

THE  
CONVERSATION



# Crafting a Strong Pitch

*A workshop for communications partners + scholars*

*Feb. 9, 2022*

# Agenda



- The Conversation U.S. (TCUS)
- What's in a pitch?
- How to pitch as a scholar
- How to pitch as a communications partner
- Pitching examples
- Additional tips + best practices
- Q&A



# The Conversation U.S.

Promote truthful information and strengthen journalism by unlocking  
the rich diversity of academic research for audiences across America

- The Conversation is a nonprofit, independent publisher of expert research and news analysis.
- Written by academics, edited by journalists, for the general public
- Scholars write explanatory journalism pieces (**not op-eds**) within their area of expertise in a rigorous and collaborative editorial process.

# Who we are

# Our authors

- Authors must be a current faculty member or researcher at a U.S. college or university.
- Authors must provide links to research or other evidence throughout their stories to back up their statements.
- Authors must fill out a disclosure form listing any conflicts of interest.
- We can't publish a story without final approval from the author.



# Who reads us

Our articles are free to read and republish through a Creative Commons license. So by writing one story, scholars can reach audiences in many different publications.

We partner with The AP, Yahoo! News and Apple News.

*By the numbers:  
TCUS stories  
received nearly  
230 million  
pageviews in 2021.*

# Why write for us?



- Our model delivers evidence-based information to millions of people.
- Gives academic experts a greater voice and impact in shaping scientific, cultural and intellectual agendas
- 1:1 professional development with editors

# The kinds of stories we publish

- News commentary + analysis
- New research + discoveries
- Curiosity pieces





## **News commentary + analysis**


**Omicron makes booster shots more critical for medically vulnerable seniors**

**Sidney Poitier – Hollywood's first Black leading man reflected the civil rights movement on screen**

**School closure debates put teachers unions front and center**

# **New research + discoveries**

**Life's stages are changing – we need new terms and new ideas to describe how adults develop and grow**



**Offshore wind farms could help capture carbon from air and store it long-term – using energy that would otherwise go to waste**



**A new treatment helped frogs regenerate their amputated legs – taking science one step closer to helping people regrow their body parts, too**



## Curiosity pieces



**What the world can learn from the Buddhist concept loving-kindness**

**What is the metaverse? 2 media and information experts explain**

**Is chewing on ice cubes bad for your teeth?**

# What's in a pitch?

pitch

/piCH/

*definition*

A pitch is a brief description of a story intended to convince an editor, producer or publisher to commission the piece.

# What we look for in a pitch



- *Is the story of interest to a general audience?*
- *Is the story timely?*
- *Is the author an expert on what they're pitching?*
- *Can the angle be covered in 1,000 or fewer words?*

## Not considered a pitch...

- A blog post or link to a story that has already been published
- “I’m an expert in the field of microeconomics. Do you want me to write for you?”
- A press release or grant announcement
- A draft of a story article or an outline
- “Our university is part of a consortium that’s studying plant disease X. See this webpage for more information.”

# Common reasons pitches are rejected

- Not for a general reader
- Not timely
- Reads like an opinion (or advocacy) piece
- Too speculative
- Not focused enough/too broad
- Subject vs. story
- Full draft sent instead of a pitch
- We already have a similar piece in the works.

# Is the pitch written for a general audience?

- Have you included a clear explanation of why this matters to someone outside of your field?
- Have you avoided jargon and acronyms?
- Have you used clear, precise language and concrete examples?



# Is the idea timely?

- Is the topic currently being discussed in the news?
- Is there an upcoming milestone, anniversary or event related to your idea?
- Have you published new research on the topic?

**Does the idea read  
like opinion,  
advocacy or  
speculation?**

- Have you avoided “should” and “must” language?
- What scholarship or evidence will the proposed story rely upon?
- What is your expertise in this particular area?

**Does the pitch  
propose to tell *one*  
story?**

- Have you focused on depth rather than breadth?
- Have you condensed your information and focused on only the key points?
- Can the thrust of your story can be summed up in one sentence?

# How to pitch as a scholar

Log into your author account and go to this URL (which is also available on our homepage):

theconversation.com/us/pitches

THE CONVERSATION

Search analysis, research, academics...

## Pitch an article idea

Thanks for your interest in pitching an idea to The Conversation. This page briefly explains our editorial priorities and shows you what makes a good pitch. You can then submit a pitch via the links.

