

IRE 2019

“How to find the best investigative story ideas and pitch them successfully”

Tips on reporting for the pitch

Maybe you have the kind of reporter-editor relationship in which you stroll in, put your feet up on the editor’s desk, tell him or her what you want to work on and get an absolute, unconditional blessing and commitment of time, support and resources.

Or maybe you work in American journalism in 2019.

In an era of diminishing resources, when time is increasingly a luxury and projects may require investments in data, coding, video and audio, even an excellent track record with an editor is no guarantee that your project is going to be greenlighted.

Further, editors may have to make the case for time and resources to their bosses.

Even if this is not an issue, even if you don’t have to argue your story and your case, drawing up a pitch can help clarify what you are writing, why you are writing it and what you need to get to the finish line.

While each newsroom has a different take on the pitch- its formality, how many people you must talk to, whether you do this as a team - there are core issues to address.

Before you begin:

- Know your editor. (And your news organization.)

Every editor has his or her preferred story type and treatment. Get to know what your editor’s favorite stories are, from both your

own newsroom and others, and why they are favorites.

For instance, I had two editors. One was very comfortable with and focused on data. The other was hooked by anecdote, and stories which clearly showed personal stories of harm. We all want both numbers and anecdote, of course.

But in pitching a story to one, I might lead with the numbers. Pitching the same story to the other editor, I might focus on stories of people.

Why should this even matter? Isn’t a great story a great story regardless of editor preferences?

Yes, but: You do not want an editor who is lukewarm to your project. Lackluster editor interest and involvement can be a recipe for a project that is minimally or sloppily edited, published late and forgotten quickly.

Similarly, your news organization has its own priorities.

If it’s truly digitally driven, or newly enamored with podcasts, then your pitch might incorporate those options. If a paper is so locally focused that a regional or statewide story would be out of its wheelhouse, then you may consider scaling back, or going on to another story proposal.

- Talk it out.

Describe your project to a colleague or two, or three. Tell them the three or four things that most surprised or interested you.

Then watch what they pick up on and get enthusiastic about. Ask them if there is something they are confused by, bored by, or have questions about.

They can surprise you. Twice in two years, once with Trump’s Florida-Russian business

connections and once with Purdue Pharma, I wound up writing pieces I originally had no intention of tackling because it felt like previously covered ground.

Casual conversations with people in the newsroom persuaded me to take a different approach, and I wound up writing about both.

An honest back and forth with colleagues can also reveal potential logic flaws in your underlying assumptions. Better to hear it from them than from your editor in a story pitch.

Alternatively, team reporters and editors can gather together in a small room with a large whiteboard and whack away at ideas and findings. This takes a few hours, a lot of Diet Coke and even more patience, but when it works, it can work really well.

- Find a way to make your editor care.

The answer to why a reader should care enough to keep reading is not inherently obvious, especially if you are writing about harm done to an unsympathetic population such as prison inmates or drug-using parents.

It's our job to make them care. An editor is a good place to start.

To persuade your editor, and ultimately your readers, that your story is worth their time, ask yourself some questions: Why are you writing this story at this time? What findings make it compelling? What harm would occur if no one uncovered or wrote about it? Is there a path to change stemming from the project? What would that look like?

And the perennial editor's question: What makes it different from other pieces on similar topics?

Sometimes an editor gets a faraway look in their eyes and says, "Yeah, that's really

interesting, but, hmm, I think I've read that before. Somewhere. Pretty sure."

You may get that reaction pitching stories on some well-known topics such as nursing home abuse, violence in prisons, substandard hospital care- but they are well-known topics precisely because they keep happening.

Remind your editor there's a reason we keep writing about them: They're important.

Organizing your pitch:

- Bow to the tyranny of the nut graf.

At the beginning of a project, you really don't know what you are going to find. In-depth reporting may later change the nut graf in some way.

But you already have an idea of what your project is. Clarity and the short attention spans of busy editors everywhere require you to be able to state it in one - at most two- sentences.

If you require three, then your project really hasn't gelled in your mind.

You can try doing more reporting, hashing it out with colleagues, writing your findings down - whatever helps you rethink or look at your findings in a slightly different way. I'm pretty visual, so I will sometimes jot individual findings on sticky notes, put them on a board and see if a simpler, clearer nut graf becomes apparent.

