



Dream of Travel Writing

How to Craft the Perfect Travel Article Pitch

What we're talking about today is how to craft the perfect pitch, but the thing is that, what I see every time I do pitch critiques with writers is that some of the issues with their pitches actually come before the pitch is ever written. It has to do with the idea itself. We're going to talk a bit about how to make sure you have the right idea through "5 Ways to Tell You Shouldn't Write a Pitch Yet" and we're also going to talk about how to formulate the perfect three-paragraph pitch.

The idea of the three-paragraph pitch is that it keeps you from spending too much time pitching, from spending too much time doing the research that actually precedes the pitch, not necessarily from writing the pitch itself. And so when we go through the three-paragraph pitch structure, it keeps you from researching and including extra information that editors don't need to see in your pitch. People often research and they put so much information in their pitch that the editor gets into a "too long didn't read" situation and so it makes it hard for you to get in touch with new editors. At the end, we'll talk about some of the most frequent questions that writers have about pitching.

This past weekend we had our first writer's retreat in the Catskill Mountains. It was called the "Pitchaplooza" and it was all about pitches. One of the great things about Pitchaplooza was I spent two and a half days, talking, pitching, with writers who are all at different stages in their careers. And what that meant was that I got to see, in that little group, some trends that go across all different writers. And they're comfortable with the concept of pitching, writers that have been writing for a long time but only for one magazine, and it really shed light on some things that I don't always address on the blog. So I'm excited to share the answers to these frequent questions with you today.

I'm actually a former magazine editor as well. So I've sat on both sides of the desk and I bring both of those perspectives to when I talk to you about pitching because the thing is that, I think as freehand writers we often get into this mentality that the editors are sort of these faceless beings on the other end of emails. And we don't think about their day and the challenges they confront. And so having been there myself, I'm very familiar with that. And also I'm a contributing editor to multiple trade publications. And contributing editors are not actually people who edit per se, or edit articles coming in from other writers, but they're on contract to write frequently. I also have writers I work with very often in that capacity.

Before we talk about what is the perfect pitch, we should talk about what is the purpose of a pitch. I'd love if you guys can chime in on the side in response to this question because before we talk about pitching it's important to understand what is the point of a pitch letter what is the point of that email, it isn't really a letter anymore, it's always an email, but what is the point of that communication. Are we trying to get an assignment, are we trying to get a response, are we trying to get more information from the editor about the publication, What



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are we trying to do? And for the purposes of this conversation, I like to think that we are starting a conversation with the editors.

Think about it this way: I love this quote from Jordan Heller, who is the Editor in Chief of Hemispheres Magazine. And what he says is that, “I once had a guy call me up and give me a one word pitch. He said ‘Macau’.” And that’s not really a pitch, is it? It’s not really a narrative. It’s just a place. And you know obviously I’m hoping that all of you on this call will look at that and think “oh that’s silly I would never call up or write an editor and just say ‘Macau’”. But the thing is I think we often forget that just as a one word pitch that’s just a destination is useless, there’s a lot of other types of pitches that don’t really mean anything to an editor that we can do.

As far as I’m concerned, the main purpose of a pitch is not to get an assignment, it’s to start a conversation with the editor. And the thing is, what does that conversation mean? Is that conversation to get you an assignment? Yes that’s a farther along goal, but in the near term, the purpose of that conversation is to show the editor that they want to work with you. Not just that you want to work with them, because that’s obvious, because you’re sending them a pitch, but to show the editor that they want to work with you. And so how do we do that? We do that by showing the editor that we are capable of producing good ideas, we do that by showing the editor that we are professional (which doesn’t just mean using business-like conversation or business-like words). I see a lot of people writing pitches that have a sort of stilted business language, which is not actually super effective.

What happens is, if an editor gets a pitch from somebody, and it seems very stilted, it seems like this person doesn’t have a good writing background and they spend too much time pouring over their words editing them, or maybe this person is an English second-language speaker, and all sorts of things that we don’t think about when we do the final proofread of our pitch. But they can come across when our pitch has this stilted, over business-y language. That doesn’t really show the editor that you’re someone they want to work with.

The ways that we can show the editor through our pitches that we’re professionals is actually by using certain industry terms and by using certain structures, such as the three-paragraph structure that we’re going to talk about. And the third and probably one of the most important things that we can show an editor is that we understand their publication. And I’m going to talk about how to do that as well. When you pitch with this in mind, that you’re trying to start a conversation, it’s a very, very different ballgame. We talked about this a lot over the weekend, and this is something I really want to instill in you guys. If you’re pitching a sort of conversation, the idea is to get a response. It’s not necessarily to get a yes, but it is to get a response. If you’re at a bar or if you’re at a networking event, wherever, and you go up to someone you don’t know, and you go up to them and say “Hi! How are you doing?” your



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goal is for them to say “Hi! I’m so-and-so, who are you?” Not necessarily for them to say “Yes, let’s go out on a date.” Because that’s not the question that you’re asking. Let’s think about how to reframe our pitches so that the question we’re asking is not this right, get to the point, give me an assignment, but the question that you’re asking is “Hey! Can we talk about working together?”

