

TELLING THE RIGHT STORY TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE AT THE RIGHT TIME

MODULE ONE

STARTING TO DEVELOP YOUR OUTREACH GOALS AND UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE WITH THE AUDIENCE FIRST METHOD

The first (and most essential) goal of our training is to develop a clear series of goals for your outreach activities. As part of this, it is critical to accurately identify and understand the audience that you are targeting with your outreach. So, that's where we'll start using a method we have developed that we call Audience First. Goal setting for outreach is something that takes time to fully work out, so this is something that we'll be coming back to quite a bit as this training continues.

Outline:

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4. [Listening to Your Audience](#)
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Part One: Defining your audience

Here's the truth. There is only one way to succeed in connecting with audiences of any kind: to put your audience first. What does audience first mean? It means that you have clearly defined the audience that you want to engage. It means that the center of your message is not your own story – the focus is on the concerns and interests of your audience. If you know exactly who you are talking to and center your story on the things that they care about – well, you'll have something that will make your audience sit up and pay attention.

For a good example of how this can work, [consider this blog post](#) by Andrew David Thaler (AKA Southern Fried Science), a deep sea biologist and adept science communicator.

Think of it this way. A paper in Ecological Monographs (pick your own specialist journal) is structured very differently than a paper in Science. Why is that? Well, the audiences for those journals are not the same and what those audiences care about is not the same.

A very common mistake is defining your audience too broadly or too narrowly. On the too big side, I very frequently find scientists setting their audience as “people who watch science-related YouTube videos” or “readers of the New York Times”. What do New York Times readers actually have in common? Well, I guess they like to read. And I suppose they enjoy breathing. It’s going to be hard to hang your hat on things like this.

On the other side, I commonly hear scientists say that they want to develop an outreach program to connect with a tiny handful of people – sometimes even one person. If that’s your situation, the kind of outreach program discussed here is probably not the right way to go. Instead, just connect with those people directly.

A specific-enough audience is generally alike in interests and concerns (alike in knowledge is a bonus) when it comes to the issue that a scientist wants to raise. Here are three real examples of scientists who have found nicely focused audiences for their outreach.

- A marine biologist whose research focuses on food webs of the US Pacific coast and who targets his outreach on people who fish the central coast of California.
- A set of ecologists who write very short science stories for parents with young children (and who desire to read stories about science to their kids at bedtime).
- A fisheries biologist who corrects widespread misconceptions about the dangers of sharks, by focusing on those who are watching Shark Week television programming (a popular yearly event on the Discovery television channel that features angry, angry sharks with sharp, sharp teeth).

There are many different audiences you could select. Picking one and getting started will help you hone your message (and learn whether you succeeded in reaching them). Your audience will also naturally evolve as you gain experience. For example, you may start with the aim of engaging local adults with your research, but find that you are more interested in engaging state-level policymakers on science-related issues.

To identify your audience, try this approach:

1. What are the overall aims you hope to achieve with your outreach? There are no wrong answers! Even if you are new to this whole thing and don’t have a specific aim in mind, you can still formulate some general goals based on what you find initially interesting. And you can always change your aims. Here are some potential aims to get you thinking.
 - a. I want to influence policy associated with my line of research or field.

- b. I want to influence public opinion on issues associated with my research or field.
 - c. I want to increase the public visibility of my research or field.
 - d. My research doesn't use the creative part of my brain enough and I want to podcast/blog/other to exercise my creative side.
 - e. I find my research or field extremely interesting and I think the wider world would share my passion if they knew more about my research or field.
 - f. I want to transition out of a research career into some other career and I think that building a communications portfolio will assist in that transition.
 - g. I want people in my field to pay more attention to my research.
 - h. I want to entice graduate students to join my lab.
 - i. I want visitors to my website to spend more time looking through it.
 - j. I would engage a set of people who would be willing to contribute funding to my research program on a regular basis.
2. Once you have at least one aim in mind, think of what sort of audience would be most appropriate to achieving it. For example, let's say that your top priority is option A from above (influence policy). For any given policy, there will be multiple relevant groups, such as: policymakers (at potentially local, regional, national, and international levels), various stakeholder groups, and consumers associated with a policy. Just as with general aims, there is no one right audience—just the audience that you would like to communicate with now. Here are some good guide rules:
- a. The more you can visualize your audience – the more you can see individual people (even if they are people you have made up) – the better chance you'll have in speaking to them.
 - b. Start with what you know. It is much easier to have a sense of an audience with which you have at least a little personal experience.
 - c. One key consideration comes up for those who are interested in drawing funding from those that they are engaging with their outreach efforts. Namely, the target audience for engagement may have very limited capability to actually provide funding, even if they are highly committed to your outreach program.

