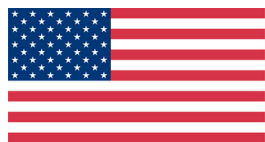


SA | AJP Southern Africa Accountability Journalism Project



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ENABLING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

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TIP SHEET

How to Pitch an Investigative Story Idea (*Effectively*)

Training Session #1: Wednesday 15 January 2025

How to Pitch an Investigative Story Idea (Effectively) TIP SHEET Training Session #1: Wednesday 15 January 2025

INTRODUCTION

On the 15th of January 2025, the Southern Africa Accountability Journalism Project (SA AJP) hosted an online training session attended by around 60 journalists and editors from the region. The training was provided by Daneel Knoetze, the project's editorial coordinator. It aimed at equipping journalists with insights to help them pitch investigative story ideas successfully, to the SA AJP and more generally.

ABOUT THIS TIP SHEET

This tipsheet is a summary of that training session. A [recording](#) of the session is available on the SA AJP's YouTube channel. If you click on the recording hyperlink under any one of the points in this tip sheet, you will be directed to the specific section in the training presentation where the point is expanded upon, often with reference to examples.

KEY TIPS

The difference between investigative journalism and news/feature reporting
Investigative reporting follows its own methods, rules, guidelines and value system. Before pitching an investigative story idea, it is worth reminding yourself of this fact. Good resources for this include Chapter 1 of Story-Based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists, which is available for free download [here](#).

MAIN POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Method: "systematic, in-depth, and original research and reporting" which yields original source material and insights.
- Output: an investigative story often seeks to expose wrongdoing that is contributing to a problem that causes some harm in the world.
- Intention: the intention of exposing this wrongdoing is so that it can be rectified.



WATCH NOW

Watch this section of the training session [here](#).

WHAT YOU NEED TO SHOW WHEN YOU PITCH AN INVESTIGATIVE STORY IDEA

- **HARM:** There is a problem causing harm to people or the public interest
- **WRONGDOING:** Someone or something contributes to this problem by doing something wrong.
- **EVIDENCE:** You already have access to some source material to prove this wrongdoing and, perhaps, to help illustrate the harm that it contributes to.

So, the general format of a winning pitch might look something like this:

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

where each element is clearly set out.



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Common pitfalls that pitching journalists should be wary of:

1. BURYING THE LEDE

In news reporting the “lede” is the opening paragraph, which summarises the most important aspects of the story. We can borrow the concept of a “lede” and adapt it to investigative pitches. So, in an investigative pitch, the “lede” would summarise the most important aspects of the story you seek to tell. Who is doing what wrong? What harm is it contributing to in the world? And, what is the strongest evidence you have in-hand to illustrate this?

All too often, journalists fail to elevate these essential elements, leaving the editor to scan their pitches in search of them. One of the surest ways to bury the lede is to provide the editor with long-winded summaries of topics or descriptions of problems. Don’t do this. Focus on elevating the uniqueness of your angle, convincing your editor of the seriousness of the wrongdoing, the severity of the harm it is causing and the strength and originality of the source material (people, documents, records, data or even locations) that you have access to.

How to avoid burying the lede:

- Get the format of your pitch (“wrongdoing” contributing to “harm”, backed up by “evidence”) solid before you start writing
- State it as a couple of sentences or a “hypothesis” at the top of your pitch

Most of what you write in the pitch should expound on one of these three things

- Brag about your best source material / access; avoid long-winded topic summaries



[Watch this section of the training session here.](#)

2. SWEEPING GENERALISATIONS

Often journalists attempt to put their pitch in the format of “wrongdoing” contributing to “harm” in the world, backed up by “evidence”. Unfortunately, they do so by making sweeping generalisations. The problem or background to your investigation may be very expansive and convoluted, but your pitch certainly should not be. The main problem with sweeping generalisations is that your editor begins to doubt that you have any unique or original angle, or access to any unique or original source material.

How to avoid sweeping generalisations:

- **Be specific:** Who, where, what, when, why and how (who specifically, has done what specifically wrong, and how is this specifically contributing to harm, and how specifically do you know this i.e. what specific access or source material do you have)
- **Be led by your existing access:** Decide, what is the best source material/people that I have access to (and can likely get access to), and then write your pitch based on this.



[Watch this section of the training session here.](#)

3. JOURNALISTS HAVE NOT DONE GROUNDWORK OR SECURED ENOUGH SOURCE MATERIAL

Often journalists pitch investigative angles that they would like to pursue, but they do not demonstrate that they have made any progress - or accessed any source material, people, documents, data etc. - towards reporting a specific story.

How to avoid this:

- Do some **targeted groundwork**, trying to secure access to at least one (but preferably more than one) quality source - documents, an informant, whistleblower or case study that you can “brag” about to your editor.
- Pitch an **investigative angle** on a topic or a story that you have worked on before, leveraging the unique insights or sources you gathered.



[Watch this section of the training session here.](#)

FURTHER READING

- ProPublica’s guidelines for pitching an investigative story idea ([link](#))
- The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) tips for pitching investigative journalism as a freelancer ([link](#))
- Story-Based Inquiry: a manual for investigative journalists (especially chapters 1 and 2) ([link](#))
- The Investigative Journalism Manual’s chapter on planning an investigation ([link](#))
- From the GIJN - Pitch Perfect: An Insider’s Tips for Writing a Successful Investigative Journalism Grant Proposal ([link](#))

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