

6 questions journalists should be able to answer before pitching a story



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I can't believe that my former editor never threw me out of his office. That's because, back when I was a cub reporter, I used to pitch story ideas by proclaiming that I wanted to write about "the homeless," or "drug gangs," or "teen mothers."

While these were interesting and important topics, that's all they were — topics. They didn't have enough shape or specificity to be ideas.

Several months passed before I finally learned how important it was to do research to support a story idea. I realized I could do "pre-reporting" without getting too invested in a story. I could read previous stories and interview a few sources to have a better sense of what the story might be about.

And with that background, I could pitch my ideas in the form of a small quest: "The number of homeless families is increasing in the suburbs, and I'd like to find out why." "Juries seem to be particularly unforgiving of drug gang members, and I'd like to see what prosecutors and defense attorneys have to say about that." "A school has started a program for teen mothers, and I'd like to examine who's behind it and what they hope to accomplish."

Story pitches can come in all formats. (The narrative blog, [Gangrey.com](#), has a good piece on pitches — particularly magazine story pitches — [here](#).) Pitches can vary depending on the reporter's track record, and how long the reporter and editor have worked together. In general, the more the editor and reporter have worked together, the more they can communicate in shorthand.

But regardless of the reporter's experience or how mature the editor-reporter relationship is, I think it's important for the reporter to be able to answer a handful of questions before pitching the story to his or her editor. These are questions for both reporters and editors to ask.

What piques your curiosity about the story?

I always ask this when a reporter approaches me with an idea. I want to know whether she is genuinely interested in the idea and whether her curiosity will drive her to seek the answers she needs to tell the story. I want to know what aspect of the story first caught her attention. If she ever gets lost in the weeds during the reporting, I can remind her about the initial moment of intrigue. Finally, I want to understand how the writer thinks. What topics are of natural interest to her? Where is she getting her ideas from? What is she reading?

What's new about the story, and why do you want to tell it now?

I want the reporter to have done enough research to understand where the story lies in a timeline. What previous events have led to the current situation? Give me that context. Then let me know what's new about the situation. Does the story reflect a new trend, a turning point, the start or the end of a conflict? Do we need to tell the story in advance of an upcoming decision, meeting or event?

Such "news pegs" can be limiting, and I've often argued that we should be able to publish stories just because they are good stories. But given how busy readers are and how many distractions they face, it helps if a story — even "just a good story" — has a compelling reason to be told today.

Why will the reader or viewer care about the story?

Yes, I'd like to know why a reporter is curious about a story idea. But I'd also like him to step outside of his reporter's role and think as a reader or viewer. How can we frame the story in a way that's relevant to the average person? This is where the reporter considers why the story would grab the attention of his parents or, say, his friends at a bar (or his parents at a bar).

Not that his parents or friends are average people, but they live outside the newsroom (which can sometimes become fixated on a story that's not relevant to others). Ordinary people are most concerned about their finances, health and safety. And if they have kids, they're probably concerned about all of that, plus education. Does the reporter's story idea touch upon any of these issues?

How can we tell this story digitally?

We are increasingly telling our stories across platforms — on the Web and on tablets and other digital devices. It's important for the reporter to develop a sharp sense of what kinds of storytelling work well on different platforms. In addition to producing the traditional story, could we create short videos of the people in the story for an online package? Are there any ways of telling the story through an interactive graphic that would work on the iPad?

I'm not expecting the reporter to produce these packages himself. But I'd like him to have the judgment to say, "Here are the components in my story idea that I think would lend themselves to digital storytelling."

What questions will you need to ask to get this story, and what sources will you need to consult?

Since this is still the ideas phase, I'm not expecting the reporter to know what the story is going to say. I hope that he has a hypothesis that he's going to test through his reporting. That's why I'd like to know at least three or four questions that the reporter wants to ask, plus two or three sources he'll consult. I'd also like to know whether there's a central question that the reporter is trying to answer in the story. The central question can help us focus the story after he's done most of his reporting.

How much time will you need to produce the story, and how much space/time do you think the story deserves?

As an editor, I think it's important to talk about the scope of a story before much of the reporting gets under way. I don't want to be rigid about it — we can increase or decrease the scope depending on what the reporter finds out. But it's important for the reporter and editor to agree on the story's ambitions at the beginning, and then adjust as the reporting progresses.

I've also found that it's not a good idea to tell the reporter, "Write what you think the story deserves." In the newspaper world, if a story deserves a lot of space, let's talk about it ahead of time, and I will fight for that space. But both the reporter and the editor will benefit from having a starting point and shared expectations for how ambitious we both will be.

If you'd like to learn more about pitching (and selling) your stories, join Butch Ward and me at ["Writing and Selling Your Freelance Stories,"](#) a three-day Poynter seminar that runs Oct. 1-3.

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