Let's say your target audience is composed of at-risk teens. This group would have almost zero capacity to fund your research program under any circumstances. In these kind of cases, it is essential to identify and regularly engage two audiences. The first audience is your original target group. The second audience is a different set of people that could be interested in your engagement efforts, but have greater funding potential. This second audience could be engaged perhaps because of a connection to the subject matter or perhaps to the first audience.

Part Two: Finding Your Audience

Once you have begun to define your audience, it is essential to understand what that audience cares about. After all, that's where your message needs to focus. But how to gain insight into your audience?

You have a few options here. Perhaps you know where to find people in your target audience that you can directly ask. Or, maybe you can find media written by or designed for your target audience. Or you have a way of connecting to them on social media.

The best choice will depend on the communication habits of your intended audience. Are they digital natives, who share every thought on twitter? Or are they public policymakers who may tend to be more guarded? We'll go into more detail below, but whatever approach you choose, you'll want to keep some notes. The process is a little like tracking down the most relevant scientific literature. Find a relevant paper; see who they reference; see who references them; see what other search terms or concepts come up; put the best papers in your reference manager.

First, you have to find them. Let's take one of the three sample audiences we discussed above as an example. We want to find out what **people who fish the central coast of California** are thinking.

Web and Traditional Media: Here's an example of how our food web biologist might get started with california fishermen. A quick Google search on "California Fishing" brings us to: the [California Fishing Blog](#), [Fish Sniffer](#), and the [Fishing Network](#). You have to cull through a lot of "big fish" pictures and ads for charters and guides, but there's real information there about the concerns of your audience.

If you live where they still have brick and mortar bookstores and newsstands, visit one and browse the fishing magazines. Better yet, visit a fishing store and look at the magazines there.

Gear is clearly a big interest for fishers. For extra credit -- think about how might you be able to capitalize on that interest in your outreach.



Social Media: Twitter can be a powerful way to understand your audience. There are hundreds of millions of active users, meaning that whatever audience you want to engage, they are likely to be on Twitter. And twitter users tend to engage more publicly than facebook users, so you don't need to actually "friend" them.

Don't speak twitter? [Appendix A](#) is your handy guide to getting started with twitter.

A search of twitter for "california fish" brings us to the account of the [California Wetfish Producers Association](#) with 502 followers and 793 tweets, and the [California Fishing Journal](#) with 10K followers and 21K tweets.

Start with the list of accounts that follow the California Wetfish Producers Association (reached by clicking on the number of "followers" at the top of the account page). Scroll down a bit and you'll see the [Ventura County Commercial Fishermen's Association](#). If you're interested in learning what commercial fishers care about, these would both be good accounts to scan or follow.

At this writing, [VCCFA is buzzing](#) about a proposed California regulation (SB1114) which would limit the use of drift gillnets. Notice the hashtag #SB1114. Twitter can search on any word, but hashtags usually indicate a topic that that community finds important and worth searching. Enter #SB1114 into the searchbox at the top of the Twitter app and you'll get an earful of what interests this community. Some of the accounts engaged in this debate, like [Eat US Seafood](#), also provide insight into our audience. These accounts could go onto our list (described in the [next section](#)).

If your audience were parents looking for children’s science stories, you might search instead for #homeschool or #kidscience. If you want sharkweek aficionados, try #sharkweek (duh) or #sharkattack.

Another way to explore the community is to look for accounts that retweet the most relevant content. At the bottom left of each tweet, you can see how many retweets and how many likes it has. For example, [a post from KeepAmericaFishing](#) was also retweeted by (at this point) 5 accounts. A list of tiny icons near the bottom (see images below) tells you who retweeted. Hover over those icons to see more information about those accounts. Click to go directly to that account.



