



Twitter: a guide for senior local government people

A crowdsourced guide to Twitter for senior people working in and around local government. Brought to you by LGC. Kindly written by Twitter's #localgov community.

What it is

Twitter is much maligned in some quarters, with comments such as: "But I don't want to know what you're eating for lunch thanks very much." Here our contributors explain what Twitter is to them.

A fantastic place to network and collaborate, hear the latest news and views and create relationships with people that you might otherwise have never have come across.

Twitter is democratic - from the newest recruit to CEXs - everyone can share and learn
The latest, breaking news often before anyone but the source.

Recently I've been telling people news that the mainstream media couldn't confirm for nearly an hour - alright it made me feel important, ok!

A chance to get your elevator speech to people who you wouldn't otherwise reach. And to change it, refine it, and experiment with different ways of explaining why what you're doing matters,

Part of the future.

The best new comms tool in years. Great way to develop thoughts, test them out on others and refine them.

Great for signposting to articles by people whose views and opinions you value.

A true two-way communications tool, allowing stakeholders to engage directly with you and your services.

A great way to drive people to your website and vice versa, keeping people updated in an up to the minute way.

A replacement for the "smoking room" (ladies loos? or water cooler? number 51 bus?) .. You choose who you sit next to, say, respond to, hear and converse with. But bear in mind that everyone can overhear what you say.

Allows summing up views and sharing links in 140 characters or less.

Builds relationships quickly and reflects open conversations from and with 'allcomers'.

Quick access to 'influencers' and press.

One of the easiest ways to find out quickly what's going on in the world - from international news to what's going in a locality, and what local people are thinking too.

Twitter is a micro-blogging platform which allows people to share their ideas and thoughts to others who are following them. Unlike Facebook where people follow their friends, on Twitter people follow those who

share similar interests to them. It could be said that you follow the people on twitter who you wish you knew in real-life. Twitter allows a two way conversation between people and twitter chats have been popular too.

Twitter is simply another communications platform available to anyone to talk and share about anything, people do share stories about their daily lunch patterns, but you don't have to follow those people :) More importantly though is the increasing number of #localgov and other public sector folk who are now using it to share learning, experiences, connecting with each other and exchanging knowledge around improving the public sector.

A real time search function into any anything taking place anywhere

A great place to share information, links, and views. A simple and effective signposting network for people in local government to use.

It is non-hierarchical, something which local government needs to learn from, as hierarchies are one of the sector's least attractive features.

A quick and easy way to communicate with people who have said they want to hear what you've got to say.

OK if you want to highlight a quick thought, absolutely fantastic for disseminating links to opinion, news and articles online, totally indispensable if you want to listen to the wires.

In less than 140 characters you can change or inform hundreds if not thousands of people what's happening in the world.

It's good online space where a community of local gov and public sector folk from all levels of the organisation (and people who don't work in the sector but are interested in improving it) are sharing experiences, collaborating on ideas and offering support and motivation to each other.

Benefits

Here our contributors explain what benefits they get from using Twitter and how it helps them in their job

Twitter allows me to listen to opinions I would never come across otherwise. It helps you to keep one eye on the horizon and its takes so little of your time to manage. Each opinion is 140 or fewer characters - not words - long. If you don't feel engaged ignore that entry and move on. If you want to know more have that conversation.

1) instant opinions on breaking news 2) symbolic openness/accessibility from the top 3) new networks. Key is to have in mind equally its strengths but also its limitations/risks. Twitter is a new & important medium. But no more.

I joined Twitter because I thought it was important to be transparent about what I get up to every day – Twitter allows me to do this very informally and quickly. The added benefit for me is that I have started to engage and debate with others on a range of current issues, and I feel much more connected to what is happening on the political front in my Council.

Twitter works best when it's personalised. Few will engage with corporate accounts overseen by cautious marketing & pr departments. (So, just sometimes, share what you're doing for lunch)

Don't be frightened to use it and to add the odd personal/human touch, that's what makes Twitter so engaging. Just use common sense and the normal protocols you would do anyway at work.

I've been picking up news of local community events I would otherwise never have heard of, and can help them raise their profile. In exchange they notice me, and are more likely to come to me for the things I want them to. Win!

