

The Four-Part Pitch

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It has never been easier to get published than it is right now. Thanks to the ongoing desktop publishing revolution there are myriad outlets to choose from. In addition to the blogging sites mentioned in the previous chapter, there are websites on every imaginable topic that need content. There are still some newsstand magazines that pay freelance writers, and there are numerous literary magazines that do not pay.

Beneath the upper echelon of the newsstand, there remains a healthy maker movement for printed zines: regional and local zines, music zines, political zines, fanzines, and other microtopic zines. In the professions, there are scholarly journals, trade journals, and all manner of websites looking for writers. Then there are the remaining newspapers: big daily papers, smaller alternative newsweeklies, rural weeklies, entertainment guides, classified advertisers, gazetteers. With these choices, you can get published today almost at will. You just won't get paid.

Your priority should be to identify good outlets for your work: places you have an affinity with, places where your writing will fit. Some of these may be paying markets; most won't be. When you send your writing in, do what I do — ask for their customary rate and accept whatever it is. Simple. We're talking about cultivating outlets for your work here. If you're looking for advice on how to grow a business with your writing, you have entered the wrong book. This book is about making a life as a writer, not making a living as a writer. There are many excellent books about making money with your writing that mostly involve using your writing to generate multiple streams of income. The writing won't pay but hopefully the consulting will.

You make money from your writing by becoming a recognized name familiar to editors of either periodicals or books. Your published writing precedes you.

Publishers are paying, in part, for your name. If you already have a household name, such as celebrity status in some field, you can get paid to write. In fact, you can get paid to not write; you can tell your story to a ghost writer who will write it for you.

If you are not a celebrity and you want to write, and you want to find outlets for your work, you are in the right book! As you publish your work, you'll find that your name becomes recognized and you will have an easier time finding paying as well as free prestige outlets for your work.

Once you have found a few outlets you'd like to write for, how do you go about opening a dialogue with them? Of course, you could just attach your writing to an email and send it. If you have tried that method and are tired of being rejected, I have something for you that works much better.

Over the years, I have developed a formula for pitching that is stunningly effective. Getting journalists to review books is an art form, and it is very similar to getting an agent or editor to consider your writing. I wrote over 200 news releases per year for many years running. This pitch has been refined through literally millions of impressions. I've shared it with many writers and they report the same remarkable results. It is an obvious but irresistible pitch, which means it's probably not original. I'm sure it's a refinement of a basic sales letter formula I heard in school or read in a book. I call it my "four-part pitch." The four parts are:

1. Stroke
2. Pitch
3. Credentials
4. Action Alternatives

The Stroke

Stroke: Pay a compliment to the receiver. Make it genuine if you can.

This is the element that most distinguishes the Four-Part Pitch from other sales letters. When you say something genuine and positive about the work your receiver is doing, they can't help but take notice. An author named Bob Black, who I had the privilege of editing for a number of years, once wrote, "that voice is sweetest that sings my song." Flattery puts the reader in the right frame of mind to receive your pitch. But it's more than just flattery.

The stroke shows that you did your homework. What it tells an editor is that you actually read their publication. It makes it more likely they will actually read your pitch. Here's an example of a fairly generic stroke:

I'm a subscriber to your publication and I love what you're doing in the Interview section.

Take a look at the email pitches you receive. How many of them begin by talking about themselves and how many start by talking about you? It is human nature to be drawn in by writing that is about you. Drawing in the editor, showing respect, and demonstrating a knowledge of the publication will get them to paragraph two.

The Pitch

Pitch. State your request as clearly and economically as possible.

You have one paragraph to make the case for the piece or project you are pitching. Let's go right to an example article pitch:

I'm writing to see if you would be interested in seeing a profile I've written of Gary Michael Smith, the author of *Publishing for Small Press Runs?*

Come right out and state your request — no long-winded set-up. The hard part is to get your pitch across in one paragraph. You have to take out almost all the hype to get it to fit.

Now that you have purchased the editor's attention with your stroke, and quickly stated your request, it's time to sell yourself as the right person to write this piece.

Your Credentials

Credentials. What qualifications do you have to author this piece?

