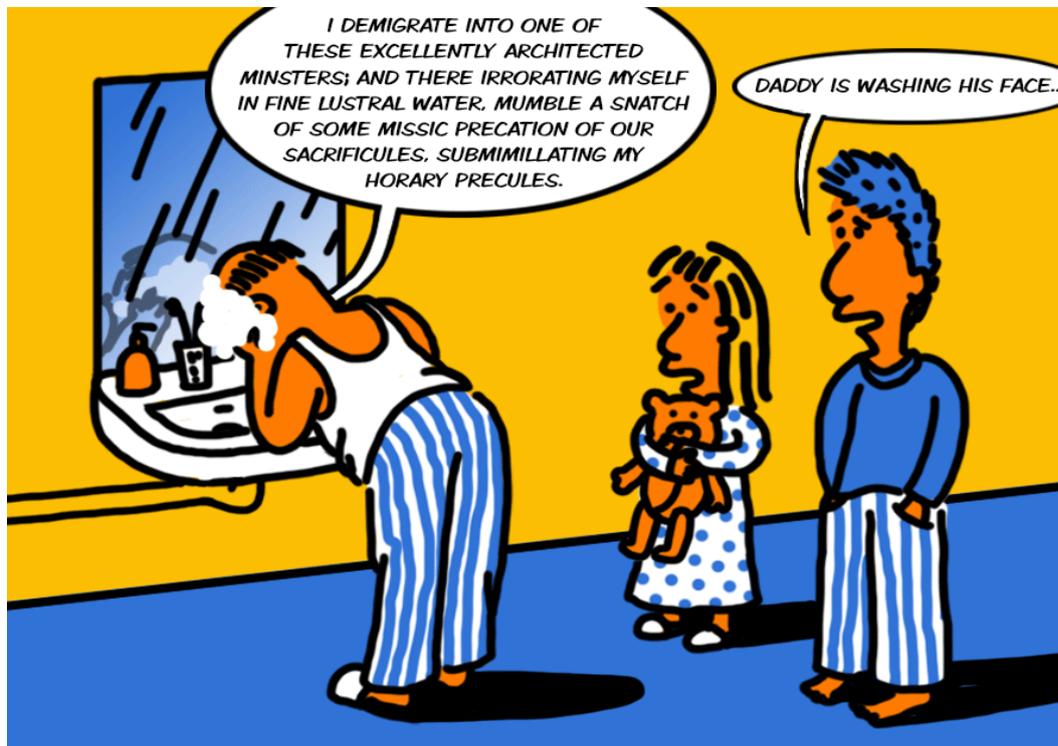


# Brevity under fire as Twitter turns ten



**The soul of wit:** for the French author Rabelais, humour lay in absurd verbosity as above

**Twitter marked its 10th birthday this week. Around 200 billion short messages are now sent on it each year. Should we welcome the condensation of our thoughts, or mourn the death of length?**

‘A short burst of inconsequential information.’

This definition inspired Jack Dorsey to choose the name ‘Twitter’ for his new microblogging site. On 21 March 2006, Dorsey sent the first tweet: ‘just setting up my twttr’. Ten years on, around **6,000** tweets are sent per second; **320 million** people log in to Twitter each month.

Presidents, prime ministers and the Pope now regularly send 140-character messages around the world. Some even say Twitter influenced the outcome of the Arab Spring protests and the 2015 UK general election.

‘My goal is to simplify complexity,’ Dorsey says. He and his colleagues were inspired by the brief messages on instant messaging software and Facebook status updates. And in 2013 they extended their philosophy to videos by launching Vine, which allowed users to share six-second clips.

Some worry that **concision** is making people more stupid. The CEOs of Amazon and LinkedIn have banned Powerpoint from meetings and a scientist working on the large hadron collider said its bullet point format was ‘acting as a **straitjacket** to discussion’.

Longer forms of expression have declined in the last decade. The Royal Mail delivered 30% fewer letters and parcels in the UK in 2012 than 2005. This Saturday, the *Independent* newspaper will close with just **one-fifth** as many readers as its concise sister *i* — which was launched in 2010.

In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius says: '**Brevity** is the soul of wit'. The Biblical sentence 'Jesus wept' and Abraham Lincoln's 272-word **Gettysburg address** have been among the most quoted words in history. And Ernest Hemingway famously **wrote** an entire novel in six words: 'For sale, baby shoes, never worn'.

This stands in contrast with the work of French novelist Marcel Proust, who once wrote a 958-word sentence, and Nicholson Baker, whose entire novel *Mezzanine* was based on a man's thoughts during a one-hour lunch break.

Writer Pico Iyer defends those who write at length. 'The long sentence... allows the reader to keep many things in her head and heart at the same time,' he says. In an ever-more complicated world, he argues, we need to understand issues in increasing depth and fully appreciate their **nuances**.

### **To tweet or not to tweet**

'Good things, when short, are twice as good' — as the great Spanish sage Baltasar Gracián said. And many agree.

Rubbish says Chris Knight, writing in Canada's *National Post*. 'A long sentence, carefully crafted, **sinuously** plotted, making perfect (and not mere **perfunctory**) use of language's full, throatsome range of punctuation as well as its great **rhombicuboctahedron** of letters, is at once an edifice of towering and fragile beauty, and a song of deep and **convoluted** meaning.'

### **Post reading activities:**

1. Can you guess the meaning of the words in blue? Look up 4 new words.
2. What political events has twitter influenced?
3. What could be one of the outcomes of concision?
4. What are some of the arguments put forward in favour of longer texts?
5. Which of the final two paragraphs of this article do you think is better written?