Now that we’ve talked about what the point of a pitch is, let’s talk about how we know we are not yet ready to send a pitch. And while we talk about this, I’d love for you guys in the question section to chime in about some of the things that hold you back from sending pitches. Because I’m going to answer some of them, but I bet you guys have some things I haven’t thought of. So maybe you have gone on a trip and you have some things that you might like to pitch and you write them up and you don’t know who to send them to. Or you have found a publication but you don’t know who the right editor is. Or perhaps you’ve gone on a trip and, Kendra has a good point here, she doesn’t know what the “cool” angle is. Sometimes it’s because we think we don’t have enough information and so keep chiming in on these and I’ll address them as we go through.

To start, here are five ways that you should know that you are not yet ready to hit send on that pitch.

1. Your idea is too narrow, or broad, for the publication you’re pitching, for example, if you were pitching a national publication. National publications are the type of publications that show up on any newsstand around the country, travel and leisure, Conde Nast, now there’s Afar, Outside, these are the big ones. But there are also smaller national publications, ones that have a specific focus. We have a bunch coming up in the database this week on adventure travel. There’s food, food and travel, La Cuchina Italiana is another one. When you’re pitching a national publication, you have to remember that their audience is national.

When the idea is too narrow, what I mean by that is that you are trying to pitch a small mountain lodge in the Dolomite mountains of Italy to a national American publication just as a new property of simply because it’s a cool place. So that’s too narrow for a national U.S. publication because it’s not the kind of thing that is going to interest all of their readers. They’re less likely to buy it.

There are two things you can do if you think you’re idea is going to be too narrow. You can do what’s called a “basket of kittens”. I love this. This is by Abby Kozolchyk, who is an editor for Everyday with Rachel Ray. She calls it a basket of kittens when you take a bunch of things that individually are small and unique and good on their own, and then you get this collection of things that are all wonderful on their own. And when you put them together,



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how can you say no, how can you say no to a basket of kittens? And if someone you know doesn't like cats, one of my best friends doesn't like cats, think about puppies or rabbits or babies, whatever adorable animal floats your boat. That's one way, if you're trying to pitch something to a national magazine that might be too narrow. Another way is rather than put together a bunch of individual places that are similar and are all around the geographic distribution of that publication, is that you can take the individual thing that you want to feature and you can make it indicative of a trend.

For instance you can say that the mountain lodge in the Dolomites is actually doing a very pioneering new thing, it's offering guests to opportunity to arrive by hot air balloon and take their meals in hot air balloons, it's almost like a hot air balloon hotel. So that's very cool and different, and no one else is doing it. So you wouldn't be able to say that, but you can use that as an example of extremely high luxury high level mountain getaways that are now becoming prevalent, in light of ultra-rich people not knowing what to do with their money now that they own too many yachts.

The flip side to that is, what if you are pitching a regional publication, what if you are pitching a small publication. You have to make sure that your idea is not too big. So what that means is, say you are pitching "Edible Hudson Valley." So our house in the Catskills is in the Hudson Valley Heritage area and we have an Edible Magazine that's separate from the Edible magazine for NYC, Brooklyn, and all these Edibles, it's just for the Hudson Valley. So if I were to pitch them agritourism, the opportunity to go spend the day at a farm, petting the animals, picking the vegetables, taking cooking classes—that's way too big for them. What they would need is the kind of thing we were talking about—that we can't pitch to a bigger magazine. They would need the story of one particular place in their coverage area that's doing that, and how the person started their agritourism, why they had the idea, why its uniquely tied to the Hudson Valley.

2. There's No Story. The other thing that means you're not quite ready yet to send your pitch is that it's just a topic. Somebody said previously that they hold back from sending pitches when they're not sure they have an angle. What an angle means, for those of you not familiar, is like a "slice of an idea". An angle is, rather than agritourism, a specific type of agritourism that opening in a specific area that does a specific thing that's indicative of a trend.

We're making it very, very narrow. But the thing is that editors complain very frequently that new writers, new to them writers, and freelancers in general, are often pitching them things that aren't stories. So we heard earlier with Jordan Heller that someone pitched him "Macau". And that's not just a pitch, that's a place. But I think we also forget how compelling storytelling is. And that goes back to what I was saying, say in the Hudson Valley we want to pitch this agritourism which was started by somebody who, this is kind of a



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common story but, somebody who worked on Wall Street and he got burnt out, and so rather than spending his high salary on going to bars and going to the Hamptons for the weekend, he took it and he invested in a property upstate, and he created a place where other burnt out Wall Street people could come get away for a week and go back if they don't want to leave it all behind the same way he did. So that's a story, right, it has a beginning, he was on Wall Street and burnt out, it has a middle, his journey of setting up this place, and it has an ending, now he has a place where burnt out Wall Street people can come. One of the things that can really set your pitch apart, and also make you not sure if you're ready to hit send is the lack of story, the lack of "so what".

3. Now another thing that a lot of people miss that is a very clear sign that you are not ready to send a pitch, is that you have not matched it to a specific section of a specific magazine. If the text of the pitch that you have written in your mind could apply to all sorts of magazines, it is not ready to send. Your pitch needs to include a specific reference to the section of the publication you are pitching, in which your pitch should appear. When we get to the three-paragraph structure, you'll see that this helps write the pitch, the middle part of the pitch where you talk about what the story is going to be about which is typically an area people struggle with. If you have access to the magazine database, the "how to pitch" tab is where we show you how to make that connection.