- Numbers as a backbone.

Even a few early numbers can give a project context and backbone.

You don't necessarily need big data at this point. And like the nut graf, you may not know all of the available data in all its permutations until you are reporting.

But numbers have a place in your pitch.

For instance, you may want to dig into a pending bankruptcy at a local charter school in Florida. You can point out that the school's finance woes come at a time when an average 20 charter schools a year are closing in Florida, and that the number of for-profit charter schools has doubled in eight years.

That's not big data. It's not exactly on point, either.

But it does give your editor context, and also an argument for exploring finances of multiple charter schools, not just one.

- Seek out a wise man or woman.

Unearthing a relevant quote from an expert supporting an issue you will be writing about can lend credence to your proposal. That's especially helpful if your project challenges conventional wisdom.

- Remember the humans.

You don't need a dozen anecdotes, maybe just one. But they should exactly illustrate your nut graph. You want to convince your editor, not give him/her a reason to argue with you.

Let's say your charter school story nut graf is: Charter school ABC used taxpayer money to maneuver a reverse merger on the sketchy Vancouver stock exchange, enriching directors and leaving students without books.

Not-quite-on-topic anecdote: *Little Johnny's mild-mannered parents called the Vancouver mayor and demanded to know why the stock exchange was a notorious magnet for fraudsters.*

Editor response: "Why are you talking to me about stock exchange regulations?"

Better anecdote: *Little Johnny's mild-mannered parents commandeered the*

executive director's 140-foot yacht and demanded to know where the textbooks were.

Editor response: "Go right ahead and do this project, new favorite reporter!"

Ask for resources:

- Have an idea of the time you will need.

For many of us, the golden days of "take all the time you need" are in the rear view mirror. Estimate how much time you would need to report, write and fact check. Then, if your editor tries to establish an unrealistically short deadline, you will be prepared with reasons why you need more time.

- Figure out what tools and talent the project will need.

Video, photo, audio, online interactives, animation, cutting-edge digital and print design, coding, newsletters, social media planning: Not all of us are going to get all of the tools and supportive talent.

Think about which of these tools other projects at your news organization have successfully used, or projects on similar topics at other news organizations. Use those successes as examples of what can be done for your project.

Be prepared to argue for the ones that matter.

Finally, prep for the surprise:

You get a greenlight, you are deep into reporting and then, because the news gods have not smiled upon you, one of two things happens:

- You uncover a logic flaw requiring you to rethink an underlying premise, or

- You uncover something which is related to your original premise, but much, much better.

Avoiding irritating your editor at this point and keeping your new, revised project moving forward actually starts much earlier.

Once you have project approval, make certain you have a sit-down with your editor once a week, at a minimum, to talk about the week's findings.

For larger news organizations, or news organizations with dedicated and organized investigative teams, this may seem like a no-brainer.

But editors often are juggling multiple responsibilities, and projects.

If your editor is in the loop, he or she is less likely to feel blindsided when interviewees abruptly recant, or numbers lead you astray.

And even if neither occurs, your editor is more likely to be vested in the project - a true partner.

Questions?

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Storytelling Track: Self-editing moves you can start today

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Tell us a story: Tips for pitching

Know the audience. The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, for example, produces stories about government integrity and quality of life in Wisconsin, written for a statewide audience. Broad topics include the economy, education, environment, justice system and health. We report on systems that are not working, and on potential solutions.

What's the story? A story is not a topic, like “the toxicity of fire retardants.” A story can be expressed as a declarative sentence: “Wisconsin furniture manufacturers are soaking couches in toxic chemicals without telling people.” A topic requires inspiration; a pitch requires reporting.

Speak with humans. The trouble with investigative work, of course, is that you don't know what you're going to find until you do the work, and if you're a freelancer, you don't get paid for anything until somebody approves the story. But you still have to do enough reporting beforehand to be able to say what you think the lede is or might be. That reporting usually can't be done entirely on the internet.

Why should we care? Use all the same tools you'd use in a story — stats, quotes, vivid descriptions. Who is affected?

What sources will you need? For proof, context, color. Are they possible, probable or already in the bag? If you're pitching audio or video, are they good talkers?