1. Primarily to learn quick about what's going on. I find out information faster this way.
2. To get information and ideas to get me thinking. Stuff I pick up on twitter helps me to be better at what I do.
3. I am fascinated by what other chief execs do and find it really interesting to follow their tweets.
4. I started off by making a new Year's resolution to tweet and to make myself do it at least twice a day (weekdays) as I don't think it's really playing the game unless you use it every day. My original thought was to use it to communicate better with people in my organisation, but I wanted to get the hang of it first, so I haven't encouraged people inside the council to follow me yet (though some do and I have some "secret" followers (so my spies tell me!)
5. I used to keep a diary when I was a child, and using twitter in the way I do reminds me of that! I tweet what I do as part of my policy to try to be open and transparent about what I do as chief exec.
6. I think it's important to reveal a little bit about yourself (not too much) and occasionally funny as too much boring info isn't that much fun to read. However I hate "motivational" quotes .
7. I am generally positive, and do use twitter to promote my organisation, but I hope not in too much of a sick-making type of way

Keeps me right up to date with latest developments and enables me to be visible and human.

A superb way to have people whose views you trust, pre-read, comment and recommend relevant news, views and ideas, so you don't have to do all the leg work.

I've found Twitter to be a amazing training course - lots of really generous professionals sharing information and ideas - and you don't even have to leave your desk/sofa/garden

Never, ever, ever, tweet about what you had for breakfast ... Unless it was truly, utterly, exceptional. And even then, only if your followers could experience the same.

Can be used for professional development/support - networking on a very wide platform with people you might not meet or interact with otherwise.

It may be best to separate professional and personal use of social media as it can be confusing for you and readers! I use Twitter at work and Facebook for friends and family for instance.

My knowledge and understanding of the issues around local government has multiplied ten fold through the wealth of information. My network has also built and already these relationships are starting to bear fruit for some of the work I'm doing in my council.

Why do I tweet? It's quick, easy, fun, interesting - a bit like Facebook, but for grown-ups. And I love the little bird icon!

Twitter = input from/to media, govt, citizens,etc, use with blog, reference council/community news - brilliant tool!

Why? - because it's a great way of making what we do relevant to our communities. Ask me another!

the important thing about twitter is that it ISN'T just for [#localgov](#) chiefs but also drudges like me ;)

Twitter enables me to make excellent connections with with a range of professionals and people with something worthwhile to say about topics that interest and stimulate me.

Twitter for me is almost like google, it is my first destination online when i want to find out about what is happening in and around localgov as well as specific industries.

If it weren't for twitter and the many great connections i've made on other social media platforms, i doubt I

would have got the job as Digital Communications Manager in my council.

We promote the use of twitter and other social media platforms as a way to support self directed learning in my council.

A way to find out what others are saying about your organisation, and to respond

When I have five minutes to spare, it provides a great snapshot of what some people in local govt are talking about.

I can concentrate on people's ideas, and not bother about where they fit into an organisation.

Twitter is like the networking lunch at the best local government conference you've ever been to (without the warm chicken satay skewers). It's where I share ideas, experience and learning, discuss current issues, hear about new developments and make valuable contacts. It has radically changed the way I work, broadening my view of local government and its future.

Makes me feel connected to people who you would not normally ever think was possible. Sharing, caring and loving like minded people who want to do good.

It's helped me find a group of people who share my interests and passions for local government and learn from their experience, knowledge and ideas. Hopefully I've helped some of them too! It's boosted my professional development and given me a broader understanding of current issues. What I particularly value is the motivation and support.

7% of our population are on Twitter so it tends to be used internally or for personal development, keeping up with changes, getting opinions on White Papers, discussing White Papers, finding new ways of doing things, being inspired by the way other people tackle similar problems, learning to share best practice. I also find it really useful for getting inspiration on the days when I've left mine at home.

How it works

Tips and advice on how to sign up and learn the ropes.

Couldn't be simpler - go to <http://twitter.com/>. Think up a user name and strong password, enter your email address and you are in. Be careful when picking a username. A sequence of initials is a barrier compared to a real name. Ditto a job position.

Then spend a bit of time creating your profile - and getting it right. If you're in local gov how can your followers engage with you in more than 140 characters? Make sure your profile gives your website address, and Chief Execs / Leaders should also use their profile to tell followers where to find key contact details for departments. And complaints.