In this magazine, we see that there's an "out and about" section that asks for articles that are 400- 1000 words. Sometimes they are roundups or itineraries. You would say to the editor, "I propose a piece on mountain lodges you can reach by helicopter in the Dolomites for your adventure section of out and about. The piece will be about 400 words." This addresses the third part of what we want to show the editor, that you are familiar with their publication. And this again, is what most writers forget to do. If you do this, you are putting yourself above 99.9% of people. To me it made the difference when I started out pitching in terms of getting assignments, and the successful people I know all adhere to this practice of pitching to a specific part of the magazine and had a 90% response rate as a result.

4. We talked about if you don't have a story, it doesn't have a beginning, middle, and end. There's nothing new about it, there's no action. But sometimes what happens is, you don't even know what really we're pitching. I see this happen when people have really long rambling pieces, and I review them, and I say how can I make this shorter and they don't know what to cut. They don't know what to cut because they don't actually know what their story's about. They have a collection of facts and there might be a beginning, middle, and end but they don't really know what the thread is, they don't know what the point is.

One way to test this is to make sure that you can describe your article in one sentence. Don't say a couple of words or one word, because again that's a topic. So one sentence has a verb



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and a noun and maybe some adverbs and some clauses, but one sentence. So to go back to this Wall Street agritourism example, I would say, my story is about a former, burnt out Wall Street trader who left it all behind to start agritourism in the Catskills that now helps other Wall Street brokers from burning out. So that's one sentence, it's a little long, I could probably make it shorter.

5. The most important point of that sentence is to see if it passes the “tell-a-friend” test. I think a lot of us when we're thinking about ideas before we pitch them, especially when we come back from a trip, I know I'm guilty of this, that if I get back from a trip and my friends ask how it went, I don't want to tell them. Does anyone else suffer from this? I feel like I haven't quite formulated my ideas yet, and people say “oh how was your trip?” then that forces me to tell them some sort of bland description of what we did, which is not necessarily what the story is. I haven't quite formulated the story.

Once you have that one sentence that we came up with in point 4 and know what the story is about, you can go around to people you know, and this works best for people who aren't in travel and aren't in journalism, to your significant other, to your mom, I use this on the barista in the coffee place where I work a lot during the day. This is my favorite thing—when I go to get coffee in the morning they say how's it going what are you working on (they know I'm a writer) and I say I'm working on a story about blahblahblah. And if they don't say “oh that's cool!” then I am missing something. And you can try this on anybody, it doesn't have to be people you know and in fact it's better to have people that you don't know because then they can give you honest feedback. Honest feedback is a blank stare, “oh cool”, or “mmm I don't really get that, what do you mean?”. The tell-a-friend is a great way to see if your idea is going to interest an editor as well.

Let's get into the heart of it, the three-paragraph pitch formula. So I'm curious, just chime in in the questions tab, how long it takes you to write a pitch, in minutes hours whatever metric to describe you sitting at your laptop typing up the words that will eventually be in the email that you send out. I noticed an interesting thing around this, when we started doing our travel writer focus groups. People said one of two things, they either said two to three hours, which I'm seeing some of you respond in the question section, or they say 15 minutes. It was almost uniformly one of the two. There's a reason for that split.

I call this “reconsidering the two hours and 45 minutes”. If you think about taking three hours to pitch, that means you are doing something for two hours and 45 minutes that people who are writing pitches in 15 minutes aren't doing. Part of that is trying to figure out the answers to the questions that we already talked about. So if that is what you're doing a lot of the time, so if you're not typing, researching things online, second guessing yourself then one of the things you can do, go and download the handouts in the handout sidebar, there's a



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sheet in there called the “Idea triage system”. It’s like the 8 question version of what we talked about when we discussed “5 reasons you know you’re not ready to hit send”.

Run your ideas through that before you sit at your laptop to write a pitch. If you have sat down in the pitching moment—you are armed with the address of the editor, the name of the section, and you’re not yet clear on what your idea is, you’re going to totally kill your mojo. You’re going to kill your writing flow, and frankly your sense of self-confidence. And that’s going to affect the next couple of pitches you send that are ready to go. Don’t sit down at your laptop with an idea to pitch that hasn’t yet passed that test—either the 5 things we just talked about or if you want the easy sort of work-through, that pitch triage sheet that’s in the handouts. What the people that only take 15 minutes to write a pitch do is, they are already armed with all the pieces of the pitch and they just fill them into this formula. So let’s get into the formula.

The perfect pitch formula is composed of three things. I talked about it being a three-paragraph formula. And the one thing I don’t have on here is the headline—so the subject line of the email which is going to be the headline of your piece but we’ll talk about that at the end so don’t worry about that. The three parts of the three-paragraph perfect pitch are the lede or intro (and any of you who have a journalism background you’ll notice that I used the journalism lede here and that’s because the lede of your pitch, the first paragraph of your pitch, should sound like the beginning of your article and we’re going to get into how to do that).

