What’s a Pitch?

It’s an idea that you develop to the point that your editor cannot say no. You take that vague, ethereal thing that you imagine writing about – runaways, flower farmers, suburban cows, whatever – and do enough reporting to answer these four questions developed by our resident pitching pros and journalism professors Tracy Dahlby and Rusty Todd:

1) Why is this a story? Why is it important?
2) Why is it a story now?
3) What’s at stake?
4) Why should anyone care?

Show Precise, Focused Detail

A pitch is a statement, not a question or a hunch. You have to do enough pre-reporting to prove there’s a reason to do the story now. What’s the background? Show me the context. See the examples that Tracy and Rusty use in Reporting Texas:

Vague: I want to write about rodeo clowns because I think they’re cool, they wear funny clothes, and everybody wants to know more about them.

Acceptable: The continuing drought is causing a comeback in windmills throughout Texas as ranchers look for ways to maintain their herds and wildlife habitat. Aeromotor, perhaps the most famous windmill maker, is doing booming business in San Angelo. We will look at businesses that erect and repair mills in Travis and neighboring counties. We’ll also gather nationwide statistics on this resurgent business. We’ll interview windmill repair people, ranchers, Department of Agriculture officials and economists to find out if this business will continue to thrive as climate change progresses. Art to include pix of a windmill repairman at work, livestock or wildlife at a windmill tank. Graphic could chart growth of windmill sales/repairs over past few years.
Tips for Setting Up a Good Pitch (from Tracy & Rusty)

1. Do research first—Google/Lexis/Nexis

   What has already been written about the topic? What more can you add? This will give you grounding in the topic.

2. Have some facts/studies to demonstrate if something will work out.

   Sometimes news stories will mention a study/research/numbers – look up the original source and see what else you might learn. (Also, this way, if you use the info in your story, you can cite the original source, rather than the publication that tipped you off to it.) Likewise, news stories contain human and institutional sources that can be helpful contacts for both pitching and reporting your story.

3. Contact people to find out if you have access to building/people.

   This gets to the feasibility of your story. If you want to interview President Fenves, do you have access to him? How do you know this? Lack of immediate access doesn’t necessarily rule out your story. But you may need to put the story idea on a back burner while you try to secure access – and be working on one that you KNOW you will be able to do NOW.

Now, a few more for the strong feature:

1) Are there good characters through whom to tell the story? A lengthy tale about a crack addict trying to stay clean through her pregnancy depended on the availability of a willing, pregnant crack addict. You can IMAGINE writing many stories but can you find the right subjects?

2) Where do you need to be to tell this story? What scenes to you need to paint with detail you observe? This goes back to the news question of access. Is that crack addict going to allow you to be fly on the wall while her children are melting down before dinner or to go grocery shopping with her while she uses public assistance? Will she have you in the delivery room?

Now, write the pitch to sell the story to your editor. Let her know what she can expect, how long it might take to complete and the length you see it requiring. Once she approves the pitch, it’s a go. Get busy reporting and deliver what you promised!