In a nutshell, you can then get started by following some interesting people, posting a link to something you find interesting, saying hello and start a conversation. Lots of people I know have joined Twitter, only to quickly become fed up with the lack of interaction early on. You get out of it what you put in so jump in with two feet!

First pick a few names in the easy to use search field to follow and get them to tell others to follow you. It doesn't matter how many people you follow that's entirely your choice, but the more people you follow the more will notice and maybe follow you. Interesting posts and # hash tags ([see below](#)) also garner more followers. There is etiquette to all this but frankly you only need to follow it if you want to - just as in real life some people can be rude!

The best way to learn is to join in. Lurking - [see below](#) - can help you get the gist of what Twitter is, but engaging with other people is the best way to really get the most from it. A few people in our team have also said that they found starting by [retweeting](#) other peoples tweets an easy introduction.

Be prepared to learn as you go along and to commit. There's no half measures if you want to get the most out of Twitter otherwise what's the point in doing it? As Yoda said, "there is only do or do not, there is no such thing as try".

When you have got the hand of things, you'll need to decide how you want to use Twitter - whether you want to 'broadcast' your news or to engage and converse with people. Generally Twitter is best used to engage - and it would be a missed opportunity if you didn't, as it's free feedback which doesn't require panels being convened etc. However there are times when you will just want to tell people something.

If you are going to simply use an account to broadcast at people, explain this in your bio. If you will only be covering the account between certain times, tell people this.

You can check your feed as often or as little as you want and the system lets you very easily track whats been said about or to you.

Get into the habit .. But beware of "blackberry" syndrome. You can have the occasional day or two off. It helps to take a break in fact - you restart with fresh perspectives.

Jargon buster

Twitter is full of stange jargon - which is quickly growing and evolving. Our contributors have defined the basics.

- @ - At symbol - putting the at symbol in front of a username mentions that particular user in a tweet, and they will receive notification of your message. The message is not private however, and other users may view your message. (*@LGCPlus When is the next issue out?*)
- .@ - starting a tweet with the @ symbol will mean that the tweet appears only in the timelines of the recipient and those who also follow that person. Place a "." in front of the @ to "trick" twitter into sending to all your followers
- # - Hash Tag - putting the hash symbol in front of a continuous stream of text is used to denote a topic of conversation which can be used to search tweets of interest on a particular subject. (*#LGTwitterGuide*)
- #FF - "Follow Friday" - Each Friday, users use this hash tag to recommend other twitter users they feel will be of interest to their followers. (*#FF @LGCPlus*)
- DM - "Direct Message" - sending a direct message to a user which is not visible to other users of twitter. This can be done by using the "Messages" button on the top menu bar, and selecting the user you wish to message, or by beginning a tweet with the letter "d" (*d @LGCPlus psssttt! I have some juicy gossip for you*)
- Fail whale - the image which twitter.com gives you when the Twitter servers can take no more. Well the image is of a whale, not a fail whale, the fail bit was sort of added after.
- Feed - also know as "timeline" - a list of recent tweets, assembled on your personal page from all the users you follow. Everyone's feed is different, as most people follow a range of different account depending on their interests
- Follow back - you don't have to follow people back at all. Some people consider it good manners to follow someone who following you - see Justin Beiber below - but it's analogous to talking to the nutter on the bus because he's staring at you!
- Followers - the people who choose to have your tweets appear in their feed - in other words they will see everything that you tweet.