The second paragraph is the outline of what you’re going to write, and it’s very important that there is a stark contrast in the language between these two pieces. If your first paragraph and your second paragraph, or what I more often see is your first through fourth paragraphs because they’re all sort of telling the story, if they all have a similar tone and similar writing style, you are writing yourself into a hole. Two things are happening—editors don’t have a lot of time to read pitches, they read them because they do need new ideas and they do need new writers, but they are very stressed out. I got a post on the blog about all the things that editors do during their day. I sent it to an editor friend of mind whom it’s based on, and he said even just reading this post stresses him out.

Editors have a lot on their plates and they resoundingly say, write me the shortest pitch you possibly can to get your idea across. So it’s kind of a test. And so the way to do that and still show them your writing style is through the lede. The lede is where you flex your descriptive muscles, where you show them your journalistic style. The outline of what you’re going to write is not where you do this. The outline should be, not necessarily vague, but the outline should be an outline, it should be an overview, it should not go into excruciating or artistic detail about your piece.



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The third part I like to call the “I’m so great” paragraph, which is something I borrowed/stole (frequently attribute, so I guess it’s not stole) to another writer who has a blog called Dollars and Deadlines. She calls it the “I’m so great paragraph” because this is where you’re tooting your own horn. This is important to remember, because I think that in the ISG paragraph it’s kind of at the home run, you’re at the end you’re almost ready to send the pitch, this is where people falter. This is where we start to go on and on about our credentials or lack thereof, and sometimes we say essentially “I might not have enough experience to write this piece but I wish you would assign it to me”. Or we simply plop in a URL or any other number of things, but the ISG paragraph, all it needs to talk about is why YOU in particular should be writing THIS particular article. So let’s dive in.

When you’re writing a lede, there are a couple of formulas you can use to get, not just to the point, but to get to the impact, the attention grabbing nature of the lede quickly. One of my favorite ones is “start in the middle” but I’m going to get back to that. Some easy ones are to start out with a too good to be true statistic. For instance, if you were writing about online marketing, and you had a website that had a 0.2% bounce rate, so bounce rate means the number of times that somebody comes to your webpage and leaves immediately to go somewhere else, a different website, rather than going to another page within your website.

A very good bounce rate is 20-40%. If you have 0.something% bounce rate, that’s practically unheard of. So that would be the type of statistic that you would put in here. I like to use ones when I’m talking about the size of the travel agency. There’s one that Travel+Social Good uses a lot, that 1 in 11 people in the world work in tourism. That’s pretty staggering. That’s a great way to start an article, if you have one of those available. Another way that’s related, but not numerically based, is to demonstrate that something is the only thing of it’s kind. So I used a completely made up example earlier of the hut in the mountain in the Dolomites that is only reached by hot air balloon and you have to option of taking your meals in the hot air balloon and it’s almost like a hot air balloon hotel.

That would be the kind of thing where someone would open your email and be like “What?! This exists? This is amazing, this is ridiculous.” A friend of mine who is based in France, wrote a piece one time about a volcano in France that you could visit. Who knew that there was a volcano in France, right? Another way to do this though, especially if you’re trying to pitch a narrative piece rather than a more factual roundup piece is to use an anecdote, is to use a moment from your trip. Now there’s two way to go about this. One is to start in the middle. In our workshop in London, we workshopped through an idea with gentleman who had gone skydiving in Dubai. And what we created was this pitch which was an email that started with him looking at his feet, about to jump out of the airplane. That’s one way to start in the middle.



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Another way to use an image or experience from your trip is to take the one that sticks with you. So it might not be the middle, it might be the end, it might be the beginning of an experience. Don George has a story in his collection, a sort of “greatest hits” of Don George. He’s the author of Lonely Planet’s Book of Travel Writing, if you’re not familiar with him, and he also runs the Book Passage Travel Writers and Photographer’s Conference, which I highly recommend. So Don George has a story in which he talked about being somewhere in SE Asia that is formerly war torn and he is near a border, and he is asked by one of the soldiers (who are armed with AK47s) to come off into the jungle with him to meet the soldiers because they all meet for their cigarette break. And even though there were all sorts of story that came after that, that one moment, where the soldier opened up to him showing that this conflict is not felt on the ground as much as one might think, could be a place where he could start that story.

Then we get to the middle paragraph. Once you’ve set the scene or you’ve grabbed the editor’s attention with a statistic or something unique, then you need to get into what you’re actually pitching them. This is the part where that one sentence description is really important. I recommend that whatever your one sentence description is, you stick it in this paragraph, either at the beginning or the end. And what you can do here, and this is a very formulaic paragraph to write, is start by saying “I’d like to propose an article for your [Insert name of Section]” When I showed you a part of the travel magazine database previously, we talked about the “out and about section”. So “I’d like to propose a 400 word article for your out and about section in the section where you cover adventure travel”, and then you say your point.

This is where you say your one sentence description. So this is where you say “A brand new once in a lifetime opportunity to stay in a mountain hut that can only be reached by hot air balloon.” Now you’re going to talk about what you’re going to cover. This is a great opportunity to go back to high school or middle school or whenever it was that you have the three-paragraph, three point thesis structure. A lot of people in this section try to include practically the whole article, the whole kitchen sink in an overview. They try to oh and there’s this and there’s that and there’s this other thing and if you like I could also feature this.

