Developing An Investigative Pitch

Ida B. Wells Society | Feb. 11, 2021

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Developing the Idea:
I. Examine Leads

Sometimes, a source might come to you with a tip. (Keep DMs open!)

Often, though, you might notice something isn’t adding up, or you’ll see a specific incident that raises bigger questions.

For ex: While following your beat, are you noticing a pattern no one else seems to have identified? Are you seeing a curious anomaly or a strange case? Are there gaps in existing information? Missing pieces?

By asking a few key questions, you can explore whether a lead has the potential to demonstrate a problem or injustice worth investigating.
For example, in 2014 a lawyer told me about a man named Dwayne Provience...
Developing the Idea:
Assess the Injustice

What is the problem & is it important?

How widespread is it? (Scope/Scale)

Are vulnerable or underserved communities involved?

Intersections of power?

What can reporting on this tell us? What purpose would it serve?

“This investigation reveals the forgotten victims in Detroit’s bankruptcy, a group of creditors who stand to become casualties of the city twice-over, through no fault of their own, and with little means to do anything about it. At its core, this is a story about power and high-stakes dealing, with dramatic consequences for the lives of ordinary people.”
Evaluating the Idea:
Consider the Best Use of Your Time

Has it been done before? Is someone else likely working on it now?

Remember, as a freelancer, you have limited resources. Competing against a big outlet on a story they might also be after may be less effective for you than concentrating on a unique contribution.

*Can I sustain interest in this over a long period of time?

NEXT: How will I report it out?
As U.S. troops were leaving Afghanistan in 2014, I noticed a strange anomaly in claims about the war...
“BuzzFeed News exclusively acquired the GPS coordinates and contractor information for every school that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) claims to have refurbished or built since 2002, as well as Department of Defense records of school constructions funded by the U.S. military.”
Developing the Idea:
How Will I Report It Out?
Find A Systematic Approach for Investigation

Think through the way you intend to investigate this issue. Is there a means to investigate this problem systematically?

For example, is there a sample of court cases that reflect this issue? Is there a dataset I could acquire, or data I could collect that would help me investigate this problem in a systematic fashion?

*Is there a time-sensitive window of opportunity to use this approach?

For any pitch you write up, you’re going to want to identify what this systematic approach is. Explaining this approach will make your pitch stronger, which is why pre-reporting is so important.
In 2016, I noticed peculiar numbers in data about the U.S.-led air campaign targeting ISIS...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>Airstrikes In Iraq</td>
<td>14,000+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Airstrikes In Syria</td>
<td>19,000+</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIS Fighters Killed</td>
<td>70,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civilian Casualty Incidents</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian Casualty Rate</td>
<td>.06%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In this case, there wasn’t a dataset of airstrike GPS locations I could go visit, so I had to go collect data on the ground. After sampling one town, I had a stronger pitch.
Getting Ready to Pitch:
Do I Have A Narrative Approach?

Can you find a great narrative (often a particular character’s journey) through which to present the investigation?

You don’t necessarily need to have your character or narrative ready at the time of a pitch. But for a freelancer, a pitch will land stronger when you can show an editor a potential character & narrative approach. It can help illustrate why the investigation matters & that you have the storytelling chops to carry it.

If you don’t have a character or narrative at the time of your pitch, you can explain how you might see yourself telling the story, or at the very least, where & how you’ll be looking for characters.
THE U.S.-LED BATTLE AGAINST ISIS IS KILLING FAR MORE IRAQI CIVILIANS THAN THE COALITION HAS ACKNOWLEDGED.

THE SURVIVORS ARE LEFT TO WONDER WHY THEY WERE TARGETED. MOST WILL NEVER RECEIVE AN ANSWER.

THIS IS THE STORY OF ONE MAN WHO DID.
Things To Consider When Choosing A Character for Your Investigation

They Reflect The Overall Findings & Help “Carry” the Narrative Forward
Your main character’s journey should help illustrate the overall findings of an investigation. It’s not about a fascinating person whose sensational story makes you want to turn the page; it’s about someone whose story reflects the findings and carries the narrative forward. Someone whose circumstances, environment, and journey allow you a way to get into some of the most important issues in your investigation.

