Finding Your Twitter Voice By Optimizing Your Tweets
How to Break News and Share Stories Effectively

The Idea: Unless you're lucky enough to teach the rare class built solely on social media writing, helping students find their voice and learn to share news effectively often is an afterthought. We certainly can do more to teach how to tweet with flair. I finally got fed up when I saw students on our campus publication constantly sharing their work with "Read my latest story <link>" over and over again, as if that was going to entice anyone to click! Just as we optimize headlines for search engines (SEO), social shares should be Social Media Optimized (SMO). This assignment is intended to help prepare future news desk editors and reporters think about how to share news that begs to be read.

Implementation: The assignment has two parts: an in-class attempt and then a follow-up homework attempt with a few modifications. I give the students a short written guide that describes the nine different tweet styles they'll be learning, and it also has examples of tweets from journalists that show the style in use. Then I provide them with the link to a story and treat this as a live in-class exercise by having them produce tweets using the following styles:

1. **Breaking News:** A tweet that gets the basic news out but has no story link (of the nine styles here, this is the only one with no story link included in the tweet). In this mode they are doing the work of a social media producer who is working the desk at a news organization. I only show the first couple story paragraphs so they can focus on the news.
2. **Developing News:** A follow-up on the breaking news tweet, but adds details and a link.
3. **Standard News:** The standard tweet news organizations would publish once a story is finished and complete.
4. **Commentary/Analysis:** A twist on the Standard News style, taught as a tweet you'd do as a follow-up, where you offer some perspective or analysis that goes beyond the nutgraf. A common, useful style when you're curating others' work online because it adds value to the link.
5. **Factoid:** A less-common style that calls out something interesting/useful from the story and includes a link.
6. **Question:** A useful style for those curating, it asks unanswered questions about the linked story. Useful for getting insights from your followers.

7. **Quote:** Makes use of the Twitter "quote tweet" function that lets you retweet someone else's share and add value. This lets you add elements of analysis, factoids or questions but it's a different style in that your "link" is another's tweet about the story you're sharing. This requires they search Twitter for the story URL (also a useful skill!)
8. **Picture:** Link tweets with pictures get more retweets than those with no picture. For this style, they can either use a picture from the story or a screenshot of a key passage from the story that they've linked to, plus some explanation of why the image is important.
9. **Clickbait:** We do these partially for fun, but partially to show why they're so bad. I have them write one of the classic "you wouldn't believe what happens next!" style tweets. Just being on this side of the share is useful for them to see why being flippant is not a good idea. I tell them they can delete this tweet later.

After the in-class version, they do it again for homework. The only difference on the homework version is they have to find stories for their nine tweets. I have them use the same story for the first three tweets on the list (sharing as if it were breaking, developing, then finished). For tweets 4-9, they have to use a different story for every tweet. I encourage them to mix up story types, from hard news to more entertainment news.

How the assignment is used: I have used this in my multimedia classes, which have them creating stories that straddle several different platforms. After their in-class and homework attempt, the expectation is that anything they create in the class would be shared on Twitter and I expect it to be social media optimized. Optional add-on I have used is to require them to pick a social media "beat" and require them to tweet out things in the news a few times a week using this process.

Goals: I view this assignment as a starting point. It gives students frameworks for how to think about sharing information online by offering them ways to share both breaking news and links to stories. But it is not intended to be something that is done and forgotten. It works best when the standards for SMO are then folded into other assignments and SMO tweets are required to complete other assignments. In the long run, practicing effective sharing is foundational to finding voice online. In particular, some of the more analytical styles of sharing lend themselves to letting students experiment with adding bits of commentary and analysis to what they're

sharing. That is a hard skill to do well right out of the gate, so giving them space to play is important.

Student reactions/results: Student reactions have mainly been positive. It is often the first time they've been formally taught how to tweet with a sense of style. Several have told me afterward that they finally understand why some of their favorite reporters tweet the way they do when they are sharing news, that they see the methodology behind the words. That in itself is good.

With a semester of practice, I've found they really come into their own in the second part of the semester. It has been similar to basic reporting in that regard, that they are overly robotic and mechanical trying to learn the style early on but as they get more practice and confidence, it starts to become second nature to them.