The editor doesn’t need to know all these things right now. They only need to know the point. You told them the point, and now they need to know that you can deliver on it. I’ve said that this hot air balloon hotel business is the only one in the world. So what I might say is three other things that make them unique. Or, if we are going to go back to our Hudson Valley Wall Street broker guy, I could talk about three activities that he offers in his agritourism or I could talk about three moments in his journey to set up his agritourism that I’m going to mention in the article. But keep it brief and keep it an overview and keep each of those points from



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ballooning out of hand in the description. Remember what I said before—the lede is for description and for flexing your journalistic muscle whereas this middle paragraph is where we tell the editor what we’re going to cover.

You want to hook their interest but then you want to keep them on the line. You don’t want to talk them to death about the article idea. You want them to be wanting more. So don’t give them the whole kit and caboodle. The one other thing you can have in here is what research you have done or will do. If you have a trip coming up, this is where you can say “I’m heading to the Hudson Valley next weekend and visiting this agritourism, and I’m going to be interviewing the owner.” Or you can say, “I recently returned from the hot air balloon hut and I have photos available to accompany the piece.”

One note on photos, because I did not include this in the frequent questions at the end of the call. People often ask me how to tell the editor they have photos or if they should tell the editor they have photos. There are two separate answers here. If it is a major newsstand magazine, so we’re talking Far, T&L, Conde Nast, super major Women’s Magazine level, we’re talking \$2 a word, they don’t want your photos, and they don’t even want to know that you have photos because they would either be sending someone out to take photos or they will use stock photos because that is what they do. However, pretty much anything below that, and even talking magazines that pay \$1/word, if you have gone somewhere that is hard to get to, unique, it’s unlikely that they can get those photos from anywhere else and even a destination, tell them that you have photos because in this day and age when budgets have shrunk so much and it’s very less likely than it used to be for someone to just send out a photographer, if you have the photos available, that could be a total make or break for getting the assignment. And this is where you could mention it. You can say, “I’ve already gone on this trip, and I have the photos to accompany it.”

That leads us right into the “About you” paragraph. I’m just curious, over here in the questions box, how long does it take you guys to figure out what to write in the about you paragraph for each pitch. Do you have a standard one that you just sort of cut and paste, or do you write them custom for each article? Do you sort of have a couple that you use, depending on if it’s in different topic areas that you cover, such as maybe you do ecotourism but you also do food and so you have a few different ones? Because what I’ve found is that this goes two ways. Either people write a custom one ever single time and they mention different things, or they have one that they drop in, which is not necessarily the right answer for each article, it’s not really highlighting their expertise for each article.

When you write that third paragraph, what I want you to keep in mind is the only thing that should go in there should be relevant to that specific piece. If you are pitching an article and you have a blog, the fact that you have a blog is not relevant. If you have an award-winning



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blog on Italian food that you have had for 15 years, and you are pitching something about a specific type of Italian pasta, then that is relevant. You need to frame it like it's relevant, you need to say that it's a blog about Italian food and it's award-winning and you've had it forever, because that's positioning you as an expert. But otherwise, I see so many people say that they have a blog and then just put a link to it, like either they drop the link in so that it's a naked link or say "here's a link to my blog".

An editor that is getting an unsolicited email from you, you are pitching them out of the blue, and they don't already know you, is never ever going to click on a link that is hidden like that. AND if you just send a link to your blog just "splat", not only do they not click on it, but they're not very happy because they want to know why you should write a specific piece. They don't want to spend 5 hours looking through your blog to see if you are the right person. You need to tell them. So if you have written for other magazines that are relevant to the piece, that's great. I used to only write about Italy, and when I pitched articles about Italy I would say, "I write regularly for Italy Magazine and I've written for Italian American, etc." If you have written for very high level impressive magazines, say for instance you have a clip from USA Today or the NY Times or the Wall Street Journal, that's great because that shows the editor that you have the chops to write, which is relevant to the specific piece because it is relevant to them commissioning you.

A formula that I really like here is to say "I am a (depending on how you feel about yourself you can say 'I am a travel journalist/writer, whatever feels right to you, and add freelance in front if of that if you're freelance) who is based in (only say this if it is relevant to your piece, if you're pitching something about S. Africa and you're typically based in London, not important, so if I'm pitching something about the Hudson Valley, I'm going to say something like I'm based in NY. If I'm pitching something about the Dolomites, I'm just going to say 'I'm a freehand travel journalist') who has written for (then you include your most impressive publications or the ones that most fit this piece, don't include more than 3, don't include links, just include the titles). And then include whatever makes you relevant for this piece. Again, like I said, if you have a special expertise area, then mention that. If, for example, you have a degree from the Institute of Gastronomical Sciences in Italy, and you're pitching a food piece, that's a great thing to mention. Likewise, if you're pitching a piece about healthy food and you have a nutrition background.

I've got a question over here on the sidebar: "Should you link to your most impressive pieces, even if it's not relevant?" Notice I said, mention the outlets. I'm going to address this later in the "10 most commonly asked questions" about whether or not you should link to your pieces. But the partial answer to that question now, and we'll circle back later, is you should say "a freehand travel writer/journalist, who has written for...and the places" But no



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links, remember we don't want to include links that the editor is going to be scared to click on that is going to make them think that your pitch is spammy.