In-person: Web and social media searches are easy to do in spare bits of time and great for identifying key individuals and organizations, but once you are able to identify specific individuals, almost nothing beats striking up a conversation. Looking for fishers? Head to the docks or the gear stores. Parents of young kids? Visit libraries and talk to librarians. Shark week aficionados? Tough one; maybe Sharknado viewings?

How to get started? There’s no great mystery. Be upfront about your interest. Say you want to learn more about what their interests and concerns are. Ask where they learn what’s happening in the fishing (or whatever) community. Start with general non-threatening questions and follow-up on topics that they bring up. Try not to ask open-ended questions. (“What do you think about X?” Rather than: “Do you agree with Y?”).

For introverts, striking up a conversation with a stranger can be a big challenge, but it will be easier if you keep a few things in mind.

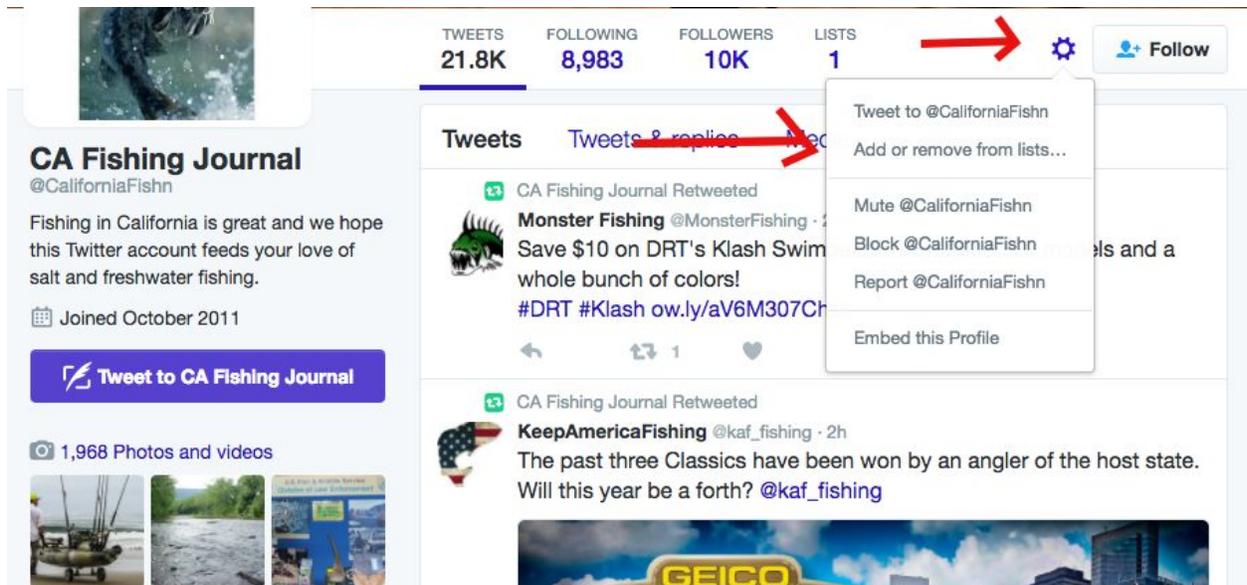
1. At this stage, you're not trying to tell them anything. You're asking about them and their interests. You're trying to find out what they know and where they get their information. The lure of a person who is genuinely interested in you is almost irresistible.
2. Your goal is ultimately to talk with these people. Spoken conversation is about the most efficient kind of communication. Would you rather endure a little social anxiety now or invest months in producing a video or a brochure that doesn't reach the audience you intend?

Part Three: Keeping track of your audience on Twitter

One of the most effective ways of keeping track of your audience on Twitter is a little-known Twitter tool called a "list." A list allows you to find and group twitter users together, so that you can read the stream of tweets from that group of users. For example, you may create a list called "California fishers" that contains users that self identify as being interested in fishing. You don't need to follow a particular user (Twitter's term for being the recipient of all tweets from that user) in order to add him/her to a list.

