Sass in 140 Characters: Learning to Communicate on the Social Network

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A clear fissure divides two genres of writing we do in a day: the lengthy and artistic essays we write for school and the stuff we toss up on Facebook. This article explores how we first learn to communicate on the social network and the way we can improve our Facebook and Twitter prose. While we may only be able to express our ideas on Twitter in a few words, it is possible and potentially beneficial to rethink the boundaries that separate the "short" genres of web writing and the "long" genres of academic writing.

On a recent trip in downtown Chicago, right after two girls passed me by in Union Station gawking at the size of my feet, I had one of those strange sinking-heart moments when I could not find my cell phone. I knew right where it was: back at home on my desk. "Oh man," I thought. "Now I can't post this story on Facebook."

Normally, when something interesting happens, I am well prepared to inform the world of the event: "Two girls just laughed at my size 17 shoes. Soon we clown-folk will have our day!" This time, though, I was naked. My friends would have to wait to receive such pressing news. The beauty of technology is how it allows for the constant journaling of everything that happens in a day. If I have a quick message to relay to an individual or snarky thoughts to broadcast to all, I do so over Facebook and Twitter. Especially since I am in college, separated from old friends and close family, relying on the genres of different social networks to communicate my thoughts and daily encounters is more relevant than ever.

Imagine writing across every genre broken down into two overly simplified categories: short and long. Long writing is that which takes a significant amount of time to complete. Many students are familiar with these genres.

Research papers, general essay assignments, and the like provide a medium for a central idea, or thesis, to be explained and supported with fat paragraphs. Short writing, including genres that communicate an idea in as few words as possible, is a far less time consuming endeavor, and may offer a thesis with no support. In my academic life, short writing has been subordinated to long, which has left a gap in my learning. Teachers impose minimum word and page limits to assignments with the hope of encouraging students to beef up their arguments. Though lengthy compositions packed with depth and detail are important, online genres demand brevity. For example, Twitter limits each tweet to 140 characters. Other online genres that do not have imposed limits are also typically short so that busy people are more inclined to read them. But because academia does not directly teach this kind of short writing, it is a self-taught genre and has evolved into a genre of great speed and little accuracy.

For an old school lesson in grammar, refer to Chapter 3, Section 2, Subchapter 1, of your 2010 MLA Handbook. Fine. Don't. The gist of it is that punctuation, formally speaking, is for the sake of clarity (Modern Language Association 66). More so than other grammatical devices, punctuation plays a major role in what we express. One mere symbol can change the inflection of an entire clause. It's easy stuff. I'm not going to write a letter to my mother and sign it, "I love you?" And equally so, I am not going to approach a grieving widow and bark, "I'm so sorry for your loss!" More enjoyable yet is the old school comma lesson of, "Let's eat, Grandpa," versus the grotesque alternative, "Let's eat Grandpa."

Now refer to your choice of social networking website. This one I know you'll do. Flick through a few of your friends' posts and updates and read what they are writing. I am sure you will find that nearly everything written in the social network is, according to the 2010 MLA Handbook, unintelligible trash because it conflicts with grammar rules. Heck, imagine the letter grade even the most liberal of English professors would give to our quick, online prose. As marvelous as it would be to claim the Internet as a breeding ground for quality literature, most of what our friends pen is not terribly great. One of my close friends, Tim, is at present a biomedical engineering major at Purdue University. He's smart, and like many of us, guilty of neglecting grammar rules. Figure 1 below shows one of his status updates:
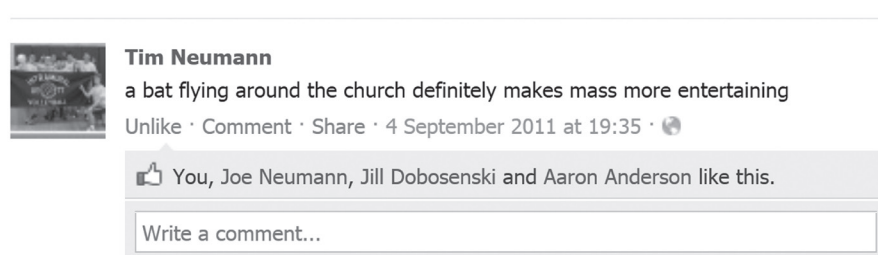

Figure 1: Neumann's Bat Status Update

Note the absence of consideration for proper punctuation by MLA standards. His sentence is well structured but lacks capitalization and punctuation, perhaps to save time. And yet we understand exactly what Tim is saying.

Since webspeak is not covered in school and most people do not look into it on their own, we learn this language by reading and writing online. When I joined Facebook and Twitter, nobody explained, "Capitalize nothing. Exclamation points and question marks are in, as well as the occasional ellipses, but periods are out." There was never a lesson in school called, "Hw 2 rite good online." So both Tim and I learned how to write within the genre conventions of social media by reading our friends' posts and mimicking their writing.