Access & Best Possible, Most Verifiable Information:
The main character should have an abundance of information to help you verify the specific details of their story, because you’re going to have to write about them in detail. Maybe they saved every relevant email. Maybe there’s an associated court case with useful documents. Maybe they shared their health records with you. Maybe you got access to their diary, or they kept a blog. Or maybe you just have good rapport with them, and they are willing to open their lives up to you for fact-checking and verification.

Caution: Re: Personal Storytelling:
Is this person good at telling their own story? This can be really helpful if you’re telling the investigation in audio or video form. But you need to be careful: bias towards choosing people like this can mean you can overlook a really worthy character. For example, perhaps a character doesn’t speak in a way that the audience of the outlet you’re pitching is used to. That shouldn’t bar them from being a character.
Basim Razzo

- His story reflected the findings;
- He preserved documents, emails, GPS coordinates, & more.
- There was a video of the airstrike on his home posted to the Coalition’s YouTube Channel — proof they conducted that airstrike.
- We built trust.
Getting Ready to Pitch: Pick An Outlet To Pitch

Once you’ve developed the idea & done some pre-reporting, brainstorm which outlets might be the best fit for that investigation and the way you’d like to tell it.

Don’t just send the same pitch to many outlets. Think strategically about where you want it to be published and why they would want to publish it. Then cater your pitch to that specific outlet.

- Study that outlet’s investigations for patterns: whether in their headlines, styles of writing or narrative, or other trends that show you what stories they’re likely to take. Do they have specific kinds of ledes? Nut graphs?

- Look up what editors have said they’re looking for in pitches. (Search twitter for “from:@editorshandle pitch” to see what they’ve tweeted in the past about what they’re looking for in a pitch.) You can also introduce yourself (briefly) via email and ask what they’re looking for right now. It doesn’t always work, but it’s often worth trying. They probably already have text they can send you easily.

- Look at the previous coverage they’ve already done on the general subject of what you’re investigating. Is it something they’re missing coverage of? Or would your work enhance their existing coverage? What makes it a good fit?
Writing The Abbreviated Pitch
(Topline Summary)

Think of this as the bare minimum you need them to read in order to understand your pitch. The whole thing should be less than 300 words.

1. **Intro:** If you don’t already know the editor well, introduce yourself & state why/how you’re reaching out to them. (Maybe someone specific suggested you pitch them? Maybe you’ve been in touch before?) Tell them you’re submitting a pitch for an investigation.

2. **Synopsis:** BRIEFLY lay out the crux of the investigation in a single paragraph, ideally no more than 100 words.

3. **Fit For Outlet:** In a sentence, explain why it would be a good fit for that outlet.

4. **Pivot To Full Pitch:** Simply tell them that if they might be interested, you can share a more detailed pitch (or you can let them know that you’re sharing a more detailed pitch, in confidence, below).

5. **Contact Info & Link to Your Website:** Make sure you give them a way to reach you, and a way to learn more about your work (like your website/clips).
Dear (EDITOR),

We met at the Investigative Reporters & Editors Conference last month, and I wanted to follow up with a pitch for an investigation into an underreported aspect of the country's rape kit crisis:

Despite the recent discovery of hundreds of thousands of untested rape kits gathering dust in police evidence rooms across the country, no one has systematically investigated the relationship between race and kits that go untested. While there are anecdotal accounts that rape kits submitted by women of color go untested at higher rates than those of others, there is little data to test these claims. Over the last three months, I’ve been collecting data in three cities with some of the largest backlogs, and will soon have exclusive access to rare racial data about untested kits emerging from a lawsuit in Tennessee. The investigation I’m writing focuses on analyzing this data, interviewing survivors, advocates, and law enforcement, and weaving my findings through compelling narrative.

I know that (OUTLET) has been on the forefront of covering the rape kit crisis, and I think this investigation could find a great home with you. It has real potential to shed real light on an overlooked problem within our justice system that affects countless women every day.

If you’re interested, I’ve laid out a more detailed (and confidential) pitch below, including my proposed reporting plan and narrative approach.

I’d be happy to chat about any of this. You can reach me at (PHONE) or (E-MAIL), and learn more about my work here: [WEBSITE].

