

*Maryn's not-comprehensive short course on pitching
(prepared for Magazine Journalism, Grady College, University of Georgia)*

A good pitch requires a fleshed-out idea

- It is not enough to have a topic. A topic is not a story. Topic + news, or + characters and narrative arc, make a story.
- A pitch should be newsy but not time-sensitive.
- For most magazines, the minimum production timeline, if pitch is accepted immediately, is:
 - 1-2 mos reporting/writing
 - 1-2 mos editing/production
 - So you can see that something that is news *today* will be old when a magazine comes out — and therefore will not be a successful pitch.

For a successful pitch, you must do research

- Expect to spend at least 10 solid hours on this. (Yes, this is unpaid work.)
 - Google
 - Lexis-Nexis or Factiva
 - PubMed
 - interviews
- If the pitch is successful, these will become your first round of story research
 - Therefore, you must take good notes and keep your research organized.
 - If you sell the story, you will be required to prove where every quote and fact came from, so start being organized now.

For a successful pitch, you must also research your target publication

- Identifying the right editor is the LAST task.
- The first task is ensuring that your idea matches, or can be tuned to, the magazine's target demographic
 - E.g., women's magazines:
 - SELF, women 18-35
 - Health, women 20-45; aspirational
 - More, 40-60; upper income, professional
 - Good Housekeeping, LHJ; 30-50, more likely to be moms with kids
- Your idea and your characters/quoted sources must match the target demo.
- Therefore, you must research the magazine.
 - Go to a library and analyze the paper magazine.
 - Magazines that exist on paper and the web are still making decisions on the basis of how the paper magazine is organized (front of book, middle/back of book).
 - Websites, even iPad apps, to this point do not allow you to assess the decisions that magazine has made, about placement and relative value of a story

Expect to have several rounds of communication with an editor

- Initial introductory email

- Pre-pitch email, one-paragraph description
- If they agree to look at more, then:
 - First-draft pitch email
 - Discussion by email or phone
 - Second-draft pitch email
 - Usually requires additional research

Successful pitches accomplish several things at once

- Demonstrate you understand the magazine
- Display your comprehensive idea
- Show that you have done some research
- Showcase your compelling writing
- Give the editor ammunition for pitch meetings (more on that below)
- Do not provide any reasons for hitting the delete key
 - bad idea, poor demographic choice, talkiness, bad spelling

Most pitches have a fairly rigid form. This is not the time to get creative.

- Short version: *Why this, why now, why you.*
- Long version: The basic components are:
 - Topic background
 - Story proposal (literally: "I propose a story about...")
 - Whom you will speak to (and have already)
 - In some magazines, which academic research you will review, with titles and links
 - Whether this has been covered before and where
 - How long a story you envision
 - Why you should write it and who you are
- There are variations:
 - Some magazines request 1-page only.
 - Some ask for long pitches. It is possible for the initial pitch to be longer than the final assignment (1000-word pitch v. 750-word story.)
 - Some look for anecdotal-lead pitches, but if you use an anecdotal lead, it must be short.

At most major magazines, an assigning editor does not make the pitch decision alone.

- Your pitch may be reviewed by:
 - Executive editor and editor in chief
 - Editorial board of editors competing for space
 - Monthly pitch meeting of editors with veto by EIC
- Therefore, your pitch (and phone conversations) must give the editor you are talking to enough information to allow him/her to defend choosing your story

Rejection is common

- Do not take it personally. Be pleasant and positive

- if they like their interaction with you, they are more likely to think of you for an idea of theirs
- Do NOT say "another magazine is interested"
 - Do not simultaneous-pitch. (Writers disagree about this but editors universally hate it.)
- Do be prepared to follow up:
 - Re-send 1x
 - Augment email or seek phone convo 1x
 - Then be prepared to re-pitch elsewhere.
 - Pro tip: Assume you will be rejected. Redraft your pitch as soon as you send it. Then it will be ready to send again as soon as it is rejected.

Sources of help:

- publications, e.g. Writers' Market
- online publications, e.g.: MediaBistro's "How to Pitch" series
- databases maintained by professional organizations:
 - Association of Health Care Journalists,
 - National Association of Science Writers
 - American Society of Journalists and Authors
- pro bono and academic sites:
 - The Open Notebook
 - www.theopennotebook.com/pitch-database
- Stanford Univ: Future of Freelancing
 - freelance.stanford.edu/pitch