posts, news articles, reports etc. The limit of 140 characters is prohibitive to pasting normal links, so they are frequently shortened, either automatically in Twitter or using a “URL shortener” site via google.

RT (Retweet): If you read a tweet that you like and want to share with your followers, select the Retweet option below the tweet. Some people add RT at the beginning of the tweet to show that it isn’t their own work (optional).

Reply: To reply to a tweet, click Reply underneath it to complete the Tweet box. Twitter links these together as a conversation that can be viewed by others.

Mentions: When people put other people’s usernames into tweets including the @ sign, the tweet will pop up under “@Connect” (Interaction timeline). This collects all tweets that specifically mention that user, so use it to see what people are saying to, or about, you.

#hashtag: Hashtags are words written by users to tag their post. You can search by hashtags, allowing you to find tweets written by anyone using that tag. Conferences usually give out a preferred hashtag, so delegates can discuss the conference live e.g. #EvidenceLive

#FF (Follow Friday): On Fridays, users write tweets using this hashtag to recommend @usernames for their followers to also follow.

DM (Direct message): These are sent from one user to another, but they won’t show in anyone else’s timeline.
6 tips for getting followers

1. **Tweet.** Twitter isn’t about listening to silence. Tweet regularly.
2. **Tweet to an audience.** If you want to build professional networks, your professional followers might prefer not to hear a running commentary on your golf successes. Similarly, if you want to appear balanced and wise, don’t tweet about the injustice of the amount of foam on your cappuccino.
3. **Sell yourself** in your biography and be clear about what you do and don’t tweet about. People like to be assured that their timeline won’t be cluttered with inconsequential drivel.
4. **Follow other people.** Most people receive an email when they get a new follower, so by following them you are alerting them to your Twitter presence and they may follow you in return.
5. **Connect with other users** by mentioning them in your tweets (i.e. including @mycolleague). If you find an interesting paper, you could mention the authors or a colleague who you think would be interested in it. They may retweet you, which will bring you to the attention of their followers, who may then follow you.
6. **Get some followers.** It’s a virtuous circle: To find people to follow, look at the profiles of interesting people and see who they follow. People will find you via the ‘Following’ list of people who follow you, so getting some followers helps others find you.