For purposes of illustration, let's continue with our audience of California fishers. So that you can visualize what a list looks like in practice, I created an list for our fishing audience, which [you can find here](#). I added a few accounts to the list who seemed to provide insight into this group.

How do you add accounts to a list? If you find an account that you find interesting, click the gear icon to the right of the page for that account (top red arrow in image below). In the box that drops down, click "Add or remove from lists" (bottom red arrow). You'll have the option to add this account to an existing list or a new list in the screen that follows.



IMPORTANT: you'll probably want to make your list private (one of the options given). With a private list, people are not notified that they are being added to your list. With public lists, they are notified. Since we are in listening mode at the moment, it's probably best to keep a low profile with these lists.

Many Twitter accounts are promotional in nature. These accounts will provide little insight to you. You'll want to find organizations or people on Twitter that are primarily talking about the issues or their lives, not hawking products or services.

One problem that you may have is that you can't find your audience on Twitter. This can offer a valuable insight. It may be that your audience isn't properly defined. If you have defined your audience too widely (people of earth), it will be impossible to find a cohesive set of accounts to represent that audience. Or perhaps your audience contains subsets that don't really belong together (heavy metal drummers and woodworkers), making it difficult again to find a cohesive set of accounts. The bottom line here is trouble with finding your audience can actually help you better define your audience.

Part Four: Listening to your audience

Now that you have put your audience together, the next step is to listen to what they have to say. Read through the tweets of your audience to get a sense of the issues that they are tweeting about right now. Your goal is to develop a sense of your audience's current frame of mind. ***Pay particularly close attention to anything that surprises***

you about your audience. Developing this intuitive sense of your audience is a gradual process and definitely not something that will happen overnight.

The key is to keep checking in with your audience on a regular basis. These regular check-ins can serve another purpose for you. The issues your audience tweets about (and therefore cares about) may change and checking in regularly will give you (hopefully) a feel for that change.

Lastly, start thinking of how you might connect your science message to the current concerns of your audience. We'll be coming back to this topic in much more focused way in the coming weeks of this training, so for now have this question of message connection as a secondary concern.

Part Five: Assignments and the “Audience First” worksheet

Great – you have done some thinking about your audience. Now what? The next step is to follow the Audience First worksheet (after assignments section of this document), which will help clarify your thinking through a series of questions. The questions here are not as simple as they seem, so it may take you some time to come up with answers. Also, your initial answers are certain to change over time, perhaps radically. So, we'll be circling back around to this worksheet as the training continues. The key idea here as you fill out this worksheet is to be specific in your answers.

To give you an example of what this looks like, here's a [worked example of the worksheet](#). This worksheet centers on defining and understanding the audience for a podcast that one of us (Jai) is working on. Here's the [first episode of that podcast](#), to give you a sense of how this worksheet led to an outreach product.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Learn how to use the Google+ community page for the class (do by early in module). See Jai's [video introduction](#) if you're not familiar with Google+.
2. If you are not on Twitter, please join (early in module).
3. Start looking for your audience on Twitter and create a list containing at least five accounts (early to mid-module). Check in with your list from time to time (continuous).
4. If you find any accounts that you think may be of interest to the rest of the class, please share them on the Google+ community.
5. Fill out the Audience First worksheet (mid-module). Upload that worksheet to the Google+ community for the class (use the Module One Discussion category). There are two ways to do this. If you have created your worksheet in Google

Docs, you can directly share that document to the community. Alternatively, you can take a screenshot of your worksheet and upload that as an image.

6. Provide feedback to the worksheets of at least three other people in the class, using the comment feature of Google+ (mid to late module). Try to provide comments to worksheets that don't already have many or any comments. When commenting, keep the following questions in mind: a) do the audience and audience concerns seem adequately defined? b) does the call to action seem to make sense given the audience? c) does the connection between the audience and the call to action seem realistic? d) does the one-point message adequately crystallize that connection? e) can you suggest any Twitter accounts they should follow or other locations or sources of information about their audience.
7. Participate in a group discussion on Google Hangouts (late module).

Assignment: Audience First Worksheet

What is your topic?

Who is your audience?

What does your audience care about, with regard to your topic?

