

What would Shakespeare tweet?

There's an art to writing on Facebook or Twitter, and no one cares that you're 'eating a sandwich'

By Maria Puente
USA TODAY

Not so long ago, people used to keep diaries to record their quotidian doings -- privately, of course. Now people keep Facebook and Twitter accounts, updating their status daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute, and almost nothing is private.

Worse, the modern status update is not always compelling reading.

Feeding the cat

Watching TV

Eating a tuna sandwich

To be fair, even great diarists of the past had bad days: Samuel Pepys, the Englishman whose journals clarified a big chunk of the 17th century for historians, sometimes had nothing more imaginative to say than: *And so to bed.*

Surely we could do better 350 years later?

"We all have to go to status-update charm school," jokes Hal Niedzviecki, author of *The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors*, who joined a slew of online social networks to investigate how they are changing the definition of privacy. "Just one in every million status updates is worth reading, maybe one in every 5 million if you're looking for poetics."

Never mind poetics. Coherence would be nice.

There's no doubt that social-media networks are fantastic communication machines. They allow people to feel connected to a virtual community, make new friends and keep old ones, learn things

Cover story

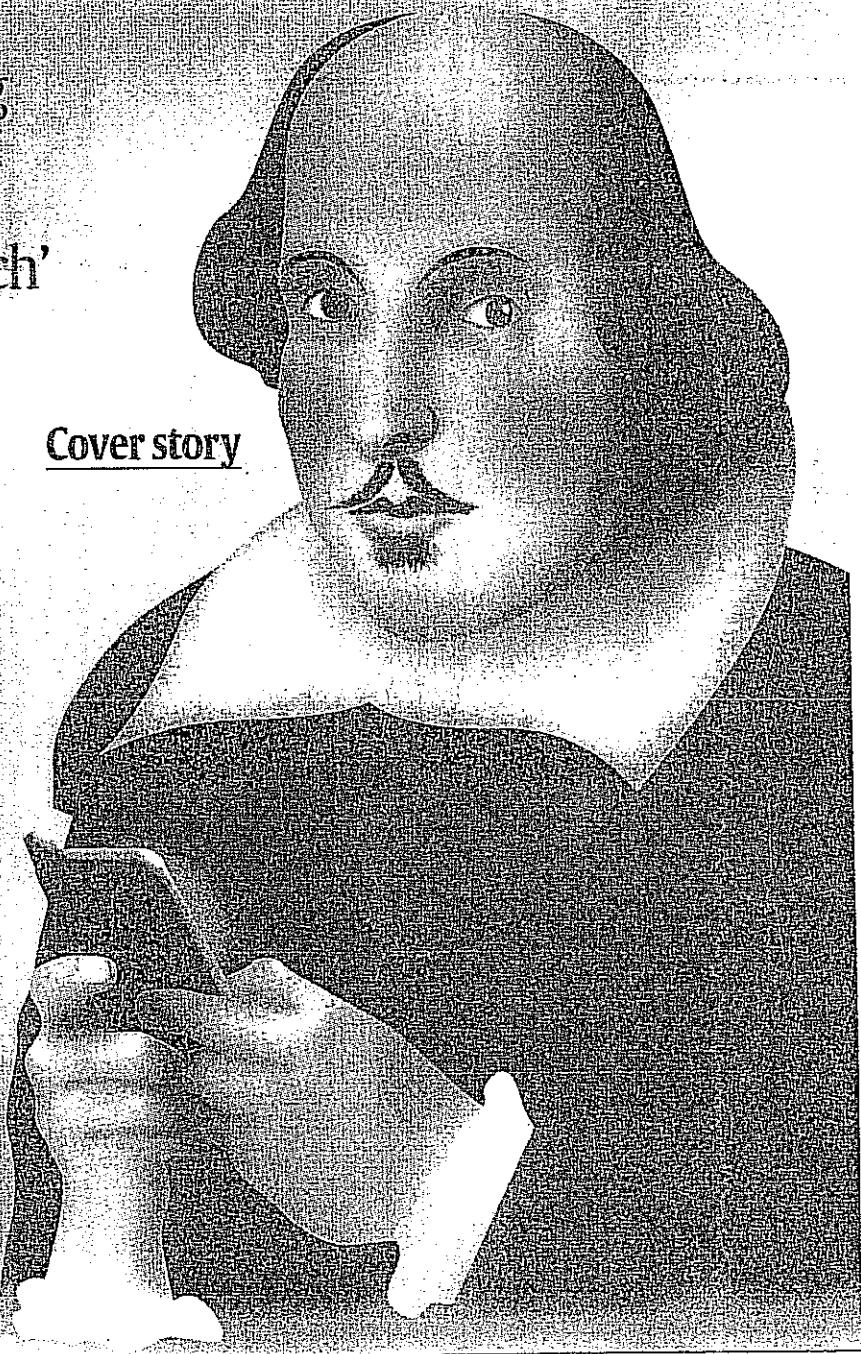


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Alejandro Gonzalez,
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Posts over time

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they didn't know. They encourage people to write more (that can't be bad) and write well and concisely (which is hard, trust us). They are a new form of entertainment (and marketing) that can occupy people for hours in any given day.