Thank you,

(NAME)
Writing The Full Pitch:
1. Give It A Title

This is optional, but sometimes you might want to give the full pitch a title in the vein of that outlet’s style of project titles & headlines. Study investigations published by outlet you’re pitching, and give your full pitch an appropriate title, and possibly even a subhead/deck if it feels right. For example, each BuzzFeed investigation has several:

(Project Title) **DETECTIVE GUEVARA’S WITNESSES**

(Headline) **A Chicago Cop Is Accused Of Framing 51 People For Murder. Now, The Fight For Justice.**

(Subhead) Chicago Police Detective Reynaldo Guevara is accused of framing at least 51 people for murder. When a group of mothers, aunts and sisters found that no officials — not the state’s attorney’s office, not the mayor’s office — wanted to take up their cause, the women went in search of justice themselves. Next week a man convicted in one of Guevara’s most dubious cases will be in court for what could be his last chance at freedom. Will prosecutors continue fighting to keep Roberto Almodovar behind bars?
The length depends on how narrative-centric the outlet you’re pitching is, but you’ll want to open your full pitch with a key character or brief scene that helps set up the pitch, pique their interest, and give a sense of your writing:

“Late one evening in September 2015, Bassim Razzo turned off the television, went upstairs to the bedroom, and settled in next to his wife, Mayada, to sleep. It was 1 AM. Not long after, the room exploded. The lights flickered wildly, and pounds of concrete fell around him. The roof had caved in—he could see the night sky, the stars over Mosul. By the time he was brought to the hospital, he’d learned that it had been an American airstrike, and that Mayada and his daughter Tuka were dead. A second airstrike had crushed the house next door, killing his brother and his family. Bassim desperately needed surgery, but Mosul was under ISIS control, and health care had crumbled under the Caliphate. So he made a daring escape, through ISIS-controlled Syria, to Turkey, and then Baghdad. Since then, Bassim has been living in Iraq’s capital, struggling to cope, and trying, in vain, for justice from the U.S. government. Yet the Americans have so far refused restitution, or even official acknowledgement.

The airstrike was not errant; it targeted both homes with precision, dubbing them centers of a “vehicle-borne IED network” in a video released after the strike. To this day, Bassim does not know why.”
You’ll want to transition from your opening scene / character into a more fleshed out version of the synopsis in your topline summary. You need to convey the central problem, give a sense of scale, what’s at stake, and why this matters now:

“In nearly two years of airstrikes in Iraq, America’s primary front in the fight against ISIS, the Pentagon claims to have killed as many as 20,000 ISIS fighters—and only [18] civilians. Our year-long investigation suggests, though, that the true scale is orders of magnitude higher: possibly [10,000] dead civilians, and counting. The anti-ISIS campaign is perhaps the least transparent war in American history; with few reporters on the ground, the public has largely been kept in the dark about the true human costs of the conflict.”

Sometimes, it can be really helpful to acknowledge how your idea is different than existing reporting, and what makes it unique:

“Although some journalists and human rights organizations have documented a few cases of individual civilian casualties, no one has systematically investigated on the ground how many more civilians are dying than our government claims.”
4. **How You’ll Do It:** You’ll also want to give some detail about the systematic approach you’ve identified to tackle this investigation, and the work you’ve already done. For example:

“Over the last month, I’ve located the 400 other lawsuits against the city, which like Dwayne’s, stopped in their tracks when Detroit filed for bankruptcy. Among these, I’ve identified the 30 strongest cases, ranging from claims of police abuse and employment discrimination, to personal injury and wrongful death. They include individuals like Jessie Payne, a Detroit native who was recently awarded $5 million after being run over by a city bus. The payment was halted amidst the bankruptcy, and she now stands to get only a small fraction of what she is owed. I have already been in touch with her lawyers, and am planning to meet with her next week.”

5. **Narrative Structure/Characters:** If you can, briefly describe the narrative path you’re taking and any key characters:

“In terms of narrative structure, the story will follow Basim through his life in Michigan, the night of the strike, his escape, and his attempts to obtain restitution from the U.S. government. It will close with his return to Mosul, to the site of his destroyed house, as U.S.-backed forces seize the city from the Islamic State. We will amplify his story through our broader investigative findings, which include…”

6. **Timeline & Style:** Briefly explain your reporting plan over a set period of time. This can include trips you might make, sources you’re still working to get, data you’ll gather. Propose the length and style for the investigation:

“I anticipate writing a 3,000-word story with photos and possible multimedia elements, such as… My goal is to submit a draft by March, allowing a month for preliminary research and planning, a month for ground reporting, and a month for writing…”
If this is a pitch for funding from a grant making organization, you’ll need a budget.