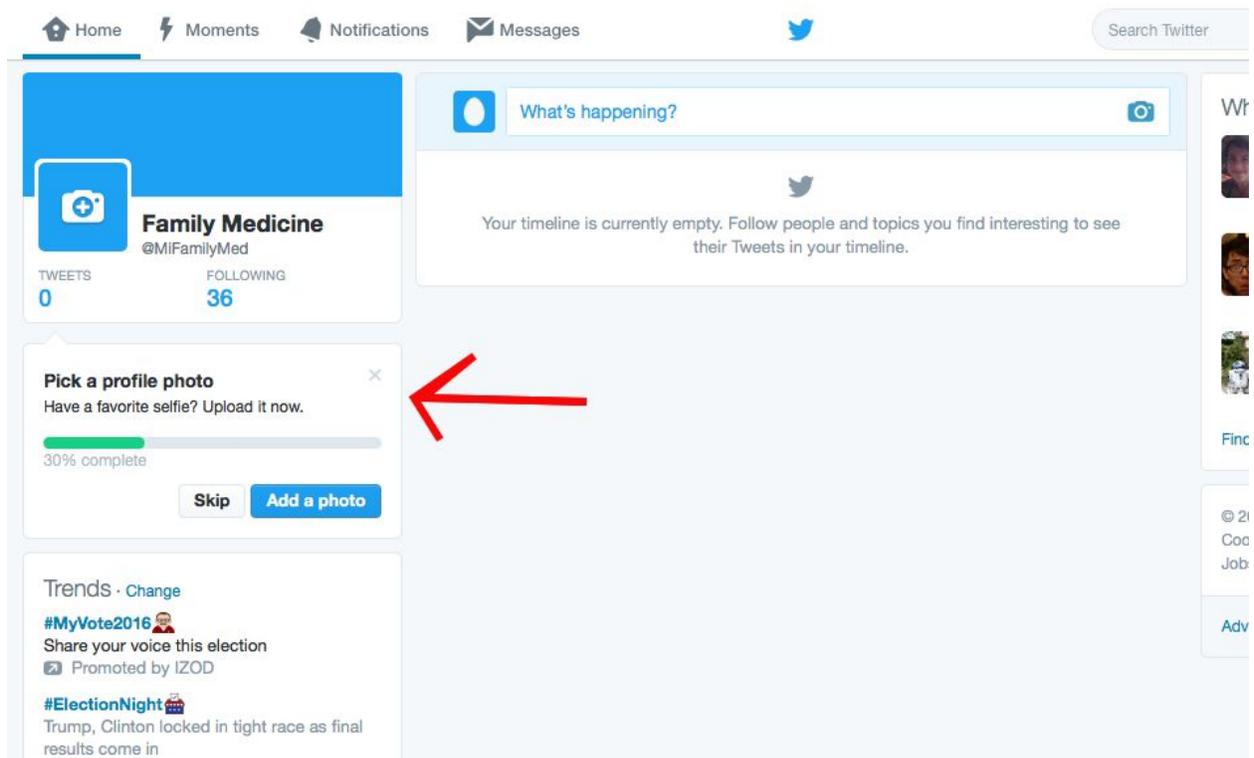
What do you want your audience to do?

What is the connection between your answers to the previous two questions?

What is the one-point message that crystallizes that connection?

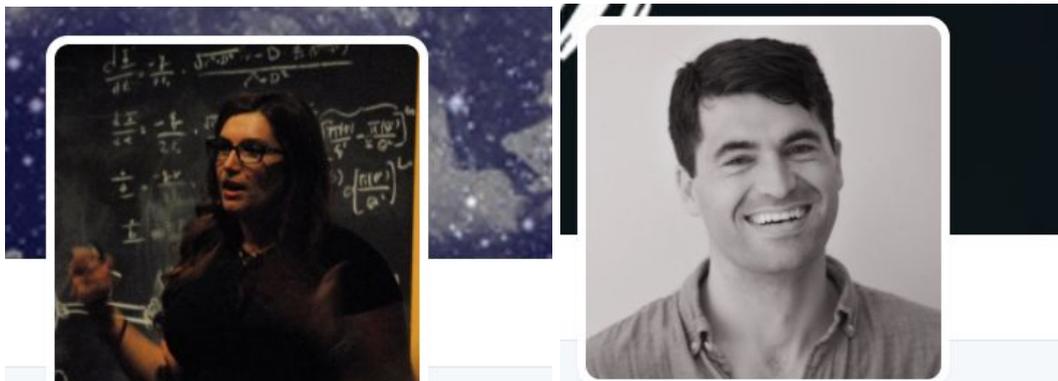
Appendix A: Getting started with Twitter