What are the unknowns? Does the story hinge on getting one cagey guy with no address to talk on the record? Might we have to sue an agency for key documents? Does the story require data analysis? How much work will you have to do before you'll know for sure whether you have a story?

How much work will this be? What's your expected turnaround time, length? Any sidebars/extra features? Multimedia? Editors will want to know how much your story will cost them and when they will be able to publish it.

Do you have the skills? What kind of help will you need? For a story that is worth doing, we need to know what those gaps are.

What's been done on this subject? Lots of people pitch juicy, well-thought-out stories that others have already done. Where did your idea come from? How does your story advance the state of knowledge in this area? What's the likelihood you'll get scooped before you finish?

Don't be boring. Really, this should be rule No. 1. Your pitch is a chance to show off your writing as well as your thinking skills. What's interesting about this story? Surprising?

More resources. Radio people often work with lots of freelancers and are nice and explicit about what they want. The lessons transfer to other media well. Marketplace submissions and pitches <https://www.marketplace.org/submissions-and-pitches>. Fact-checking guidelines from the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism <https://docs.google.com/document/d/14scpOwr7ZepIAv14V6ilbFAzXX-yeywSWTmvvMuWH5g/edit> and — to make sure you haven't forgotten something — Story release checklist from the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1AVzbEALIdtuIg6rRbW47cN_XRhXBM20KXMN6egsiTTE/edit?usp=sharing

Self-editing: The final steps to getting published or broadcast

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Spell check

1. **Yes, this gets its own category. And extra bolding.**

Proofreading

1. Proofread on paper or in a preview screen. The idea is just to look at the story in a different way — even just a new font changes how your brain is looking at the story.
2. Read your stuff out loud. Even if it embarrasses you. Or if you can, have someone else read it out loud to you.
3. Read once just to look for errors, particularly small ones. Readers hate them the most, right up there with blind sources. They signify a larger lack of attention to detail, and if readers can't trust you to get a name right, how can they trust you on any other facts? (This is also why spell checking is so important.) Look for:
 - a. Millions/billions errors
 - b. All proper names — not just people's names, but titles, organizations, etc.
 - c. Double check any number
 - d. Any time you see two numbers, do something to them. Make sure the math works.
4. Step away from your work, even if for just a walk around the newsroom. If you have five minutes, take it. Ten, take it. You'll shake up your brain a bit and you'll be surprised at how often you come back to your work with a fresh idea, no matter how much time you've spent with the story.
5. Is your story a joy to read, as it should be, instead of a chore? Ask yourself a series of questions:
 - a. Did I get to the point quickly enough? (Hint: You almost always haven't.)
 - b. Are my quotes too long? Do they spend time explaining facts, which are better paraphrased, rather than showcasing the source's point or original thought or memorable exclamation?
 - c. Is my story too long? Do I really need all those sections? Is there a point where a reader is going to click elsewhere, or set down the paper? Do I have the right mix of news, context and background, or not enough of one or too much of another? Think of it as a soufflé: Stories have to have the right ingredients or they will fall.
 - d. Read once solely to make sure every sentence relates to the theme.

Trimming

1. Edit once to cut 10 percent of the words, ideally without losing any content. The act of reading every sentence to look for something to cut also puts you in a different frame of mind and can inject a fresh perspective.
2. Kill your darlings. I mean it. Even editors have to abide by this one.

3. Rewrite if needed, don't just cut words or phrases. Take the few minutes to turn that 16-word sentence into an 11-word one with a little rewriting, rather than just cutting an adjective or two.

Fact checking

1. Checklists! Print one out and keep it posted at your desk. Andy's Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism has [a great one](#), as does [NPR](#).

Deadline

1. Hit your deadline. Give your editor and everyone who comes after you in the process the time to do their jobs to the best of their ability. They have already extended you the same courtesy.
2. Try to leave room for unexpected last-minute challenges like a source calling with new facts that change your story, or a senior editor asking for a different direction.

TIPS on story structure and writing for investigations that engage readers

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Figure out WHAT'S THE POINT? This might be your nut graf, or the thought/emotion you want readers to take away (in our line of work, that's usually outrage). Write your point on a sticky note and put it on your screen. Everything you put in your story should tie back to this point. This will keep you from writing, "Here's another random thing I learned about my topic." Which is an invitation for readers to tune out.