I said that I would get to headlines even though it's not part of the three-paragraph structure because it's super important. It's the most important thing. So if your headline seems spammy, seems uninteresting, or is in general anything but absolutely fascinating to the editor, you have greatly reduced the chances of getting your pitch accepted, let alone getting a response. There's a great statistic on this that I love: Only 20% of unsolicited pitches get opened. I don't know how accurate that is, and I think it really depends from editor to editor, but the thing is that this is your number one hurdle. We all think that our number one hurdle is our idea, but that's only part of it.

Our number one hurdle is getting the editor to open the email. And once they've opened the email, our new most important hurdle is getting them to keep reading past the first sentence. When you write your pitch, you might be obsessing over the "about me" paragraph. You might be obsessing over the "what's the story" paragraph. But the sections in the beginning—the subject of the email and the lede are really the ones that are the most important, the ones you need to obsess the most over. For the subject line for your email, you want to put what would be the headline of your article if you were to write it. So I've got a couple of examples here, and you'll notice they're all a bit sensational. And that's for a reason—we need to get the editor's attention right away.

You want to write a subject line of your email that is so attention grabbing that when they are cooking dinner on Sunday night for their family and they're stirring that pasta and they flip over to their email, they see this and they go "Huh, that's weird, what is that about?" We want to make sure that our headlines are grabbing attention. And part of the way we do this is through the five things I asked you to ask yourself before you write your pitch at all. We make sure we have a point, we make sure we have a story, and we make sure that people care. If you have any questions about the pitch structure, just throw those over there, because now I'm going to get into the most common pitch questions but if we have any other ones that aren't on there I'll circle back to them at the end.

The 10 most common pitching questions. Now I can see who's on the call and I see you all have a bit of experience so I'm not going to dwell on things too much that are super, super basic, but I will address them as we go through.

One of the first ones in order in terms of writing the pitch is "where should I name drop?". And this sounds weird, "where should I name drop". So I don't necessarily mean so-and-so told me to pitch you. This could also include information like "I saw that you recently



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became editor of this publication”. Or “I saw that you were looking for pitches”, anything like this all right. I think a lot of people turn the name dropping, what I call the “preamble”, into both something longer than it should be and also a substitute for proper lead. You have any sort of name dropping, the preamble, you got to get in and out, you got to say so and so told me that you would be interested in this idea and then immediately launch into your lead. Or “I saw that you recently took over editing the travel section of Rachel Ray. I have a pitch I hope you’ll enjoy.” Very short one sentence and then make a line break and start again with your lead.

Can I pitch an editor something I’ve already written on my blog?

This one I get a lot. Can I pitch to an editor something I’ve already written about on my blog? This is very tricky because, especially when you’re on contract with a destination, you want to get those blog posts about your trip up very quickly. But if you have written about something on your blog, an editor is infinitely less likely to buy your pitch for two reasons. One is that your blog counts as publication, so that idea has already been published. So you certainly can’t pitch the editor the exact thing you’ve already written about on your blog.

Second, the editor doesn’t know you from the homeless person outside of their office door. They do not know that you have the wherewithal to write them a completely different piece than what you’ve already posted on your blog. So if you have pitched them something, which is the very first article on your blog and they click over and they see that, they’re going to assume, mistakenly, but unfortunately this is how the situation is, that you are just pitching them the same thing and that you don’t know any better.

I highly recommend that if you have a really great idea from a trip, that you think you can sell to a magazine, to not put that on your blog at all for sure, and to hold off on posting about that trip on your blog until after you’ve sent out some pitches. Now if you have an obligation, then do social media, this is what I heard from someone the other day that they essentially do an Instagram style photo roundup of a post which essentially has no text so then you’re not taking away from potential stories you can right. But the bind here is that if you want to pitch stories about a trip, especially a hotel that you had on your trip, or an activity you did on your trip, particularly keep those out because editors won’t know you are going to write them a different story.

Should you tell the editor you’ve written the article? Now in this case, I’m not talking about the times you’ve written on your blog. I’m talking about the very common and awkward situation where you have taken a writing class or you were a mentor and then they ask you to write an assignment out of the blue—with no assignment, no connection to an editor, no



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editing, with no idea wrangling to fit the magazine. You have just written an article unsolicited, not for a publication. In these cases, if you tell an editor you have done that, you will immediately be branded as an amateur. Because ideas do not exist without publications. I hope that this got across in the beginning when I was talking about the ways you know you're not ready to write a pitch yet. And one of them is that you have not pegged your pitch to a specific section of a specific magazine. Because when you have a specific section of a specific magazine, what happens is you have a clear format and a clear focus for your idea.