1. Go to twitter.com and hit the sign up button in the upper right.
2. As you sign up, Twitter will ask for your name and username. If you would like to remain anonymous on Twitter (which is fine for the purposes of this exercise, but not if you wish to establish a Twitter presence), feel free to use whatever you want. If you would like to establish a presence, you should use your actual name and create a username that is some variant of your name or role. You can change almost any aspect of your Twitter presence, except for one thing: your username (that is, your Twitter handle). So, please be sure that you are satisfied with your username before you register it.
3. The following several screens will ask you to provide your interests, to import your contacts, and to “make your timeline yours”. Feel free to skip this sections, as they don’t matter one way or another to how we’ll be using Twitter. A final screen will ask you to send your first tweet. You can skip this for now.
4. Once you are done with this, you should see a screen that looks something like this:



In the upper left, you will notice that Twitter is asking you for a photo. If you want to stay anonymous, you can skip it. Otherwise, any headshot that you happen to have will work just fine.

Twitter will ask several more questions, that you don't need to answer. You can also skip sending your first tweet. The one important thing is the introduction to you. Several examples below show a variety of approaches.



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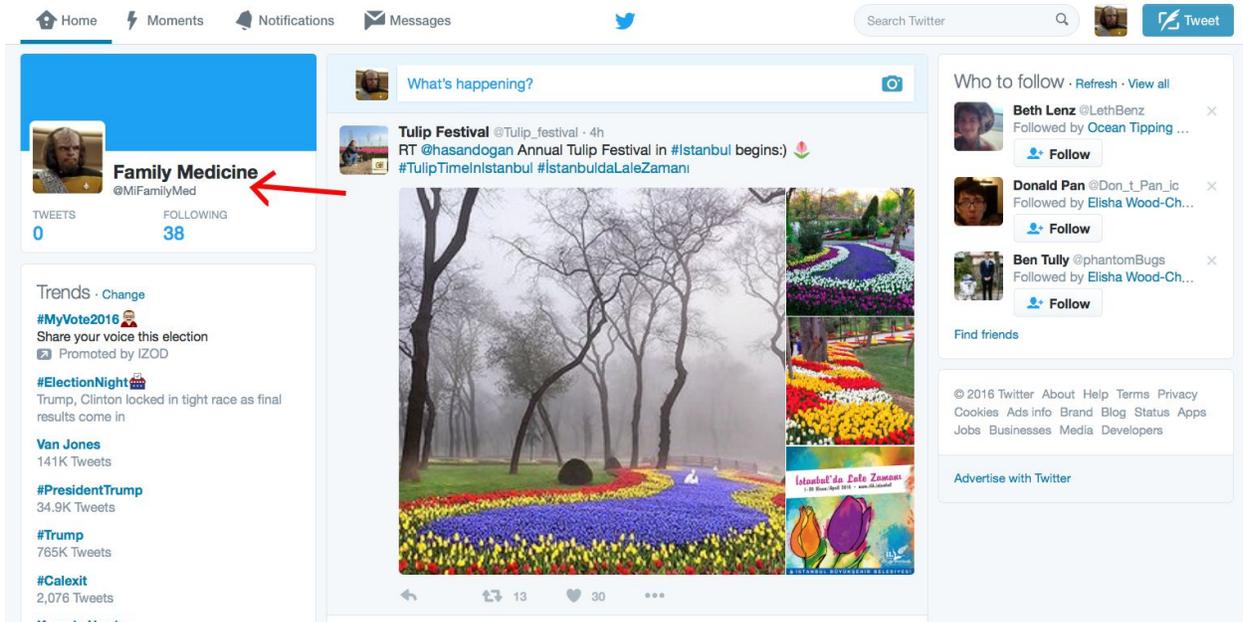
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📅 Joined March 2009

