

SA | AJP

Southern Africa
Accountability Journalism Project

Training session 1:

How to pitch an investigative story idea (effectively)

Date & time: 15 January 2025, 14:00 SAST

Trainer: Daneel Knoetze (editor of Viewfinder Centre for Accountability Journalism)

Investigative reporting is not reporting as usual!

- Method → systematic, in-depth, and original research and reporting
- Output → Exposes wrongdoing that causes harm in the world
- Intention → Accountability / impact / reform

How this presentation will help you pitch an investigative story idea

1. Three things that your pitch needs to show
2. Three common pitfalls (and how to avoid these)
3. How to adapt what you have learned to **SA | AJP's** pitching questionnaire

What you need to show:

1. There is a problem causing harm in the world
2. someone / something **contributes** to the problem (by doing something wrong)
3. I have access to some source material to illustrate this (and a plan for gathering more)

What you need to show:

1. There is a problem causing harm in the world → **HARM**
2. someone / something contributes to the problem → **WRONGDOING**
3. I have access to source material to illustrate this → **EVIDENCE**

Format of a winning pitch simplified:

WRONGDOING causes / contributes to **HARM**, backed up by **EVIDENCE**

Example of a pitch I made some months ago

Police brutality is rife in South Africa. In recent years, SA police officers have continued to employ torture methods inherited from the apartheid era - particularly suffocation or “tubing” - against people in custody. Such systemised torture is little known to the public domestically and internationally. This will be an exclusive exposé. Why?

I have access to never-before-seen complaints data, from which more than 2,000 such cases have been isolated.

I believe that, given the opportunity, I can find victims to speak about their experiences. I would also like to try find a police officer who will explain why this is ongoing. I have contacts amongst police officers in Durban, who can facilitate.

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Pause for reflection...

Pitfall 1 - burying the lede (or missing the point all together)

Definition of lede: the opening paragraph of a news article, which summarizes the most important aspects of the story.

For an investigative journalism pitch lede takes this format

WRONGDOING causes / contributes to **HARM**, backed up by **EVIDENCE**

Police torture pitch as a lede

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Pitfall 1 - burying the lede (or missing the point all together)

Example (of what to avoid):

The issues of climate change and its impact on food security are increasingly recognised in different parts of the world, including Africa. Africa is epitomised as the most vulnerable continent to climate changes. Other studies also project that Africa is highly vulnerable to climate changes. The studies mainly found that climate changes have a severe impact on agricultural land, which ultimately affects food security. The IPCC reports that in sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural productivity will decline from 21% to 9% by 2080. About two-thirds of Africa's arable land is expected to be lost by 2025 because of the lack of rainfall and drought. South Africa is not immune to these impacts. It is worth noting that the global population is continuing to rise and the rates at which climate change and production of agriculture and food have been increasing are not equal.

etc. etc. etc.

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How to avoid “burying the lede”

1. Get your format of “**WRONGDOING** contributing / causing **HARM** backed up by **EVIDENCE**” solid in your own mind and notes, before you start writing your pitch
2. Most of what you then write should expound on one of these three things - sell them!
3. Elevate and brag about the best source material / access you have in-hand. Why is it significant, amazing, original?
4. Long-winded topic summaries should be avoided. But, key facts / events / context can lend urgency to your angle, so be selective

Format of a winning pitch simplified:

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So if we follow this format, it will automatically be a winning pitch?

Unfortunately not

Example of the type of pitch we might receive:

Literacy rates across southern Africa lag behind the rest of the developing world. The target of this investigation will be governments in southern Africa and how their education policies are not adequately supporting literacy outcomes of primary school learners, leading to kids falling behind the rest of the world in reading ability and hurting their future prospects. The wrongdoing I will seek to prove is maladministration in policy geared at literacy.

I will also expose other factors that contribute to poor literacy outcomes, which include lack of parental support, books and learning materials not arriving in schools, school infrastructure not being properly maintained etc.

I will interview government officials, teachers, NGOs working in the field. I also have access to recent reports from the UNHCR which highlights the key facts re: reading crisis in southern Africa.

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pause for reflection ...

Pitfall 2 - vague and sweeping generalisations (when your editor is looking for specifics)

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The use of crystal methamphetamine has skyrocketed in township communities in South Africa recent years. Instead of curbing the problem, corruption in the police service is enabling the drug trade. Key police officers in the country are on the payrolls of some of the country's biggest drug trafficking syndicates. In return for bribes, the supply these syndicates with seized street drugs from police stores and allowing operations to continue unimpeded in gang territories.

My investigation will seek to expose this corruption in its many forms.

I will prove this through interviews with police officers, NGOs in township communities working on drug use prevention

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The main problem with sweeping generalisations?

You don't actually have ACCESS to the evidence, source material, people, locations to back-up your sweeping assertions

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How to avoid vague and sweeping generalisations

1. Be specific: what, where, when, who, why, and how (do you know)
2. Differentiate. The general topic (problem) that you are working on might be convoluted / expansive, but your investigative angle shouldn't be. The more you focus it, the better!
3. How to focus it? Focus on specific wrongdoing and its contribution. Be led by your existing ACCESS i.e. the people and source material that you have in-hand (and that which you believe you can get).
4. Project the importance of your ACCESS and source material and plans

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A better version of the police corruption drug dealer pitch:

Like many township communities, Eldorado Park south of Johannesburg has seen an influx of methamphetamine in recent years. Drug dealers in the community are able to continue their operations, because they have key police officers at the local station on their payrolls. One of the main services these officers provide is tip-offs about impending drug raids and stealing drug supplies from police stores

I know this because I have access to a police officer who is willing to be interviewed anonymously about what he has witnessed and how the operation works. I will also interview a mother (Mrs Julies) who has lost two of her sons due to drug addiction, to show the impact of methamphetamine on the families in the area. Given the opportunity to report this story, I believe that I might also interview retired drug-dealers - whom I have identified - who can speak about their former relationships with police officers at Eldorado Park station.

This is not an isolated case study. What is happening in this Eldorado Park is illustrative of a broader pattern of police corruption enabling drug-dealing in townships in SA. I will

Pitfall 3 - seemingly grand or strong angles, but not backed up by source material

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How to pitch on the basis of your ACCESS (secured and planned)

- Be specific about what progress you've made, and **SOURCE** material you have access to, and what value or contribution each will make
- Base your statement of **HARM** and **WRONGDOING** on what source material you have or will seek (don't try to do it the other way around)
- Do some ground work. Or, pick an investigative angle i.e. **WRONGDOING** contributing to a **PROBLEM** that you have prior experience reporting on

The SA | AJP pitching questionnaire

1. Hypothesis
 - a. Who is doing what **WRONG**?
 - b. What **PROBLEM** does it aggravate / **HARM** does it cause in the world?
2. **SOURCE** material you have ACCESS to and how does it show this
 - a. What will the “minimum” story look like?
3. **SOURCE** material and progress you can make, given the opportunity (maximum story)
 - a. What will the strongest possible story that you can produce look like?

Thank you, questions?

WRONGDOING causes / contributes to **HARM**, backed up by **EVIDENCE**