This weekend, we had somebody who had an idea for an interview with a photographer that they had met on a boat trip. And this photographer was a photographer for BECAUSE Travel, he was a professional travel photographer and consequently they had discovered an animal that was not known to exist, a whale shark it's called, in the Philippines around a particular island. And this person had a really cool story. And we found an interview column in a Filipino travel magazine that we thought this would be perfect for, however, that particular interview focuses on how a person travels, that person's travel tips. Now does that mean that person is not going to be a good interview resource? No, but it means that when you write that pitch, and when you do the interview and write the article, it needs to be around the questions that they typically ask if you had already done that interview, if you had done that article with different interview questions about the experience of discovering the whale sharks or what its like to be a BECAUSE photographer that wouldn't have been a fit for that section. So that's why it's really important from the get-go to know where and what you're pitching, because then that second paragraph where you talk about what goes into the story really writes itself.

For instance in the case of the interview I was just talking about, you know we saw this section and the questions were like, "what are your favorite apps on your phone, what gear do you bring with you, what is your best tips for surviving the airports or layovers," in our pitch we can say "I will interview so and so, they are a because photographer who discovered a new animal, or previously unknown animal, the whale shark, of the coast of this island. He's agreed to participate in this interview and discuss". And this is where you put in what we saw in that section. We will discuss his favorite apps, how he gets his shots on his phone, and what he does when he's stuck on a layover. Ok so that takes all of the indecision out of that middle section of the pitch.

If you have already written an article without that magazine in mind, you can't do that; you can't frame it to that particular publication. And so if you were to tell the editor, "I want to pitch you an essay on the mountain hut in the Dolomites that's only reached by hot air balloon, it's 900 words, I've already written it." They're going to say, "What do you mean you've already written it? I didn't commission it. What is it about?" They're going to immediately think that not only you are not professional, which is one of the things we're



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trying to show when we start this conversation, but also that you're not familiar with their publication, because it might mean that they don't have space in their publication for a 900 word essay about one particular accommodation. But there are places for a 500-word essay. So if you had just pitched them without actually saying you had written it they could say, "Hey we don't actually have a space that's 900 words, but we do have a space that's 500 words. Write it to that length." And then you would say sure. But if you say you've already written it they're not going to ask you that. The reason that we don't tell an editor that we've already written the piece is because we want to respect that they know their audience and publication better than we do. We want to give them the opportunity to workshop that idea, to have that conversation about the idea with us.

Can I pitch more than one publication or editor the same idea at the same time? This is super controversial and it shouldn't be, and I got a bunch of really funny responses from people when I did the focus group. Some people said not whether they do or don't, but they said, "I heard you shouldn't do that." And this is very telling because this is one of those things that people feel like they don't know. The real crux of it in today's economy is that it's ludicrous for an editor to expect us to sit around and wait a month to hear back from them or not hear from them at all and then send the idea out to another editor. We would spend 12 months pitching 12 articles to 12 different editors without getting anywhere. So my thought on this is absolutely yes, you can absolutely pitch the same idea at the same time to the same editor or publication.

But, here is how. So we talked about how to match your idea to a section, so that will change your idea. So the pitch shouldn't be the same words. You would frame the idea around a different section, different magazine. Now the second thing is I do not recommend that you pitch competing magazines the same idea at the same time. So don't pitch Travel and Leisure and Conde Nast. Don't pitch Saveur and AFAR, I don't know if they're competitors but don't pitch for instance, Edible Brooklyn and Edible Manhattan-anything like that. Don't pitch two magazines, like Hemispheres American Airlines and American Way, don't pitch two magazines that have a potential overlap in audience because that would not be looked upon well by an editor.

However, if you pitch them an idea, and they get back to you a month later, and they say, "Hey, yea I'd like the sign you this idea", and you say, "Oh by the way, just so you know I already sold it to so-and-so." They have the opportunity to say, "Oh well, we'll have to be faster next time." I've definitely heard this from people, from writers, that editors said this to them. Or they say, "Oh you've already sold it to Hudson Valley Edible? That's not really a conflict for us here at Air Asia's magazine so that's fine. I'll buy the idea anyway." So give them the opportunity, give more editors the opportunity to buy new ideas.



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How detailed should your middle paragraph be? This like I said is where people really start to stumble, where they go into way too much description. So circling back to what I said earlier, three points. We want to say first of all, what section you're pitching, and the description of what your article is about, and then three points about what you're going to cover, and then any research that you've already done. And that's it, okay, unless you are pitching the New Yorker, in which case you need to have a two-page pitch, that's all that should be in there. Anything else the editor wants to know, if they're interested in your idea, they will write you back and ask you. It happens all the time. I sometimes get whole pages of questions from an editor, not even because I sent them a super-short pitch but because they want to know that you've done your homework and they want to know if it'd be a good pitch for their publication.

Should I include every place that I'll cover? This is like for articles where you'll be covering ten things, or five things. Just cover a couple, just three, just a handful. What I've heard from editors across the board is that they don't want you to tell them nothing, they don't want you to say "I'd like to pitch you a roundup of ten mountain huts that you can stay in in Europe to have a backpack ranger experience" they don't just want to know your ideas. They want to know that you've done some research, so you can turn up a couple. So you can say, for instance, this one in the Dolomites that you can reach by hot air balloon, one in the French Alps, and one on top of Mount Etna in Sicily. They want to know that you have some concrete ideas, but they don't need to know what all of them are.