This paragraph should answer the question, "Okay, I like the idea; what makes you the right person to write it?" This is where you mention any previous writing experience or, if you have a lot of experience, where you stick to credits that will appeal to this specific editor for this assignment.

There is a lot more risk in publishing than many writers realize. One of the risks is that a writer will blow off the deadline. That could leave you scrambling. An editor is always wondering whether the writer will deliver the goods. Another risk is the piece will be terrible. If you can claim to have been published by a recognized outlet, the editor should be willing to extend the benefit of the doubt that you can probably put sentences together. Another risk is that you will be a jerk about changes. Any experience you have writing for a daily, weekly, or monthly periodical shows professionalism and less sensitivity to butchering — er, I mean, editing. Other risks are that you'll violate copyright law, you have an exaggerated opinion of what you'll be paid, and so on.

All these risks linger in the mind of an editor or agent considering your pitch. The failings of writers become the failings of editors. You ease the fear of these risks through your credentials paragraph. Here's an example:

I'm a freelance writer living in New Orleans. I teach at Tulane University. I write profiles of publishers for *The Independent* and other publishing periodicals. My writing has appeared in *Small Press*, *Northwest Writer*, and *SALON*.

"That's easy for you to say," you're thinking, "but what if you don't have any credentials?" Everyone has credentials, trust me. It's more a matter of making your credentials relevant than whether you have them or not. It might take some creativity on your part, but you can get through this paragraph even if you have no significant experience as a published writer. Don't lie about your credentials, because that's easy to spot. But you only have to tell enough of the truth to get your foot in the door. We all have enough experience to warrant having our submissions considered by an editor.

Now it's time to seal the deal. I used to call the fourth paragraph "the close," as in a sales letter, but the best close is not a close at all, it's an open, as in keeping your options open.

Action Alternatives

Action Alternatives. Don't force the editor into a "yes or no" position. Instead, provide a variety of suggested outcomes between yes and no.

A close is an attempt to force the decision in your favor, with lines such as, "I hope you'll consider this piece," or "I can complete the piece in two weeks." An open tries to turn even a "no" into a positive outcome by generating other leads. Here's an example:

If you'd like to see the piece, please let me know what format you prefer. If this profile isn't quite on the mark, would you be receptive to other profile ideas? If you're not in the market for work like this, can you recommend someone who might be? I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

In those few cases where I have not been given the green light to submit a piece for consideration, I get suggestions for other stories the editor would like to see. Sometimes I get referrals to editors at other publications. Then I have a built-in stroke for the next query letter: “I was referred to you by Jane Smith, the editor of....”

What’s Missing?

Let’s take a look at what we left out to get such an economical query letter.

- ◆ **Money.** Never mention compensation in a pitch letter. There’s plenty of time for that later. I usually ask for whatever the publication’s customary and standard rate of pay is, and I accept that the first time. Maybe after a couple pieces get published and I have established a relationship, I’ll see if there is room to negotiate a higher fee.
- ◆ **Rights.** There’s no mention of “first serial rights” or any other language related to copyright or usage restrictions. It’s premature to mention rights in a pitch letter. When I submit a piece, I usually state the rights arrangement I want at the top and let the publisher ask for something different if they need it. I usually begin a piece with “First Serial Rights to *Publication Name*.” I keep all the rights except for the right to publish first. I can submit the piece to other publications once it has run it and include it in books without asking permission. When the editors want exclusive rights, they usually aren’t bashful about asking for them.
- ◆ **Ultimatums.** You want to avoid hostile-sounding language such as, “If I haven’t heard from you in two weeks, I’ll assume I’m at liberty to pitch this idea

elsewhere.” You don’t play hardball in a pitch letter; you play softball — a nice, gentle pitch that’s easy to hit and makes the batter look good.

- ◆ **The Piece Itself.** Do not include the piece with your pitch. There are exceptions to the rule, but this is a common pitching mistake made by beginning writers. They’re so anxious for someone to see what they’ve written that they can’t restrain themselves from including it with the pitch letter. By sending a pitch only, you’re following protocol and showing respect for your editor’s time.