



TELLING BETTER STORIES: 75 TIPS TO MAKE YOUR STORIES STRONGER FROM PITCH TO PROMOTION

There are dozens of ways to improve your feature writing abilities, and plenty of books and seminars to help you do it. Here's a quick hit list of 75 tips I presented at MagNet in 2014—scan the list and grab a few that might work for you.

FINDING BETTER STORIES

A. Cast your net wider

- Read sections of the paper you don't normally read.
- Visit websites you don't normally visit.
- Come up with a subject you have no interest in at all. Google it and read three links about it.
- Follow people you don't agree with on Twitter. Click on the links to the articles they share.
- Read something aimed at someone 20 years younger than you—or 20 years older.

B. Dig deeper

- Look at a big story. What bandwagon has everyone jumped on in the coverage? Can you take an opposing perspective?
- Look behind the people at the forefront of a story. Is there someone on the edges of the story that might provide a novel lens through which to tell the story (for instance, the man who dug JFK's grave in Jimmy Breslin's classic column "It's an honor.")
- Look for new angles. If everyone is covering the human interest side of a multi-car pile-up story, can you cover new developments in auto technology that are making car crashes less likely?
- Riff off a great story. If you see a story you wish you'd written, find a way to localize it and tell it in another market.
- Take time to chat: Story ideas come from all kinds of places—the guy in the grocery store line-up, the parent next to you at the soccer game. What are people talking about?

C. Develop a beat

- Ask the experts what the real stories are—what are other reporters missing?
- Read what the experts read—websites, journals.
- Make sure people can find you when they have a lead to pass on—keep your contact information available online.
- Go to specialist conferences.
- Hang out with insiders—online (Twitter and elsewhere) and in person (conferences, etc.).

PITCHING BETTER STORIES

A. Research it like you're writing it

- Hone your angle.
- Find key characters.
- Paint compelling scenes.
- Don't tell the editor she should care about this story: make the pitch so compelling that she can't help but care.
- Sell yourself as the best person to write the piece.

B. Know the market

- Read, read, read.
- Mention at least one recent story from the target publication/site in your pitch.
- Learn from great pitches: Find examples of great pitches online. Listen to "[Elevator Pitches](#)" on CBC Radio's Under the Influence.
- Know their competitors.
- Keep up with the industry: Read [Canadian Magazines Blog](#), [Masthead Online](#), [mediabistro](#) daily.

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**C. Know the editor**

- Find your partner in the food chain: If you're a beginning writer, pitch more junior editors. They're more likely to be your age, and they're also trying to build a stable of their own writers.
- Talk to other writers: Who do they like working with?
- Get social on social media: Connect with editors there.
- Chat editors up: Find out what they're interested in.
- Make editors' lives easier: Send them story leads—even if they aren't topics you want to write on.

[For more advice on pitching stories, see David Hayes' hotsheet, "[Tips for Writing Query Letters that Sell](#)"]

RESEARCHING BETTER STORIES**A. Go to the scene(s) of the crime**

- Take pictures of key places in your story.
- Take notes and make sketches. Always ask: Has anything changed since the events in your story took place?
- Talk to people who know the place
- Go with a source, and ask them to walk you through the scene.
- Go at the right time of day—if the scene took place at night, go at night.

B. Hunt down sources

- Always ask "Is there anyone else I should talk to?"
- Follow the paper to a person: Who might have access to documents that could have information you need? For instance, the insurance adjuster in an accident.
- Talk it up: Sometimes casual conversations will lead you to other sources.
- Try the present tense trick: Ask a source to take you through the events, but recount them in present rather than past tense. Sometimes a shift in tense puts a person back inside the scene more effectively, unlocking things they might otherwise not mention.
- Try the dumb dog trick: If a source is tight-lipped, or you think they haven't given you a full answer, let silence work for you. Most people will say more to fill in the silence.

C. Do your homework

- Get as many specific details as possible. They have a dog? What's the dog's name?
- Know enough to know what questions to ask. Tell source A you're going to be talking to source B—and ask what questions they'd ask that person if they had the chance.
- Try the dumb drunk strategy: If someone gives you a complex explanation of something, ask them to explain it to you as if you were drunk.
- Look beyond Google. Hunt down primary sources and (gasp!) out-of-print books.
- Leave the door open: Always give sources your contact info and tell them they can get in touch if they remember or think of anything else.

WRITING BETTER STORIES**A. Get it on the page**

- You're an author. Write when you're an authority—by which I mean, start writing when you've done enough research to feel authoritative.
- Understand that no first draft is perfect. As songwriter Bill Withers said, "You can't get to wonderful without passing through all right."
- Listen to how you tell the story when you're talking about it: Are there clues in your natural storytelling that will help you choose your opening scene? Your structure?
- Listen to what people are surprised about—maybe you're so enmeshed in the story you're not seeing what's appealing to the general reader.
- Start at the beginning. Or in the middle. Or at the end. The point is—at some point, you just have to start.

**B. Rework what's on the page**

- Are your scenes the right scenes? Do they advance the action?
- Are your details the right details? Do they convey atmosphere, communicate character?
- Where are the holes?
- ALWAYS read your story out loud.
- Walk away for a day or two. Come back and read your story with fresh eyes.

C. Be coachable

- And recognize that not everyone is your coach.
- Be aware of your own weaknesses as a writer.
- Know your strengths as well.
- If an editor isn't happy with a section, probe to find out what the problem is and come up with a solution that you're both happy with. You don't have to say yes to every suggested fix, but you do have to solve problems in the draft.
- Put your energy into relationships that make you a better writer. Working with an editor you think is an idiot? Make it through this piece and then pitch someone else on your next one.

PROMOTING BETTER STORIES**A. Be your own publicist**

- Tweet it, share it, email it, post it on your website/blog/Tumblr.
- Make sure your sources get copies.
- Engage in the online conversations about your story...but don't feed the trolls!
- Can you get more mileage with a publicity interview or two?
- Look for op-ed opportunities tied to your story.

B. Get better bang for your buck (or your working hour)

- Should you work for nothing? Only if it's going to create other paying opportunities. And maybe you'd be better off creating a blog or other special project that showcases your skills.
- Write what you care about and care what you write about.
- Always have a passion project on the go.
- Know when to say no, and know when to say yes.

C. Manage yourself well

- Clear the clutter—real and mental.
- Stay on top of the details (your taxes, your invoicing).
- A little money buys a lot of freedom: have a rainy day fund.
- Reputation matters. How's yours?
- Freelance writing is tough. If you don't love it—and are spending all of your time complaining about it—you should leave it.