Should I include clips? Now clips, someone asked this: "Should you link to your most impressive pieces even if they're not relevant?" The thing about clips is they should not be included in your pitch. Ever. I know this sounds a little controversial but this goes back to what I just said. If an editor wants more information, they will ask you. And it boggles a lot of people's minds, but I don't think I ever get asked for people's clips, and when I first started I don't think I was ever asked for clips. I pitched an idea, and I would say where else I had written, and maybe one of two times people asked for clips but those people didn't even turn into ideas, those were like ongoing relationships.

If somebody likes your idea, they're going to roll with it, they can see if your writing is okay. If they want to see clips before they commission you, they'll write you back and ask AFTER they like your idea. But don't mince, don't waste time trying to figure out which clips to include. Tell them where you've written, because they want to know that you've been edited before, and so you're a capable writer who knows how to work within the journalistic system. And certainly do not attach anything. Editors will never open files from people they don't know.



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This is really good. Should I include a link to my blog or my writing portfolio in the “about me” paragraph? No, I told you that people would never click links that aren’t naked. I’ve seen a lot of people paste like a naked link to www.myname.com into that paragraph. The place for that link is in your signature. The place for that link is absolutely not in the “about you” paragraph because the about you paragraph, the “I’m so great” paragraph, should be only be about why you should write this particular article. And your entire writing portfolio is not the answer to that question.

Slide: How should I sign off?

All right, how should you end that email? After the “I’m so great” or “about me” paragraph, how should you say “thanks” or “bye” before “kind regards”. There are a lot of options, and I’ve seen a lot of them and I’ve seen editors say a lot of them are kind of a waste of time, or space, and these are a lot of the ones that I’ve seen that are sort of filler. So thanks for your consideration, I look forward to your response, I look forward to the opportunity to work with you, they’re all a bit flattering, and there are ones that are a bit less flattering and a bit more demanding. For instance, never say, “I know your readers will enjoy this article”. Editors really don’t like when you tell them what their readers are going to like.

What I’ve found to be really effective in this section is to say, “May I write (and then include your headline that we’ve put in our subject line) for your (and then include the name of the section you’re pitching) and then some thank you or kind regards or best”. Because what this does is it circles back to your idea, which was cool enough to get them to open the email in the first place, and then it also reminds them that you have done your homework. And it asks them a question. Ok and I am going to get into my next question about following up, and one of my favorite quotes from editors about following up. But one of the great things about asking them a question at the end of this email is that if you’ve gotten them to read this far, to read to that very very last sentence, you have their attention, they’re interested in your idea and there’s a pretty good chance that they want to work with you. Then drive it home. Ask them one more time. Ask them a question so that they will respond to your email one way or another.

How long should I wait to follow up? You should chime in what you think of this on the chat box because this is something that I’ve heard a lot of on the writer side. The editors’ are pretty uniform. There are a lot of different schools of thought for writers in terms of what they’ve been told or what they think, not many based on data but interesting concepts on how long people think they should wait to respond. So while you guys are chiming in on that, this is one of my favorite quotes about editor response times.



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In the Book Passage Travel Writers and Photographers Conference I mentioned earlier, this question comes up, “How long does it take you to get back to my pitch?” And there was sort of a nervous chuckle and the editors sort of looked at themselves, and then bravely Peter Fish from Sunset Magazine (which is based in Oakland now, it recently moved, but it covers the Western United States), he said, “If it’s a yes, 15 minutes. If it’s a no, half an hour. But if it’s a maybe, forever. But I try to get back at a reasonable time if it’s a maybe and say that I’m putting it in the hopper and in the meantime feel free to pitch it somewhere else and just let me know if you place it elsewhere.” But the thing about this is that it belies an interesting problem we have as freelance writers, which is if an editor does not respond to your pitch, they might be thinking about it.

They might be trying to find a home for it, they might be trying to find an issue for it. And so you run the risk, if you do not follow up with them, of waiting a certain amount of time and then taking your idea elsewhere, or of getting it picked up somewhere else, and never knowing if this editor is interested. And so across the board, I’ve heard editors say that they are totally fine with you following up with them in two weeks. That by then, it’s probably dropped to the bottom of their inbox, and if they’re not already considering it then you should remind them so that they take a look at it. If they are considering it, it’s a good amount of time for them to have gone to an editorial meeting, put some thought into it and have a better idea of exactly what Peter is saying here. Of responding in a reasonable amount of time, if he’s thinking about it. So what I recommend is to follow up twice.

Once in two weeks, just to say “Hey I wanted to see if you got this”, and then once in another two weeks, just say “Hey I hope you’ve seen this pitch; I just want to let you know that if I haven’t heard from you, I’m moving on”. Now the thing with this is like I said, you can totally be doing simultaneous submissions but they shouldn’t be in competing markets. Now once you’ve sent that second follow-up, that’s a sign that you’re going to pitch that same idea to a competing market. If you gave it to Travel and Leisure, now you’re going to take it to Conde Nast Traveler. If you’ve had it at Saveur, now you’re going to take it to Afar. If you had it at Budget Traveler, now you’re going to take it over to National Geographic Traveler. And so on.

And now we’ve reached the end of our time and I don’t want to keep you. Hopefully we’ve covered all of your bases and we appreciate all of you taking an hour out of your day to join us today