"Great blogging is great writing, and it turns out great Twittering is great writing — it's the haiku form of blogging," says Debbie Weil, a consultant on social media and author of *The Corporate Blogging Book*.

But the art of the status update is not much of an art form for millions of people on Facebook, where users can post details of what they're doing for all their friends to see, or on Twitter, where people post tweets about what they're doing that potentially every user can see.

Mundane to clever

Funny, clever and sassy updates and tweets stand out because they are the exception. Boring, vapid or just TMI — too much information — updates often dominate in cyberspace.

Sheri Peterson, 47, a social worker in Santa Rosa, Calif., is new to Facebook and sometimes can't believe the humdrum nature of what she's reading.

"Some friends — college-educated adults — consistently give lousy updates, such as *Got up; went to store; came home; watched TV*," she says. "Nothing about what kind of store or even what they bought. Was it specialty cheese or incontinence supplies? Nothing about what show they're watching, which could create conversation: *'You like watching Galloping Gourmet reruns? So do I!'*"

Although most of these social-media sites have been around now for at least a few years, it appears many users haven't quite grasped the idea. For some reason, they think their friends and family, plus total strangers, care that they're, say, *Thinking big thoughts*. Yet they don't actually explain those big thoughts and, in the case of Twitter, do it effectively in just 140 characters or less.

"No one cares if you're *On the way to the airport, Checking bags*



Cover story

or *Arrived in Kansas*," says Avery Roth, 23, a public relations coordinator in Dallas. "People who update their status hourly need to cool it. It's also a little vain."

The most inane updates, says Karyn Cronin, 32, an administrative assistant in St. Paul, say things like *Just got back from the grocery store with all the kids, and boy are we exhausted*. "That's just lame," says Cronin, who tries to make her friends laugh by using famous movie lines for her status updates: *Karyn can't handle the truth, or Karyn feels a disturbance in the Force*.

Slowly, style and etiquette rules for status updates are evolving, as people get more practice and as skillful updaters become more recognized. There's already a Facebook app called Status King, which allows users to nominate and vote on funny and clever status updates, and buy a T-shirt emblazoned with a favorite. (A recent example: *Suzanne is thinking: Change is inevitable ... except from a vending machine*.)

Jeffrey Harmon, 26, of Provo, Utah, and his siblings launched Status King in January and already thousands of updates are posted. (Sample favorite: *Jared is wondering where he's going and why he's in a hand basket*.)

"People spend hours and hours thinking up status updates to win a free T-shirt," Harmon says. He says status updates can be useful for telling friends and family where you are — *Jeff is at Disneyland* — without having to make dozens of phone calls. But because so many people have Twitter and Facebook accounts,

can paint a picture of a person

You, too, can be the type others want to follow

How do you make your status updates or tweets more readable? Some updaters and Twitterers suggest some dos and don'ts.

DO

Alison Bailin Batz
Phoenix

- ▶ **Say what you mean:** "Often Twitterers tend to think other people can read minds. I'm all for being funny, cute, perky and zany, but you gotta get your point across."
- ▶ **Give them a hook — a tip, a laugh, a link:** "On Cinco de Mayo, Sprinkles Cupcakes put out a tweet that said the first person (in the stores) to say *hola!* instead of hi would get a free chocolate cupcake. Brilliant."

Sheri Peterson,
Santa Rosa,
Calif.

- ▶ **Make unusual confessions:** "I harbor secret fears that the Ghost Whisperer has some basis in fact."
- ▶ **Be thought-provoking:** "If Jesus friended you, would you friend him?"

Tom Cipullo,
West Palm
Beach, Fla.

- ▶ **Include interesting detail:** "Post watching White House, which might be interesting, or watching Obama in White House from crawlspace in ceiling, which would be REALLY interesting."

Stephen Stewart,
Sugar
Land, Texas

- ▶ **Use complete sentences with the best possible grammar:** "If you constantly confuse 'your' for 'you are,' then invest in an eighth-grade English textbook before posting updates."
- ▶ **Post optimistic messages:** "... and good tips on food, sales, books, movies."

