

# Describe

## A Brief Digression to Discuss Journalism Is Warranted

All good books have one thing in common - they are truer than if they had really happened. - The Man (Mr. Ernest Hemingway)

<http://twitter.com/erinmalone/status/1963853525>

We walk the ever-thinning line between science fiction and reality. It has been argued that the term *science fiction* is currently anachronistic, because so much of daily life and film is infused with science and technology.

In our hands now is the most powerful, ubiquitous, indomitable communication tool in history. What will you do with it? Truth or daring fiction, which world do you live in?

Consider your messages to be your unique story, in which amazing news may break at any moment. How will your moment strike, and how will you react?

My reaction is a balance of truth and prose. I tend not to write things that sound bad, regardless of the circumstances. In fact, if I find myself writing about something that sounds bad, it's usually a

sign for me to stop doing it. Unfortunately, the truth often sounds ugly. Making the truth palatable is the job of the journalist.

Journalism has a distinguished history of growth alongside short-form communication services like the telegraph. Now, journalists everywhere are finding sources, following leads, and even writing entire articles in 140-character bursts.

*In breaking news, eyewitness reports are almost always more valuable and interesting than a journalist's accounts.*

[www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=1774875](http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=1774875)

The short format requires not just a new language, but a different way of writing. Information usually contained in a headline and lead sentence is now constrained to less than half that size, with almost no control over presentation.

For reporters concerned with inches and word count, the short form feels a bit like writing on a grain of sand. For journalists to succeed in the short form, tools and techniques must evolve along with styles and methods.

We begin with the journalistic style because the activity of reporting is intrinsically linked with being mobile and in the moment. These two characteristics are at the center of the short form.

*Journalism is ideally designed for democratisation [sic].*

<http://blogs.reuters.com/fulldisclosure/2009/01/30/twittering-away-standards-or-tweeting-the-future-of-journalism/>

Twitter will not democratize media as much as it will inspire a more direct, genuine, & immediate discourse between every entity.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/1765638345>

As publication tools are unshackled from the desk, editors and desk-like institutions seem to become less relevant, but we do in fact need those editors and academies. They help provide the

accuracy and balance that distinguish the belch of a blogger's BlackBerry from the ring of a real reporter.

There's the story you wanna tell, and the story a reporter wants to hear, and somewhere in between is the story that gets told.

<http://twitter.com/realizing/status/1478767971>

Real reporting can take place within social media circles. There are two key principles to remember. First: Public Twitter and Facebook updates are a part of the permanent record, and all searchable content is fair game for journalists. Second: A direct relationship with your social sphere is fundamental; keep it independent of the media outlet that employs you.

Keep your professional identity as a reporter independent and portable because jobs can come and go. You will want to retain your readers during times of change.

Along with the guidelines in the chapters that follow, additional caveats apply to journalism. This list is not comprehensive, but is rooted in experience with corporate blogging and investigative reporting.

Ten tips, in order of importance:

1. Determine your employer's social media policy. If they don't have one, write up a policy of your own and submit it.
2. Check sources and attribute—[shakes fist] *check sources!*
3. Think twice before posting: once for your source and once for your editor.
4. One drunken, angry tweet could ruin you.

some things can't be said in under 140 characters. especially after some champagne.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/158374242>

5. Jokes can almost always be taken the wrong way; expect this.
6. Never discuss a story before its time, or tweet about something before it happens.
7. Be as clear as possible with your sources about when you expect your story to post so they know when and how to promote it.
8. Own your smartphone and a great set of mobile apps.
9. Avoid writing about colleagues or the workplace.
10. Follow other journalists: @jennydeluxe, @michaelbfarrell, @mat, and the rest.

“Oh look, I sent you a link.” “Oh, I sent you a link, too.” “That’s great, we’re journalists!”