But if you’re pitching an outlet, and your story sounds expensive (which is why some outlets reject great ideas), you can mention seeking support from journalism funders:

“I anticipate the reporting expenses, including trips to Memphis and Detroit, may be in the realm of $(AMOUNT), but I’m open to applying for funding support through the Pulitzer Center or Fund for Investigative Journalism.”
What Makes You the Right Person to Tell This Story?
Don’t paste your bio, so much as lay out a few relevant things. Maybe you’ve broken scoops on this beat for a while. Maybe you published stories on this general subject that generated impact or resonated with communities you’re covering. Be brief!

Why Is This Outlet The Right Home For It?
(Or, if you’re really clever, why this story would thrive in the hands of that specific editor.) Do research. Maybe that editor has shepherded similar investigations. Maybe they are someone you really want to learn from. Maybe your investigation taps into that outlet’s key focus areas or their audience’s interests. If it feels right, link off to their previous coverage, so they know you’ve done your research and really thought this through.
Maybe this investigation, for whatever reason, isn’t the right fit for that outlet right now. You can preemptively acknowledge that possibility, and ask to connect in the near future to learn more about the kinds of pitches they’re looking to commission, or what you could do to improve on your pitches for the next time around:

“I understand this story might not be the right fit for (OUTLET) right now, but I’d love to connect in the near future to learn more about the kinds of pitches you’re looking to commission, or what I could improve on for future pitches.”
FAQ When Pitching A Freelance Investigation: 

But What About...?

- I’m afraid that if I pitch my investigation too early, that outlet will just steal the idea & assign it to one of its staff reporters...

- How do I afford pre-reporting before I’ve gotten a commission?

- Catch 22: I have a great project, but I need money for some pre-reporting. I applied for a reporting grant, but they wanted a commitment from a news organization first. So I pitched the idea to a news outlet, but they wanted me to have funding first. What should I do?

- I never got a rejection of my pitch. When is it okay to take it to another outlet?
The Economics of Freelancing

• Other Income (What Most Early Freelance Investigative Reporters Do)
• Collaborations & Cutting Costs
• Ratio of Expensive vs. “Cheap” Stories
• Grants, Fellowships & Resources
# Sources of Support