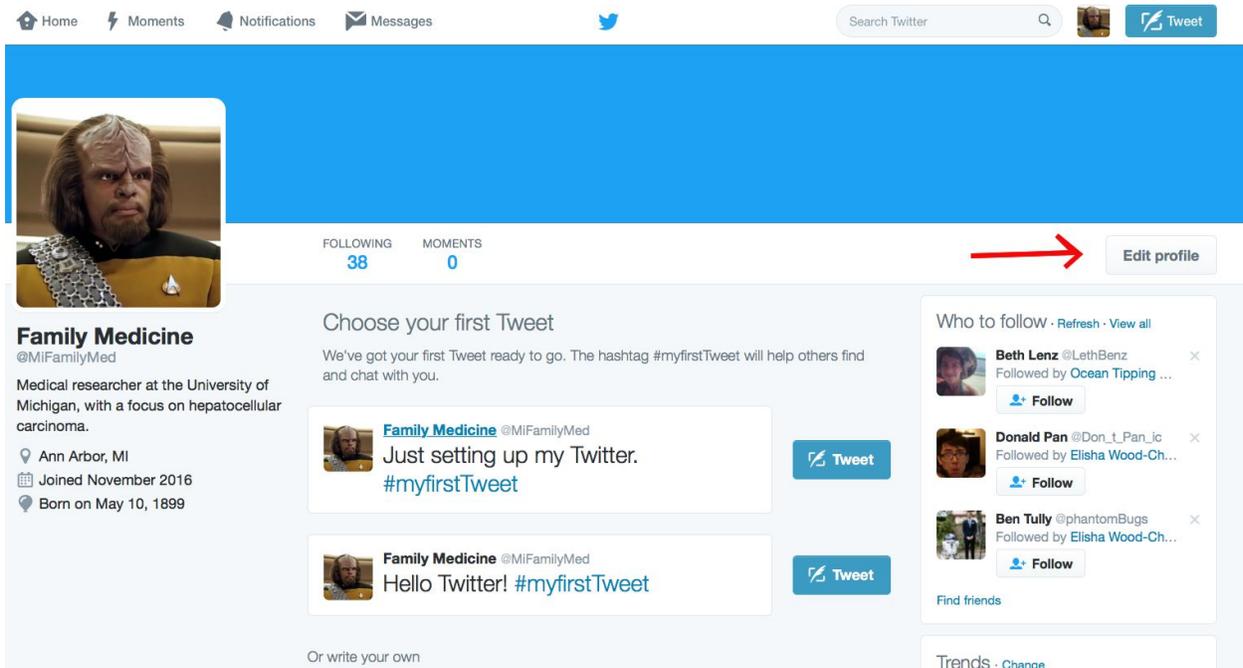


What are those @ signs and hashtags? Specific twitter accounts (or handles) are preceded by the @ sign. Hashtags indicate words or combinations of words that someone might want to search in Twitter.

Let's say you want to change any information in your profile, how do you do that? The good news is that everything can be modified. You just click on either your name or twitter handle, as shown below.



The resulting screen looks like this. You will notice an Edit profile button to the right.



The following screen (see below) will allow you to change anything about your profile (other than your username).



FOLLOWING 38 MOMENTS 0

Cancel Save changes

Family Medicine

@MIFamilyMed

Medical researcher at the University of Michigan, with a focus on hepatocellular carcinoma.

Ann Arbor, MI

Website

Theme color

May 10, 1899

Choose your first Tweet

We've got your first Tweet ready to go. The hashtag #myfirstTweet will help others find and chat with you.

 Family Medicine @MIFamilyMed
Just setting up my Twitter.
#myfirstTweet [Tweet](#)

 Family Medicine @MIFamilyMed
Hello Twitter! #myfirstTweet [Tweet](#)

Who to follow · Refresh · View all

-  Beth Lenz @LeihBenz
Followed by Ocean Tipping ...
[Follow](#)
-  Donald Pan @Don_t_Pan_ic
Followed by Elisha Wood-Ch...
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