- Klout - a 3rd party algorithm based assessment of how successful your tweeting is
- Lurking - following people but not tweeting yourself. Eavesdropping rather than joining in a conversation - a really good way of getting the feel of a conversation/user before joining in.
- MT - "Modified Tweet" - where a Tweet has not been Retweeted in its original form but has been changed in some shape or form
- Profile - the bit where you get to say who you are, what you do and why you're on Twitter
- RT - "Retweet" - If you spot a particularly interesting tweet in your feed, you may choose to retweet (repost) it to your followers. This increases the visibility of the message and expands the audience who will read it.
- Quote retweet - a RT which has a comment added to it but where the original tweet is still clearly as originally tweeted.
- Spam - either a tweet or Direct Message trying to sell you something (viagra etc) or someone who sends many messages over a short period of time which becomes annoying. This can sometimes accidentally be 'official' accounts if using RSS feeds and they stall.
- Tweet - a message sent over Twitter, up to 140 characters
- Twitterstorm - I don't know where this came from or if should be here but the furore that occurs when big news breaks on Twitter first (see Ryan Giggs/superinjunctions & Tom Watson's NOTW missions)
- Tweepers - people who Tweet and/or use Twitter
- Tweeples - people who Tweet and/or use Twitter
- Twits - the absolutely not appropriate way to refer to people who tweet and/or use Twitter
- Tweet Up - where a group of people who met on twitter, meet in person
- Twittersphere - Otherwise known as Twittersverse or Statusphere. The universe or the world of Twitter
- Unfollow - the act of removing a user from the list of people you follow because they're not adhering to the @cllrtime law of Twitter
- User icon - the picture people see next to everything you tweet. Pick something easily processed and recognisable if you're an organisation so you stand out easily.
- Verified users - for a period of time it was possible to have your account verified as official by Twitter to remove people impersonating celebrities or multinational businesses. They have since removed this ability, but the blue tick bestowed by being verified remains.

General Advice

Our contributors shared the tips and information that they wish they'd known when they started out.

Tips for individuals

You do need to decide whether to broadcast messages, comment on events/things. Are you there as a person or a position/council? Or both? Bearing in mind that you will need to be happy that *everything* you tweet is out there, quotable, attributable and you're answerable for it.

Be absolutely clear and be clear in your profile information whether you are commenting personally or as a representative of your organisation. Remember that you will probably still have obligations with regard to your organisation's reputation and also owe your future self a gaffe free background in any recruitment search of the social media.

Think very carefully about what you want to use your profile for - I'm very careful not to mention my council or political direction/policies (as they're quite nervous about Twitter and we don't use it). I mostly Tweet about my two passions - local government and psychology.

That said, don't spoil it with lengthy guidelines and rules. Trust staff and members to be sensible but beware of tweeting wars between members of different political parties. I've always tried to avoid *endorsing* pol viewpoints, while also RTing interesting/polemical pol tweets

If you [retweet \(RT\)](#) something i.e. re-post without any comment - instead of [MT. see above](#) - people may

assume you are supportive of the point. You RT an off joke - you're retelling it, warts and all.

General manner apply - reply to people who mention you, even if it is with a simple thank you. It is the top to get people engaging with you.

Don't tease. If something is sensitive and you can't share it then don't hint. However exciting the new technology we've all still got day-jobs and transparency cannot reach every corner of your corner office. This seems like unnecessary advice: but trust me, you will be tempted.

Like email, subtleties of tone are not always obvious to the reader so be aware that your tweets could be misread. Emoticons (or smilies) can help, although they are not to everybody's taste!

Similarly, respect confidentiality of conversations at work. Twitter is open and anyone can read what you write.

Don't forget it's a conversation - don't think you can speak without listening. Justin Bieber can get away with not following others: you're probably not a teen idol. Twitter demonstrates if you're interested in others. Do you want to demonstrate that you're not?

The benefit of the conversational nature of twitter is that if you ask for help/advice/case studies via Twitter people are very likely to respond. When they do, share the replies - other people will find them useful too!

Share generously with your knowledge, ideas and passions. Link to other people's blogs and posts and acknowledge the source of your information.

Followers will find you because of who you are and what you do. Be generous with the power that comes from your position: use your profile to support local charities, SMEs and the other groups that make your local community a community.

Avoid duplication of effort. Include customer services when dealing with customer enquiries or service requests, community engagement colleagues when consulting on local issues, etc.

A great use is tweeting when you attend interesting conferences/presentations. It allows the content to be spread and people to share good ideas/practice. As long as it's not a "private" one of course.

Tips for organisations - things to look out for in the way your council uses Twitter

There are benefits for many areas of the business, not just 'broadcast' and 'reputation management' for communications. It's a 'whole council' effort, not just a comms or ICT tool.

Integrate Twitter with your other digital channels, especially when running a campaign.

Avoid raising expectation too high for followers. However enthusiastic your staff, make sure to engage your audience in a way that's sustainable.

Make sure that once you've set a corporate account up, it's used regularly. A Council was criticised earlier this year when a big announcement drew attention to the fact that it had only sent two tweets so far this year.