As part of my own research into this genre, I turned to see what my good friend Sam was writing. Sam is currently an English major at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah; although when I first started utilizing her status updates and posts as examples, she was just a run-of-the-mill Facebook queen. With well over 1,000 online friends, she owns the web. Her power is in how many people "like," or show approval of, what she writes. Figure 2 shows what she wrote on December 18, 2010, earning 64 "likes":
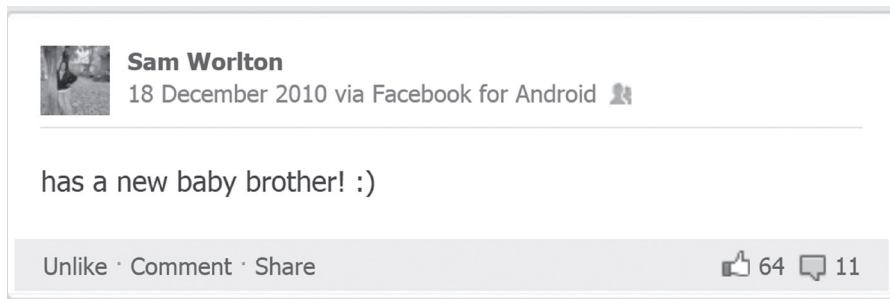

Figure 2: Worlton Baby Status Update

Then, on February 24, 2011, she wrote, as pictured in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Worlton College Status Update

This status update once more earned large positive feedback with 53 "likes." Sam credits her success as a rhetor in the genre to a clear-cut method: "When writing a status, brevity, reliability and humor are very important for me. I think that's why lots of people 'like' my statuses. And I only post them once in a while when I find something that is universally understood and experienced" (Worlton, Personal Interview). While Sam's statuses may not actually be universally understood—a small child, for instance, would not be able to grasp the way she shows her enthusiasm at getting accepted to college—she takes her audience into close consideration when she writes. Her awareness of the fact that she is writing to other people who also use these genre conventions explains why so many of her friends enjoy reading her status updates. Sam has a following like the 9 o'clock news: people, including me, tune in each day to see what's happening in her world. Thus, in the absence of structured training in short writing, turning to Sam helped me understand these genre conventions.

It would be great to say that copying Tim's (lack of) punctuation or Sam's Facebooking formula could catapult you into the stratosphere of web stardom, but I can attest that literary expression is never quite that simple. As it turns out, how we express ourselves on social networks, although quick and to-the-point, requires a great deal of thought. Since Twitter has a 140 characters maximum and Facebook status updates have an unstated convention of brevity, I found that my writing tightened up immensely when I began using these genres. For example, when I tell a story through a tweet on Twitter, my greatest concern as an author is establishing a clear narrative in as few words as possible. In a recent tweet, shown in Figure 4, I wrote:
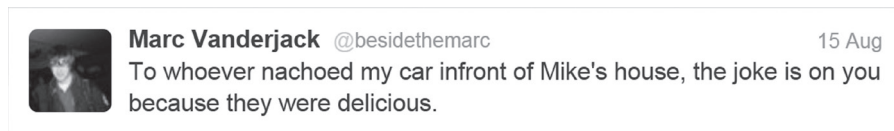
Marc Vanderjack @besidethemarc   15 Aug
To whoever nachoed my car infront of Mike's house, the joke is on you because they were delicious.

Figure 4: Vanderjack's Nacho Tweet

In this 124 character tweet, I intentionally excluded several details for the sake of conforming to the brevity conventions of the social network. If I had wished to tell my story in, say, a longer form, such as a Facebook note, I could have included a deeper description of the incident (like the struggles associated with driving when all you can see is tortilla chips and how gross nachos become when they freeze). In a Twitter tweet, a status update on Facebook, or any work of short writing, the author's challenge is deciding what to include and what to leave out in order to best achieve a rhetorical purpose.

This argument is not an extremist cry for short form writing to be brought into the classroom, but instead begs a pressing question: without academic

support, how can we effectively learn to communicate better online with an artistic sensitivity for our language? Constrained by character limitations and other genre conventions, the printed word of the Internet might have little spark. While creativity, especially with acronyms and abbreviations, is possible, finding a status update that tinkers with mechanics and has fun with syntax and diction is now a rare event. Far too mindful of a looming cap on how much we can say, many, myself often included, avoid the challenge short writing poses and spew out what is minimally required for comprehension and coherence.

When considering short and long forms of writing as genres, learning both requires research. It would be a struggle to write a Facebook status without having read one first, just as it would be difficult to write a powerful eulogy without having heard one before. Short and long writing both require consideration of audience; it would be unwise to post a 3,000 word Facebook status to my friends who are expecting something shorter, which is equally as foolish as submitting an essay to your professor outlining your scandalous Friday night. And the similarities certainly do not end there.

But regardless of the parallels between long and short genres, most people take online short writing less seriously. However, we can certainly transfer what we learn from academia to Facebook and Twitter, and conversely, I can apply what I learn in school to what I write online. For example, my online short writing allows me to develop a unique voice that I can try to transfer into my longer compositions. In addition, short writing challenges me to be more concise and to take time considering my language choices, which can also improve my longer writing.

Of course, there are genre conventions that won't necessarily translate so easily. In Union Station, after the two girls rubbernecked at the sight of my flipper-feet, I had a great awakening moment: distress over not being able to access the sphere of social media evidenced not my deep love for writing, but my concern with broadcasting my thoughts instantly. And that, of course, makes online short writing very different from school writing.

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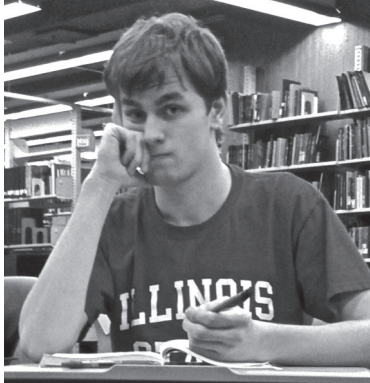
Marc Vanderjack is a 19-year-old sophomore at Illinois State from Downers Grove, Illinois. While he is currently studying to be a high school English teacher, he fears that he must drop out of school in the near future to hunt for Horcruxes with his two closest friends.