### What types of stories are we looking for?

The Conversation focuses on three priority areas:

- Timely, evidence-based analysis of issues making the news
- Articles explaining new research and its significance for a non-expert audience
- Timeless, plain English 'explainers' of complex issues

Before pitching, please consider a [keyword search](#) to read what we've published on your topic.

### Can you write for The Conversation?

Are you currently employed as a researcher or academic with a university or government scientific research institution? We do not publish articles written by people employed by think tanks or non-profit research groups. Or, if you're a student, are you a PhD candidate?

We generally work with academics at US universities. You can also pitch your article to editions of The Conversation in [Australia](#), [Africa](#), [Canada](#), [France](#), [Indonesia](#) and the [UK](#).

Yes — and I'm ready to submit a new pitch

# Our pitch form

## The pitch: What's your story?

**Story** \*

In one or two sentences, what's your story? (50 word limit)

**Significance** \*

Why is it interesting or significant for non-academic readers? (100 word limit)

**Other key points**

Why is this a good time to do this article? What is your expertise in the subject? (150 word limit)

**Multimedia**

Do you have any photos, video, audio, graphs or other material to help illustrate your story? If so, please describe them. (200 word limit)

# How to pitch on a scholar's behalf

Log into your reader account and go to this URL (which is also available on our homepage):

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[Yes — and I'm ready to submit a new pitch](#)



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Arts + Culture



**Mountain glaciers hold less ice than previously thought – here's what that means for 2 billion people who rely on their water**

Mathieu Morlighem, *Dartmouth College*

# Scholars + comms partners

Please use this



We generally work with academics at US universities. You can also pitch your article to editions of the The Conversation in [Australia](#), [Africa](#), [Canada](#), [France](#), [Indonesia](#) and the [UK](#).

**Yes — and I'm ready to submit a new pitch**

OR

Not this



No, but I'm a reader with a question or idea to suggest



# Pitching as a comms partner

- Be sure to include: the scholar's name, title, contact information and why they are the expert to write this particular story
- As part of a member university, you or the scholar should hear back from an editor within 5 business days.
- If you do not, please contact me to find out the status of the pitch.

# Strong pitch (Arts + Culture)

**Story:** Ansel Adams is famous for his black-and-white photographs of America's wilderness. His signature style is revered and often imitated. How did he learn that style? Adams dropped out of conventional schooling as a child and was a self-taught photographer, but his work as a commercial photographer informed his famous style.

Interesting question about a well-known figure

**Significance:** We assume that talented people are just innately talented, but Adams leveraged his experiences into future success, building from a childhood amateur (making snapshots in Yosemite Valley on vacation with his parents) into one of the most recognizable photographers of the 20th century. He not only learned from other art undertakings; his experience as a commercial photographer changed the way he approached the medium and allowed him to be more effective in his artwork. This ability to transfer experience, skills and knowledge seems widely applicable to how Americans think about their own lives, skills and careers.

Surprising finding based in her research

Why readers will care

**Key Points:** I am about to publish a book on Adams, presenting new research. Adams has a controlling trust, which means little research about him is published (the last scholarly book came out in 2002). For such a beloved, familiar and accessible cultural icon, there is remarkably little available. I am the chief curator at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, and Adams's archive is here. In addition to the release of my book (Feb. 2020), there is the anniversary of his birth (February 20, 1902).

Why scholar is *the* expert to write this piece


Clear news peg

# Strong pitch (Science + Technology)

**Story:** How accessible are UI/UX design tools? Not very. People with vision impairments could contribute to and improve technology design, but popular design tools aren't currently accessible to them through their screen readers. As accessibility researchers, we'll break down the prototyping tool landscape and discuss ways to improve it.

**Significance:** Few technology designers are blind/low vision. Lack of representation is problematic, when many user interfaces (smartphone apps) already aren't accessible to blind people. Designers use UI/UX prototyping tools to create mock-ups of digital interface designs, to test before coding. However, these tools are inaccessible by screen reader technologies used by blind people to access screen elements.

**Key points:** We'll evaluate 4 popular prototyping tools and how they work with 2 screen readers. We have comparison charts. We'll identify which tools are most inaccessible and where to make improvements. Inaccessible UI/UX prototyping leads to inaccessible design. Making these tools accessible could empower blind technology designers.