Empower your staff to be able to use twitter appropriately: media policies may no longer be fit for purpose. Be brave, and trust them. Go further. Actively encourage people and teams to tweet.

Rumours or stories can spread extraordinarily quickly via social media. Being engaged enables you to identify an issue before it balloons and address it. But only coming online to handle shitstorms isn't really playing the game.

Make sure every public event has a [#hashtag](#) to encourage engagement and discussions and promote it in advance. A simple and cost effective way of promoting what you are doing and involved with.

Similarly, if collaborating or consulting via Twitter, identify your audience first and set up a dedicated account, [hashtag](#) and/or discussion period.

Have you thought about use of twitter in council meetings?

Have a twitter strategy in place and make sure it is followed by all using the account.

To make the account more personal, some suggest you write the names of the people using the account in your profile, so that the public thinks there is actually a 'human' behind the account.

You don't have to reply to every mention / comment, especially if it's something inflammatory - sometimes silence is the best response!

Examples

Some thoughts on situations where councils have used Twitter to achieve something better/quicker.

You can reach completely different audiences via social media. In Tunbridge Wells we held a 'face the public' event using Twitter and Facebook where the Chief Inspector, Borough Chief Exec and representatives of the County Council and Police Authority answered questions online. We planned the event to coincide with a local Twitter meet-up and had over 120 interactions which compared very favourably to more traditional 'village hall' events.

South Cambridgeshire District Council sends daily tweets letting people know which bins to put out the following day. This offers residents a handy reminder and backs up our quarterly magazine's bin calendar.

I've really enjoyed the tweet-a-thons from Greater Manchester Police and others that give a great insight into the work of public services.

Various "twitter gritter" updates over the winter were really useful at giving real-time information on which roads were being gritted - Solihull Council comes to mind particularly. Some feeds also had information about which schools and public buildings were open or closed - potentially reducing calls/emails from the public that would need a response. Worcestershire County Council used this to great effect too.

2010 election results were tweeted by various Authorities.

Links

Helpful information elsewhere

http://www.learningpool.com/docs/marketing/general/twitter_guide.pdf

<http://support.twitter.com/groups/31-twitter-basics>

The 'house rules' used by one anonymous tweeter might provide a useful set of guidance: [http://](http://halftheworldiswatching.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/puffles-house-rules/)

halftheworldiswatching.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/puffles-house-rules/

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelD=17797214>

Great beginners guide to twitter video @andyheadworth <http://blog.sironaconsulting.com/sironasays/2010/10/the-beginners-guide-to-twitter-video.html>

'Connected Councillors' guide to Twitter and other social media for councillors

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelD=17797214>

Local by Social - How Local Authorities Can Use Social Media to Achieve More for Less

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelD=17770779>

SocITM Better Connected 2011 - contained section giving snapshot of social media, including Twitter, use across local government

Twitter Gritter and Local Elections 2009 - special reports by SocITM summarising social media and Twitter activity around these two events.

<http://support.twitter.com/groups/31-twitter-basics>

Useful Twitter tools

Many of the useful things you can do with Twitter are actually made possible by third party website or applications that have been designed to compliment Twitter. Here are our contributors' top picks.

Twitterfeed - www.twitterfeed.com - this website allows you to easily set-up feeds so that your Twitter account is updated automatically - with the latest news release for example or maybe consultations. You connect it with RSS feeds on a website - you can spot these when you see the small orange RSS logo. It can help save you valuable time - but don't just rely on automatic tweets, an effective Twitter presence means using the personal touch too.

Hootsuite - www.hootsuite.com - sign-up to this website and it will allow you to access several Twitter accounts from one website. You can also set up columns with different hashtag / keyword searches or lists of followers, so you can easily keep track of what people are saying. Hootsuite also offers analytics so you can track clicks on links etc. You can schedule messages and it also allows you to upload photos and automatically reduce links so that you can save on valuable characters.

Other examples of websites that offer a similar service are www.seismic.com and www.cotweet.com Hootsuite and other tools like it can be useful in maintaining your Twitter contributions alongside other social network media, for example with Hootsuite you can post the same comment to Twitter, Facebook and a blog site entering the text just once. Hootsuite is free for PC, Android etc, and works surprisingly well on smartphones.