What if you have TWO POINTS? Like, this terrible injustice is happening and officials are covering it up? Consider splitting it into two stories.

Think about the BRAN MUFFIN. That's the nuts and bolts most readers will skim, or use as an excuse to stop reading: How Medicaid works. The difference between a jail and a prison. Accounting principles for pension funds (or for anything). Can you explain it through graphics? Put it in a sidebar? Do an explainer video?

Is there a narrative hidden in your story? Or a MYSTERY? The surest way to keep readers is to make them want to find out what comes next. Consider leading them through your investigative process. Or tease with a question you don't answer until the end.

Try to tell your story in CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER. Do not jump around in time. If you start with a thrilling scene, readers will usually accept ONE leap back in time. But no more.

Avoid hopping back and forth between sources, especially experts or anyone who's not the focus of the piece. Put each person's material in ONE PLACE. You might find you need more voices!

When I find myself flailing with a story, I turn to the standard structure I picked up at *The Wall Street Journal*. Obviously every piece is different, but it's a starting place. Much is cribbed from an memo written by the great Mitch Pacelle, a longtime editor on Page 1 of the Journal. Including this excellent advice:

"The first 6 to 8 paragraphs are in many ways the most important. If you get those right, the rest of the writing will come more easily. Think of the story structure as coat hanger, with the hook being the first half-dozen paragraphs. If the hook is messed up, the story won't work."

LEDE: can be an anecdote but for most publications it needs to be fast -- no more than three or four graf. Surprises are excellent. The idea is that your lede should reach up off the phone

screen, grab people by the ears and *make* them read your story. So avoid rambling scene-setters. If you have a great or startling finding, consider beginning with that -- make your nut your lede.

NUTGRAF If you can't summarize it in a sentence, you need to rethink.

Sometimes the nut is followed by a couple of bolstering (and very fast) examples, which you are just ticking off and will return to below. Or your findings, aka **BULLET POINTS**. Often followed by a powerful quote.

SO WHAT, aka **SCOPE AND SWEEP**: Here's why it matters. Here's why readers should care. Here's how it fits into bigger trends in politics, society, your community. "Across the state and across the nation the same crazy thing is happening..."

TBS: Someone disagrees, or responds, or you acknowledge that Mr. X's mother loves him. Or that the data is incomplete. Doing this makes your stories stronger.

REPLY: Your strongest response to the TBS argument (Mr. X is still a revolting toad).

BEGIN YOUR CHRONOLOGY HERE.

If you can't tell a story over time, but have several different examples -- six voters around your area, five different communities with sewer problems, three small businesses in crisis -- try to make each one make a **DISTINCT POINT**. Keep in mind that most readers hate repetition and have short attention spans.

CONCLUSION/KICKER, which ideally goes back to the lede. Sometimes a quote -- but not always. If you have told a tale, you may want to flick at what could happen in the near future.

Some final thoughts from Mitch: "Don't show bias by giving the last word to one side or the other on a controversial subject. Don't introduce a new talking head for that last quote. Don't introduce a new aspect or angle on the topic."

Some final thoughts from me: Edit out the passive voice by searching for is, are, was, were; search ly to find adverbs and strengthen the verbs instead. Slay jargon.

Most important, **CUT YOUR STORY!!** For readers, shorter is almost always better. Do it yourself, so your editor won't have to. If you get stuck, look at every third graf, or every third sentence. Can it go?

Watchdog: Storyboarding worksheet

Key Question: The best investigations start with a question. What is yours?

What is your **minimum story**? What is your **maximum story**?

Maximum:

Minimum:

Working theme: What is your story? Write it out in one or two sentences. Update as you go.

What **new ground** will you pursue with this story? What has already been reported?

What is the **potential impact**? (Why should anyone care?)

What **data** might help with this story?

What **key documents** do you think you'll need? Which agencies have them? How long will it take to get them?

Who are the **key players**? Think victims, key sources, experts, etc.

What is your **timeline**? How long do you think this will take?

How will you **visualize** the story? Think about **photos, graphics, videos, design, etc.** very early.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write their response to the first question.

What **web components** will you have? How will the web version differ from the print or broadcast version?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write their response to the second question.