

## **HOW TO WRITE A STRONG STORY PROPOSAL**

—Sarah Blustein, deputy editor, *The Investigative Fund*

### **Keep it short because most editors have no time.**

Once, I got a pitch from a writer that was 4,000 words. I asked her to cut it to two pages. She did. Then she sent a version to a magazine editor that was 3,000 words. He asked her to send a paragraph so he could sell it to his boss. The point being that in most cases you should actually send somewhere between one paragraph and 1,000 words. My target is usually 500 words.

### **Be direct because most editors have no time.**

Editors are scanning pitches for a few things, and they want to be able to find them quickly. Your writing should be good, but they don't want your most poetic language, all your findings, or your entire reporting plan. The pitch is (hopefully) the beginning of a conversation, not the whole conversation.

### **Give editors what they need to take your pitch up the editorial ladder.**

I normally recommend a four-paragraph pitch. There are four important things to get in:

- a) what the story is;
- b) why it matters -- and why it matters now;
- c) what your findings are; and
- d) why you should be the one to write it.

Breaking those down:

#### *a) What the story is.*

This is your first paragraph, and I would try to do it in under five sentences. It's similar to what is usually called the elevator pitch, but I always find it more helpful to think of it as "how would you explain this to your grandmother." This is important because editors you are pitching may not be very well informed on the particular topic you have spent your last three months researching. Very basically, lay out what the story is you are trying to tell. For news stories, what's the news? For a magazine story, what's the form (profile, essay, etc.) and what's your angle? It's okay to have a "lede," but not a long, literary one; it should be more like one sentence, and a short one.

#### *b) Why does this matter.*

This is your second paragraph. Try starting it using some variation of: "The significance of this story is ..." or "This story matters because ..." You can cut those out, but it's a good habit to get into writing it. The significance paragraph is your opportunity to tie this to a larger trend, news event, etc. Usually I think this paragraph is about three sentences long, and the first or second should include the peg for the story as well — i.e., *why this matters now*. And if you are covering a story that a lot of other people have written about, make sure you add a sentence that says, "This story is different from the other coverage on this topic because..." or, "My story will significantly change the storyline on this topic ..."

*c) What goods did you get*

For an investigative piece, this is where you lay out your findings. Some questions to think about for this part: How long have you worked on it? What special access do you have (if a profile, mention if you have access to the person you are profiling, plus all her friends and pets)? What kind of proprietary reporting do you have? You are trying to let the editor know what you've got that's special. If bulleted items are useful to show what your findings are, this would be the place to include them.

One note of caution: You don't want to put in too much and give away your findings to an outlet that could assign the piece to another reporter. But you have to give enough to give them a sense of the kind of thing you have. So you can tell them that you have an exclusive source, a category of information, or some data crunched, but you don't have to put in the name of the source or all the details of the information or data. This is a good place to consult with your Investigative Fund editor to make sure you are representing your work but also protecting it.

*d) Why you are the right person to do this story*

This is the "about the author" paragraph. Don't include your whole resume. Just two or three sentences that include what matters most for this pitch: This could include your highest profile credentials, but don't forget that if you are writing a piece about farming in Maine, you want to make sure to mention it if you grew up on a farm...

**Send it two ways.**

Sometimes crazy formatting makes emails in a conversation tough to read, and sometimes editors are reading on the go. So put your pitch both in the body of the email, as well as in an attachment, so editors can read however they prefer.

**Be available to continue the conversation.**

Conclude by offering to be available to provide any other information they might need. If the pitch is time-sensitive, note when you need to hear back by. (If it is really time-sensitive, put that in the first paragraph.) Thank them for their time, or say something else that's nice.

**Follow up.**

Editors are busy people who get tons of email. That's not an excuse, but it is a reason to wait a reasonable time (a week is generally polite, unless your pitch is time-sensitive), and then reach out again. Be polite and helpful in your follow-up email, and either respond on the same email thread, or copy and paste your initial pitch so the editor doesn't have to do detective work to dig up the pitch you're referencing.