<http://twitter.com/mantia/status/2939433877>

You think you want to be a Twitter journalist? You’ll need to check your facts, provide a truly unique perspective, and most of all lead with action. Do this with fairness, accuracy, and freedom from bias, and you will always have a job.

## Observe the Truth

For the journalist, the question is not “What are you doing?” but when, where, how, and why you are doing it. Support with specifics.

Be as precise as you can; the medium allows for it—the medium even demands it. Your advantage is unique or privileged information, facts not previously known.

*You can observe a lot just by watching.*

—Yogi Berra

It's permissible to leave questions unanswered in a message this small. Answers come later. Engage your audience first, then shape the discussion or commentary elsewhere.

Participate in community-funded reporting. You can start a story or contribute to a story in progress. Remember: Revolutions are started with words.

Do you think you could help improve the journalism we do? Just register on the site (10 seconds) and click "I'll donate talent" on a pitch.

<http://twitter.com/Spotus/status/2403758301>

Consider @wordnik, an ongoing project devoted to discovering all the words and everything about them.

@RevisionFairy We think "tweetosphere" is a perfectly cromulent word, but "twittersphere" seems more common.

<http://twitter.com/wordnik/status/2412836322>

RT @biorhythmist: "festooned" is a great word that is under-used. festooned festooned festooned That's probably enough.

<http://twitter.com/wordnik/status/2483176892>

You can't change the facts, but you can create an interesting angle. Play with presentation, not physics.

## Play with Perspective

Think of every tweet as an epitaph. How does your personality shine through? Start at a far point and travel inexorably toward the conclusion. Discover an entirely different experience of writing: the slow crawl.

Living each day like it's my last, because I live near a fault line (@sfquake).

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1416507887>

Just felt that earthquake. No one else here did.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/15884>

Twichter scale; fraction of Bay Area residents who tweet they felt an earthquake.

<http://twitter.com/nelson/status/1789035638>

Depending on what you are trying to accomplish, practice gender neutrality in your writing. Ambiguity can be your friend, as it may appeal to a broader audience. In the end, though, clarity and certainty are the trademarks of terse communications.

Above all, your message must describe something: a thought, an idea, a moment, a subject. Always think before you act, but realize that thinking is also an act. Your message can simply contain a thought, but frame it with the act of thinking, like @Jack.

thinking the "Subject" line of email is dead. sms is great: message is the subject.

<http://twitter.com/jack/status/5593458>

Lead with a verb.

noticing that it's kinda fun to start all sentences with verbs

<http://twitter.com/ev/status/212>

## Lead with Action

Leadership is doing. Describe what you are doing. You are doing something bold. You are thinking. You are acting. You are inventing. You are declaring something. You are being original; you are being real.

What is the detail that no one else would notice? What is the one word that makes your situation unique? Define it. Define the moment. Put your name on that moment and say, “I did this awesome thing.” Don’t just tell us your story; show it to us.

Observe. Choose an object and give it the full treatment. Have an opinion about it. Make this part of your process, but don’t let it end there. Pure description in 140 characters or less is a technique on its own.

Long, low waves. Sunny water. Guy on a paddleboard. Pelicans.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/18002>

There are essentially two possibilities for description: yourself and not yourself. Be mindful of the balance between the two.

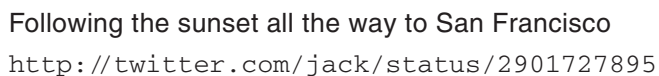
Nothing worth doing is easy.

<http://twitter.com/dom/status/1587611562>

Even posting a great photograph won’t give the full picture. Add some context. What are we looking at? What happened just before the picture, or just after? Your aim here should be to uncover some truth, or at least to approximate it.

Learn what this new medium means to you. Redefine conventions and openly set your own reasonable and practical bar. Above all, be declarative in your writing.

Done right, a short, descriptive message can tell an entire tale.



Following the sunset all the way to San Francisco  
<http://twitter.com/jack/status/2901727895>

Start with what you know. Start simple and small.