

Pitch a Story

Second course, Fourth grading period, Week 4

The art of pitching takes real skill. Whether pitching an idea to an editor who might assign the story to you or suggesting an angle for someone else's story in an editorial meeting or explaining why something is important enough to warrant air, you must believe in your ideas, know your subject and be both persuasive and brief.



Enduring Understanding

When pitching an idea, you must be compelling, concise, creative, well informed and able to answer questions about your idea.



Essential Questions

How do you pitch an idea successfully to someone who can approve your assignment? How can pitching help you to be a better reporter and be more prepared to deliver the idea you are presenting on air? How does pitching improve radio content?



Objectives and Outcome

- Students will understand how to hone their ideas and relate them to the news and editorial process.
- Students will be able to prepare their pitch presentation, defend it, and follow through.
- Students will learn to take criticism and compete successfully with their peers for a limited amount of air time.



Suggested Time

One week



Resources and Materials

AIR's Submission Guidelines for Pitching Stories to Radio, The Association of Independents in Radio (www.airmedia.org/PageInfo.php?PageID=266)

Pitch to Outfront (www.cbc.ca/outfront/contribute/sample_pitches.html) Two sample pitches that resulted in stories being aired

"Program Pitch," Writing for Television, Radio and New Media, pages 423-424



Procedure

1. Teachers might want to begin by playing with the definition of the word “pitch.” A softball team needs someone who can pitch, but no one is going to pitch a water balloon out the classroom window. How do singers find their pitch? Can anyone in class pitch a tent? Roofs of homes in New England often have a steep pitch because of winter snowfalls. Ask sailors in class what dipping the bow and stern alternately is called.

In media, “pitch” means to present a proposal for a show or segment of a program. The purpose of the pitch is to convince the editor or producer, the owner or distributor that the idea is original, timely, newsworthy, appealing to listeners and is worth producing. And you are the person capable of producing it on budget on schedule.

With limited resources, pitching assures that people know what they are talking about, have done the research, understand its relevance to the news, and have the ability to express the idea. If you can’t say it ... you cannot pull it off.

2. Discuss the qualities of ineffective and effective pitches. Give students the first page of “Making the Pitch.” After students have had time to read the examples and revised one of the pitches to improve it, have students share their “better” pitches. Teachers may wish to point out where the approach is improved and, perhaps while better, why it is still not persuasive.

Give students the second page of “Making the Pitch” that provides more effective pitches. As you read through the examples, you might ask students to share the questions they would ask the person making the pitch. Does the idea have news value? Does it advance a story? Give insight or investigate an issue clearly? Have safety and technical concerns been considered? Will it appeal to your listeners.

3. You might want to set up a role-playing situation. Divide students into four groups. Give each a topic. Each group is to develop its topic into a honed pitch, thinking of content that would make it relevant in your community.

They must consider and be able to answer these questions:

- Why should we care?
- Why now?
- What is the news peg?
- What angle is relevant to us?
- What voices, experts, locations would they include?
- How long will it take to produce? What will it cost?
- Will it advance listeners’ knowledge? How?
- Why might it bring listeners to our place on the dial?

Each group (one or all members) presents each pitch in a two-minute presentation to the class. Suggest that students make notes (not a script) so they can be clear about who is presenting and what they want to say. The class and teacher should follow each presentation with questions. If the pitch is successful, listeners will be able to summarize the idea, envision the approach and anticipate the completed piece.

Each student should turn in a five-sentence summary of his or her group’s pitch.

4. Listen to your local news radio station and deconstruct why it chose the stories in a show and the angle it presented for each story. Breaking news does not count. Stations cover these stories out of necessity. Look for the stories that advance the news.

5. Students should be assigned the first part of the end-of-term project — pitch a story that they want to produce. First they are to focus on two story ideas. Often the best stories begin with the germ of an idea, from reading, personal experience, hobbies, conversations with people about their interests, issues that interest students and the news.

Once students have selected two story ideas that interest them, they should begin the background research. They should find four to six key facts for each topic — these might include demographics, census reports, school regulations. And they should find a way into that story that is compelling. Be very specific.

After completing preliminary research for both story ideas, select one concept to develop into a story focus to pitch. The pitch might include the answers to the following questions:

- How will you tell the story?
- What will be its primary focus?
- Who would be interested?
- Why should the listener care?
- In what way is this a different perspective on a topic that everyone thinks they know about?
- How will your idea improve the content of this station?

6. Students pitch their two ideas. Answer questions of the class and teacher.

7. Based upon responses and their own interests, each student selects the one that to be developed into a piece and writes a one-page summary.



