

# Crafting the Perfect Pitch

The key to stability as a freelance magazine writer is pitching. Pitch often and pitch well. That's the only way offset the dry spells that plague a freelance career, take control of your repertoire and open doors to new publications and professional relationships.

## WHAT'S YOUR STORY

- **Magazines want stories with a shelf life.**

Imagine someone picking up your story in six months because that's how long it might take from pitch to publishing. Will it still be relevant? Better yet, imagine the reader with it in the waiting room of a dental clinic two years from now. Will your story still be enjoyable? If it's too newsy and narrow-focused, editors will pass.

- **Don't mistake topics for stories.**

A story has a sense of character and conflict, or at least some depth. Even if it's a short service piece for the front section, a good story pitch raises questions that you, the temporary expert, seeks to answer. Hint: If you can pitch it in one or two lines, it's probably not a story.

- **There are 100 ways to tell a true story, so ask yourself, what's the best way to tell this one?**

That comes down to format and voice.

- **Format**

In-depth profiles and features usually have clear narrative structures, but for service articles, packages, primers and other non-linear stories, there's almost no limit to how you can execute it.

Segmented sections, "collages," flow charts, how-tos are all on the table, but make sure it's appropriate for the magazine. (eg: *The Walrus* only publishes narratives, but *Report on Business* has a very playful front section.)

- **Voice: Through whom should you tell this story?**

You can harness your expertise and act as a guide moving the reader from one opinion to another. And/or you could internalize your research and write it in second person. Perhaps it's best told in first person, either because it's an experiential story like travel or you're an expert on the subject, or because that's just the magazine's style (eg: *Eighteen Bridges*). Make that clear in your pitch.

## How long should I spend pitching?

Between researching the subject, studying the book and writing the query, a good pitch usually takes a few hours.

## Should I secure my sources before pitching?

It's always a good idea to feel them out. Introduce yourself as a writer researching this subject for future publication and ask if they're on board. Firstly, because don't make any promises you can't keep. But, also, you might get a great quote or insight for the pitch.

## How should I introduce myself?

If you've worked with them before, "Hi, hello, great last issue, here's a pitch." If you haven't? A quick line or two about where you're from, for whom you've written and any relevant expertise you have. DO NOT mention where you went to school if it hasn't anything to do with the subject. They don't care and it's a hallmark of amateurism.

## What if I am an amateur?

Shhhhh! If you can write, then just present yourself professionally and show that you can write in your pitch.

## But I have no clippings?

Cross that bridge when you get there. An editor may ask you to "audition" by writing the first 500 words or, in very rare instances, write the story on spec. They're within their right to ask it and you're within your right to accept or decline.

## FINDING A HOME

- Before pitching a magazine, study it to ensure that

A) It's the kind of story they'd tell; and  
B) they haven't told it before.

Sometimes editors will reject a pitch because their competition has covered it already, so take a moment to see if their competition has and find a way that you can do it differently and better.

- Some magazines have [Writer's Guidelines](#) posted online (usually in the [contacts page](#)).

Follow everything to a T, except the part about sending it to a general submissions mailbox (a.k.a. "pitch purgatory"). Instead, find the editor's work email. If it's unclear, decode the email format by mining media kits and other documentation for colleague's contacts (eg: last-name.first-name@publication.ca).

- Generally editors in the middle of the masthead (senior, associate, managing) are more receptive to correspondence than editors-in-chief.
- Even if they really liked it, some editors hesitate to assign features to writers they haven't yet worked with.

Consider pitching them something small first, to prove you're dependable and to get your foot in the door.

Pro-tip: Pitch big stories to small magazines and small stories to big magazines.

- Consider sending an introductory email, one or two lines about your story, asking if they'd be interested in a fuller pitch

It might save you both time in the long run.

### **OK, I have clippings. What kind should I offer?**

Offering links and clippings is important because you don't want to give editors a reason to google you and find, say, your worst but most read piece of writing. Attach things you're proud of, that demonstrate your ability to write in the style and format of your pitch and/or the magazine. Just two or three PDFs or links — they don't want your CV (literally and figuratively).

### **How long should I wait to follow up?**

Two weeks. Then if you don't hear from them, let them know in another week or two that you appreciate their time but will have to move on if they don't reply in a few days. If you don't hear from them, it's time to move on.

Pro-tip: Make a spreadsheet or calendar tracking your pitches and listing your second, third and even fourth choice publishers. Otherwise it's easy to lose track of all your pitches. This also helps to be a step ahead of rejections—which occur more times than not. Move on and keep trying. A good pitch almost never stays homeless.

## CRAFTING THE PITCH

- Always write it as you would tell the story, using the voice and style that you'd use if it were assigned to you.

It's especially important for emerging writers. It shows you can write. It also shows you understand narrative and the magazine's audience. By the end of it, the editor should be surprised and better informed, but crave to learn more.

- A pitch's size also reflects the size of the article.

Small front section bites shouldn't exceed 100-200 words. For features, you might want to write more of a proposal, up to 500 words. Either way, add a kicker that reminds them why this story is important for their audience.

- For features, consider this structure (shorter versions of this structure work for small articles too):
- A compelling intro that sets the tone and introduces a central character or conflict.
- A body proving you understand the story's complexity, stakes and universal questions.

Make clear what your story about and what it's really about? That second part goes beneath the surface and brings back an answer to the editor's inevitable question, "Why now?" There may be several reasons. The more layers the better.

- This is a good place to weave in secondary characters if they exist, and to make clear that you have access and appropriate sources.
- A conclusive paragraph answering why this publication wants this story and why you are the best person to write it.

If you're committed to an unconventional format or size, mention it here.

- The aforementioned kicker.
- Give it a headline.

Editors appreciate a writer who thinks editorially. Even mention a specific column or department if there's one in mind. Worst case, they disagree and rename it/ place it elsewhere.

### **Can I pitch multiple publications at once?**

The answer is no 99.8% of the time. But if your access is time-sensitive, perhaps because it's contingent on urgent travel plans, then it's ok. Just be honest and don't overdo it. Tell the editors exactly to whom you've also pitched and why. And promise that if they're interested you will hold all other queries immediately. Can I resell a story?

Word for word? Sure, some magazines republish stories, such as Reader's Digest, Alberta Views, Utne Reader, but they're rare (another reason to study the book). More importantly, check with your original publisher's contract first. It will usually state exclusive rights for a set number of days post-publication.

### **What about repurposing a story?**

That's much more likely but, again, check with your original publisher's contract for a clause about writing on the same topic for competition. If that's cleared, go for it because, remember, you can tell the same story many different ways. Make sure to adjust your pitch accordingly—for the new publication and the new angle and/or format. And hats off to you for making the most of your hard work and precious time.