DON'T

- ▶ **Tweet like some celebs:** Reality star "Khloe Kardashian just tweeted that she threw out a pitch at a baseball game; didn't say what game, what team she cheered for, no tweetpic. Yet she has nearly 130,000 followers."
- ▶ **Post "anything you don't want Grandma to see"**

- ▶ **Just give the Bible verse of the day:** "Those who have nothing else to say in their updates are guaranteed a low response rate from anyone other than other Bible-verse updaters."

- ▶ **Speak in code:** "Don't leave people out of the loop by posting, *now that's what I'm talking about* without letting us know what the hell you're talking about."
- ▶ **Use micro blog slang:** "Most people don't understand."

- ▶ **Share too many details:** "Such as you are tired or constipated or angry at someone you can't even name."
- ▶ **Rant:** Skip the "profanity that would make Christian Bale blush."

Illustrations by Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

information overload can build up and spill over to recipients who don't know Jeff or care that he is at Disneyland.

"The Internet is going through a maturing stage right now," Harmon says. "The only things you should post on Facebook are the things you'd tell your friends in real life. But a lot of people treat it as a personal journal, and they vent. They don't realize they are sharing with all my friends."

When Stephen Stewart, 48, an energy company executive in Sugar Land, Texas, joined Facebook a few months ago, he was shocked when some friends shared private matters in updates.

"One was griping about her bosses — I had to shoot her a private message: 'What are you doing? Delete that comment,'" he says.

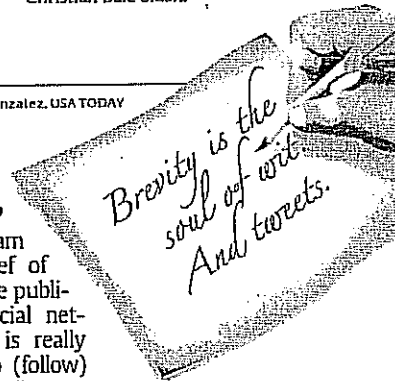
Making a connection

So what makes a good status update? "Personality," says Adam Ostrow, editor in chief of Mashable.com, an online publication that covers social networking. "Personality is really what drives people to (follow) you, especially on Twitter."

How to improve your updates? "Follow others who are funny, clear and concise and mimic them, or Twitter a bunch and figure out what people respond to," says Sarah Milstein, co-author of *The Twitter Book*.

Think before you tweet, Ostrow advises. "If this (tweet) were the last thing you ever published, would it be something to be proud of?"

Here's an example of how to improve an update, courtesy of



Alison Bailin Batz, 28, a public relations executive in Phoenix and Twitter aficionado: A friend tweets that she just ate some tasty frozen yogurt — and that's it. Why such a useless post? Turns out she was excited because her local frozen yogurt shop was giving away free scoops that day.

"THAT is what (she) should have posted — information that I can use, in this case, free food," Batz says. "We're in the 'wheel!

stage of social networking. The trend for 2010 is that everyone is going to cut back, filter, decide whether we really need to follow 1,000 people if they're not interesting. Next year, only the best tweeters survive."

Of course, there is disagreement about what's the best. Milstein argues that even the most banal updates serve a purpose.

"An individual post may not be interesting, but over the course of weeks you build a meaningful picture of somebody, you get a sense of the rhythms of someone's life," she says. Still, "people have to choose to read your updates (on Twitter), and if you're boring, they won't follow you. It's a medium that rewards interestingness."

Interestingness must be in short supply. Anne Trubek, a writer and associate professor of composition and rhetoric at Oberlin College who is studying status updates as a developing 21st-century literary form, sorted them into four categories for her column in the online magazine GOOD: The prosaic (*fill is baking bread*); the informative (*Jack loves this article from GOOD, followed by the link*); the clever and funny (*Johnny thinks Obama should be sworn in a few more times, just to be EXTRA safe*); and the poetic or nonsensical (*If Jim were a cloud, he would rain Earl Grey tea*).

Trubek likes them all, especially for the brevity that forces people to think and write in new ways.

"In the past 10 years, with e-mail and now Facebook and IM-ing and texting and Twitter, people feel more connected to writing as a form of expression, and that is wonderful and refreshing," she says.

Indeed, Niedzwiecki says, maybe it's just elitism to expect soaring poetry in a status update, when most ordinary people are just looking for a connection they can relate to.

"Most people are not going to have the time or opportunity to find clever links and have interesting things to say 24 hours a day — that's what the celebrities and gurus we follow do, it's their 24-hour job to be entertaining," he says. "For the rest of us, it's, *hey, I just ordered takeout*."

"And that's fine. There's a charm to that."