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<th>Category</th>
<th>Org/Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>URL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship + Reporting Grant</td>
<td>Marquette O'Brien Fellowship</td>
<td>O’Brien Fellows complete an in-depth reporting project of their choosing.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.marqi">https://www.marqi</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fellowship + Reporting Grant</td>
<td>Alicia Patterson Foundation</td>
<td>One-year and six-month grants are awarded to working journalists to support in-depth reporting projects.</td>
<td><a href="https://aliciapatter">https://aliciapatter</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fellowship + Reporting Grant</td>
<td>Open Society</td>
<td>Applicants for the Open Society Fellowship are invited to address the world’s most pressing social problems with creative and innovative solutions.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.open">https://www.open</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Grant &amp; Editorial Support</td>
<td>Type Investigations</td>
<td>Our team of editors commission investigative projects from independent journalists and news organizations.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.typeir">https://www.typeir</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Grant &amp; Editorial Support</td>
<td>Fuller Project</td>
<td>The Fuller Project is the award-winning global nonprofit newsroom dedicated to investigative reporting and digital storytelling.</td>
<td><a href="https://fullerprojec">https://fullerprojec</a></td>
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<td>Reporting Grant</td>
<td>NYU Reporting Award</td>
<td>The Reporting Award provides support of up to $12,500 for a work of journalism related to any aspect of history.</td>
<td><a href="https://journalism">https://journalism</a></td>
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<td>Reporting Grant</td>
<td>Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting</td>
<td>The Pulitzer Center partners with individual journalists and news organizations to create innovative and thought-provoking reporting.</td>
<td><a href="https://pulitzercen">https://pulitzercen</a></td>
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<td>Reporting Grant</td>
<td>Fund for Investigative Journalism</td>
<td>The Fund for Investigative Journalism’s Board of Directors meets three times a year to make grants of up to $4,000 each.</td>
<td><a href="http://investigate">http://investigate</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Grant</td>
<td>IWMF Buffet Fund For Women</td>
<td>Promoting the work and advancing the role of women in the news media.</td>
<td><a href="https://iwmf.submi">https://iwmf.submi</a></td>
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<td>Reporting Grant</td>
<td>IWMF Fund For Women Journalists</td>
<td>An applicant must identify as a woman and be a full-time professional journalist.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.iwmf">https://www.iwmf</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Grant</td>
<td>IWMF Kim Wall Memorial Fund</td>
<td>The Kim Wall Memorial Fund will distribute one $5,000 grant once a year to a journalist whose work has focused on the importance of investigative journalism.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.iwmf">https://www.iwmf</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardship Grant</td>
<td>National Geographic COVID Fund</td>
<td>In the most difficult of times, journalism can play several roles in support of the health sector.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.natioi">https://www.natioi</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fellowship (Support)</td>
<td>DART Center Ochberg Fellowship</td>
<td>The Ochberg Fellowships, our flagship global program, is a unique series of international fellowships.</td>
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<td>Fellowship (Support)</td>
<td>Kaiser Media Fellowships in Health</td>
<td>Kaiser Media Fellowships in Health provide selected journalists with opportunities to conduct award-winning investigative reporting.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.kff.org">https://www.kff.org</a></td>
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<td>Writing Residency</td>
<td>Logan Nonfiction Program</td>
<td>The Logan Nonfiction Program offers two fellowship classes per year:</td>
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<td>Editorial Support &amp; Commissions</td>
<td>Economic Hardship Reporting Project</td>
<td>EHRP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that produces compelling stories of economic hardship.</td>
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<td>Editorial Support &amp; Commissions</td>
<td>Food &amp; Environment Reporting Network</td>
<td>We are eager to support stories that are in-depth, investigative and engaging.</td>
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<td>Press IDs &amp; Hardship Microgrants</td>
<td>Overseas Press Club</td>
<td>The Overseas Press Club offers photo ID card options for our working journalists.</td>
<td><a href="https://opcofamer">https://opcofamer</a></td>
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<td>Liability Insurance for Freelancers</td>
<td>Dinghy &amp; Freelancers Union</td>
<td>Until now, getting liability insurance as a freelance writer has been expensive and challenging.</td>
<td><a href="https://dinghy.us/f">https://dinghy.us/f</a></td>
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The Gumshoe Group supports freelance investigative reporters pursuing ambitious journalism in the public interest.

Freelance investigative reporters produce brave, time-intensive work that news organizations often can’t undertake—at significant personal risk and with diminished structural and financial support. The Gumshoe Group supports freelance investigative reporters by connecting them with lawyers in the pursuit of public records, offering workshops and trainings, providing resources and tools, and coordinating investigative collaborations. Learn more about our work and how to get involved below.

Defamation Law for Freelance Journalists

Wednesday, December 2, 2020
5:00 PM – 6:30 PM
The Overseas Press Club
Press IDs & Micro-Grants

Shoutout to the Overseas Press Club for what I’d originally thought was a comically oversized press badge, but which has been so helpful to me in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and now Brooklyn.

Want one? opcofamerica.org/opc-offers-
opcofamerica

ACOS Alliance
@ACOSAlliance

Excellent safety training opportunity from the team @VICE with support from ACOS & @opcofamerica. Open to freelance journalists, photographers & visual journalists in any country. 90 min online workshops. Spaces limited. Apply by 18th Feb 2021: bit.ly/2M3kTfX

VICE MEDIA SAFETY WORKSHOPS

FOR FREELANCE JOURNALISTS

Digital Security - Tuesday 2 March, 10am ET
Physical Safety + Civil Unrest - Thursday 4 March, 10am ET
Self-Care - Tuesday 9 March, 10am ET

Workshops are ONLINE & FREE but spaces are limited. Priority will be given to freelancers who can commit to all three workshops and who are at risk because of their work.

Women Photograph
@womenphotograph

The @opcofamerica have made $90,000 in micro-grants available for freelance journalists impacted by the pandemic, provided that you’ve worked for a U.S. outlet in the past year:
...ssclubofamericagran...