Twitpic and Twitvid - twitpic.com and www.twitvid.com - Twitter's own website does not have the facility to upload photographs and videos but you can sign up to Twitpic and Twitvid using your Twitter login details and use these websites to upload media to be shared on your Twitter account.

Tinyurl and Bitly - www.tiny.cc and bitly.com - with just 140 characters to play with, you don't want to use up all your space with a long website address. Twitter's own website does not have the facility to automatically shorten a link but both of these websites offer a useful alternative.

Packrati (packrati.us) keeps track of the links you tweet and saves them to Delicious, an online bookmarking tool, so you can easily find them later.

Security Issues

A few things that new users should be aware of:

When setting up your account, make sure you pick a secure password, and share it only with those people who need to access the account. This does not include Twitter employees. Twitter employees will never ever ask you for your password. You should never ever give your password to someone you do not know. If you are not sure, tweet @safety - a Twitter run account there to help and advise you.

Be aware of any tweet with just a link - just like email, twitter has spam and you will often get followed or tweeted with spam links depending on the content of your tweets. Think before you click on a link - do you know this person? are they well known by others?

Make sure you have a plan in place for potential account hacking. Know what to do and when and also advise any officers/Councillors with accounts how to do the same. It's your Council's reputation potentially

on the line.

Don't make jokes at your Boss' expense; even reporting what they might have worn at the staff fancy dress party. Not everyone has a sense of humour. And, some journalists (i.e. Inside Housing) might take you seriously.

If someone within the team leaves, change the password. They might be the nicest person on earth but you never know and it's a good practice to get into.

Be careful about 'tools' which tell you how many people who like to dress in blue and dance under the moonlight are following you. Often, these little websites will auto-tweet everyone who follows you telling you the result of your little quiz. A little embarrassing on a persona account, but highly unprofessional on a professional one.

If you do accidentally authorise a website which proceeds to 'spam' your followers, you can revoke access for the website by going to twitter.com, logging in, clicking on Profile in the black bar at the top, clicking on Edit your profile beneath your user picture, then clicking on Applications again located in the strip of options horizontally beneath your user picture. This will then list all applications you have given permission to - find the one which is spamming your followers and click on the Revoke Access button.

Authors

With thanks to all who contributed, including those below and the people who contributed but didn't leave their name:

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Appendix: How this guide was crowdsourced

1. LGC set out the key headings in a Google Document (like a Word document but online), which was open for anyone to access without a password.
2. LGC tweeted a link to the document and invited local government people to contribute.
3. Users simultaneously typed in their thoughts, and watched others do likewise as the document grew in front of their eyes.
4. Users could query, discuss and agreed changes.

More than 30 took part. This is the full 13-page version of the guide. An abridged version and a series of related articles are available at LGCplus.com/5034453.article

Contributors added their comments on the basis of the following brief:

Note to contributors:

Conversation on Twitter recently turned to the fact that Twitter might be seen as exclusive and that many local gov people are nervous about joining up. (Here at LGC we keep a keen eye on the number of council chiefs, and though the number is growing it is still very small). This is rather sad because Twitter is a platform for stimulating discussion and ideas...

In one such stimulating discussion, myself and some helpful local gov bods hit upon the idea of creating a crowdsourced guide to demystify and inspire more local gov people to Tweet.

I have set up this page to do just that. I have added some provisional heading ideas. I think we need to include benefits, examples of what has been achieved through Twitter, and a section that helps to explain some of the potentially scary jargon - hashtags, #ff, RT etc - that may well stop people from taking part. I'll find a home for our finished masterpiece on LGCplus.com.

I would be most grateful if you could join in and add your thoughts below. You can take part without needing to sign up and if you wish to comment rather than make a change, just use the "comment" option in the "Insert" menu above.

Please also feel free to invite others to contribute. The link to share is: <http://tinyurl.com/3povoza>

Thanks,
Emma Maier, editor, LGC
www.twitter.com/emmamaier

PS There are quite a few very good existing Twitter guides out there. I think the premium here is something that is:

- 1) short and sweet (an "elevator test" type guide that provides a good, quick overview for those who are time poor)
- 2) specific to local gov (I think examples can be really powerful in showing how/why to do it)

Thanks!