← Interesting question that identifies a problem

← Simple explanation shows that scholars can write for a lay audience

← States their expertise and clear explanation of the story

← Helpful context

← Clear explanation of why it matters

# Strong pitch (Health + Medicine)

**Story:** What is the potential side effect of the J&J vaccine for COVID-19? The side effect is a blood clot in the veins that drain blood from the brain. It is called central venous sinus thrombosis (CVST).

**Significance:** How would I suspect that I have this? The CDC and FDA are recommending that people who have received the J&J vaccine within the last 3 weeks who develop severe headache, abdominal pain, leg pain, or shortness of breath should contact their health care provider.

**Key Points:** A similar and rare problem of blood clotting with low platelets in the cerebral venous sinus and also in the abdominal veins and arteries has been seen with the use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine used in Europe (182 cases in 190 million doses). The European Medicines Agency (EMA) investigated this and concluded that CVST with low platelets be listed as a possible "very rare side effect" of the vaccine.



Clear news peg



Anticipates question readers will have



Why it matters



Interesting comparison and context that will add further insight


# Pitch that needs work

## Story

It turns out "Yoopers" will save money if Line 5 closes down if they invest in heat pumps, rather than freeze to death as alarmists claim. A new study shows that solar photovoltaics and heat pumps provide lower cost heat to Michigan's Upper Peninsula (the UP) than propane currently provides.

## Significance

Many Yoopers fear catastrophic heating prices if Line 5 closes. Line 5 is a pipeline system carrying propane from Canada across Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas. The pipeline crosses the Straits of Mackinac, leading to concerns about a potential oil spill from the 65-year-old pipeline. Currently, there is a huge debate about Michigan's attempt to close Line 5 permanently. Shutting down the pipeline could have significant impacts on those living in the UP - that often are remote and use propane for heating. The Michigan government is considering subsidies for propane transport by train/truck as potential solutions.



← Too regional/specific to Michigan

← Does not indicate that this is reflective of trends elsewhere or that it would be broadened to a national audience

# Pitch that needs work

**Story:** Ranking of people, schools, products, countries and just about everything else is part of our daily life. We are in a paradoxical relationship with ranking: "Ranking is good because it is informative and objective; ranking is bad because it is biased and subjective, and occasionally, even manipulated."

← Too broad, general; not sure what proposed story is

**Significance:** Everybody with whom I have talked in the last several years has seemed to agree that the topic of ranking is hot. A ranking procedure may reflect either the reality or the illusion of objectivity. In addition, ranking might be the subject of manipulation.

← Anecdotal, no research mentioned

Objectivity attempts to represent the outside world without bias or presuppositions, while subjectivity results from personal cognition or preferences. While making objective rankings sounds like an appealing goal, there are at least two different reasons why we may not have objectivity: ignorance and manipulation. We should learn how to navigate between objectivity and subjectivity.

← Too broad; not new or surprising; reads like opinion

**Key Points:** Recently a dozen of articles in The Conversation discussed ranking, the social game we all play. Stories about the problems of ranking of colleges and universities, political candidates, livable cities, artists and tennis players were given. In this article, I will reanalyze these stories from the perspective of my recent book.

← Not something we do in our model


# Pitch that needs work

## Story

The Passion of Britney Spears. From Southern Baptist to Kabbalah to possibly Catholicism, Britney Spears' religious life speaks to her struggles, her faith, and her fandom.

## Significance

Two weeks ago, she caused a social media firestorm when she announced she was converting to Catholicism (in a now-deleted post). This inspired me to look into her religious biography, and I wrote a piece tracing her story from Southern Baptist to modern Kabbalah, to even looking into Hinduism, and now maybe Catholicism. It covers the moral panic around her performative sexuality, but also the praise she got for being a virgin.



← No indication that this is research-based

← News peg has passed

← Already written

← Interesting idea, but no mention of research

## Additional tips + best practices

- Always check our site and search the proposed topic before pitching.
- Don't "bury the lede": Start your pitch with the news.
- Please don't send a written draft of a story instead of a pitch or "soft pitch" the editors.
- If you or your scholars would like feedback on a pitch before submitting it, email Michelle.
- If at first you don't succeed . . .





**Thank you for your time!**

**Questions?**

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