Homework

As homework have students listen to a 30- to 60-minute show. Select three stories and write a five-minute pitch for each one based on what is heard.

Have students listen to a show of 30 minutes to an hour. Select one segment. Describe in five sentences why the station did the story and the angle it took. What was missing and why? What worked well? Who was interviewed and what did that person or persons add to the story?

Students should complete preliminary research of two story ideas. They should have key facts for each one. They should write up their pitches and be prepared to pitch them to their peers in class.



Assessment

Students should be given credit for completion of homework and a summary of their group’s pitch, for class participation in the role-playing activity and for discussion.

Evaluate students on their creativity, ability to generate ideas that are timely and relevant, and success in advancing a news story or topic of interest to your community.

Give students credit for the breadth and depth of their research and convincing presentations of their pitches.



Academic Content Standards

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (Standard 12, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)



Industry Standards and Expectations

Develop and deliver formal and informal presentations using appropriate media to engage and inform audiences. (F02.4, Career Cluster Project: Communications Skills)

Analyze how to develop a complete radio project. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Demonstrate writing processes for broadcast media, States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Making the Pitch

Name _____

Date _____

When making a pitch, you must be concrete, concise and prepared to answer questions. Read examples of unacceptable, ambiguous pitches. Analyze the pitches for what makes them ineffective. Select one and revise it to improve the pitch.

Ambiguous Pitches

1. Let's go to Iraq and do stories. Anything we find will be interesting. We'll see how it goes when we get there. [Unplanned, too general, not feasible given the location and safety issues. Waste of time.]
2. Let's go to Iraq and cover how the Iraqi police are handling local terrorists. [Still too general.]
3. I want to do a piece on My Space and what it means to teenagers to have a home page. [So what? Lots of people have one.]
4. I want to tell how the football team is preparing for another big game. [Again – the “So What?” factor is missing. Is there anything unusual about this? I doubt it.]
5. Immigration is in the news. Let's do something on what it is like to cross the border illegally. [Done a lot. How would you do it differently? Why now, not next week? What is the news value?]

The criticism from editors can be tough and feel harsh. If you are well prepared when you pitch, you can lessen the strain of presenting an idea only to watch it be shot down. Practice will make you better at pitching. Everyone goes through this.

Revision of one of the pitches

Concrete Pitches

What makes these pitches effective and likely to gain an assignment?

1. Let's go to police station No. 7 in Baghdad in Iraq because it has the highest rate of terrorist attacks in its district. I've already contacted the U.S. military in that area and Colonel Jackson has offered to give us a tour. The local police chief is one of the most experienced administrators in the area. He has developed some new ideas on how to keep the residents on his beat safe. We'll explore the history of violence in that area, what he has tried, and attempt to assess whether his ideas are working and, if not, why not.

2. Our local high school football team has not won a game in four weeks; the coach is implementing a new strategy — a pre-game workout that limbers the players and places them on the field earlier than the normal practice time. The players are discouraged. The coach says he got his idea from another high school coach in the state who has found that this more arduous method works. We'll go to our local high school over a three-week period to see what the players think about the new strategy before and after the next three games, how it has worked for them and why.
3. The patrols along the Mexican border with Arizona have been increased with an abundance of private citizens who are joining with the border patrol to stop immigrants from crossing the desert. I'll follow one group in training for its first mission and will go on patrol next Tuesday, the night before the governor is scheduled to make a speech on the impact of immigration on the state. I will focus on one trainee and observe him as he implements what he has learned. I'll also talk to the local citizens group about their reaction to having private citizens performing these duties. Has the fear of violence increased in the border towns near the desert? I suggest we try to answer this question by talking to residents in a small town near where this patrol will be on duty overnight.
4. My Space has been in the news a lot lately. Sexual predators and minors have logged on and met. What has not been covered is what else these pre-teens and teens may see on the site including violent videos from countries at war and recruiting films. How easy is it to view this material that parents may not want their children to access? I want a host to take a tour of the site on line with a military expert who has followed the development of Web chat rooms. She is [title and why qualified] and I have talked with her briefly. She speaks well and has very specific examples she can share on the air. She is sending us a packet of material so we can discuss further details, and I can prepare specific interview questions for our host. The expert will also bring in examples of the material. If it is too inappropriate for broadcast, we can run a much shorter clip, describe other content. We must get My Space to respond to any comments the expert makes so we must pre-tape the interview, not do it live. We must also address any security concerns the military expert has raised about why some of this material should not be seen on the Web.