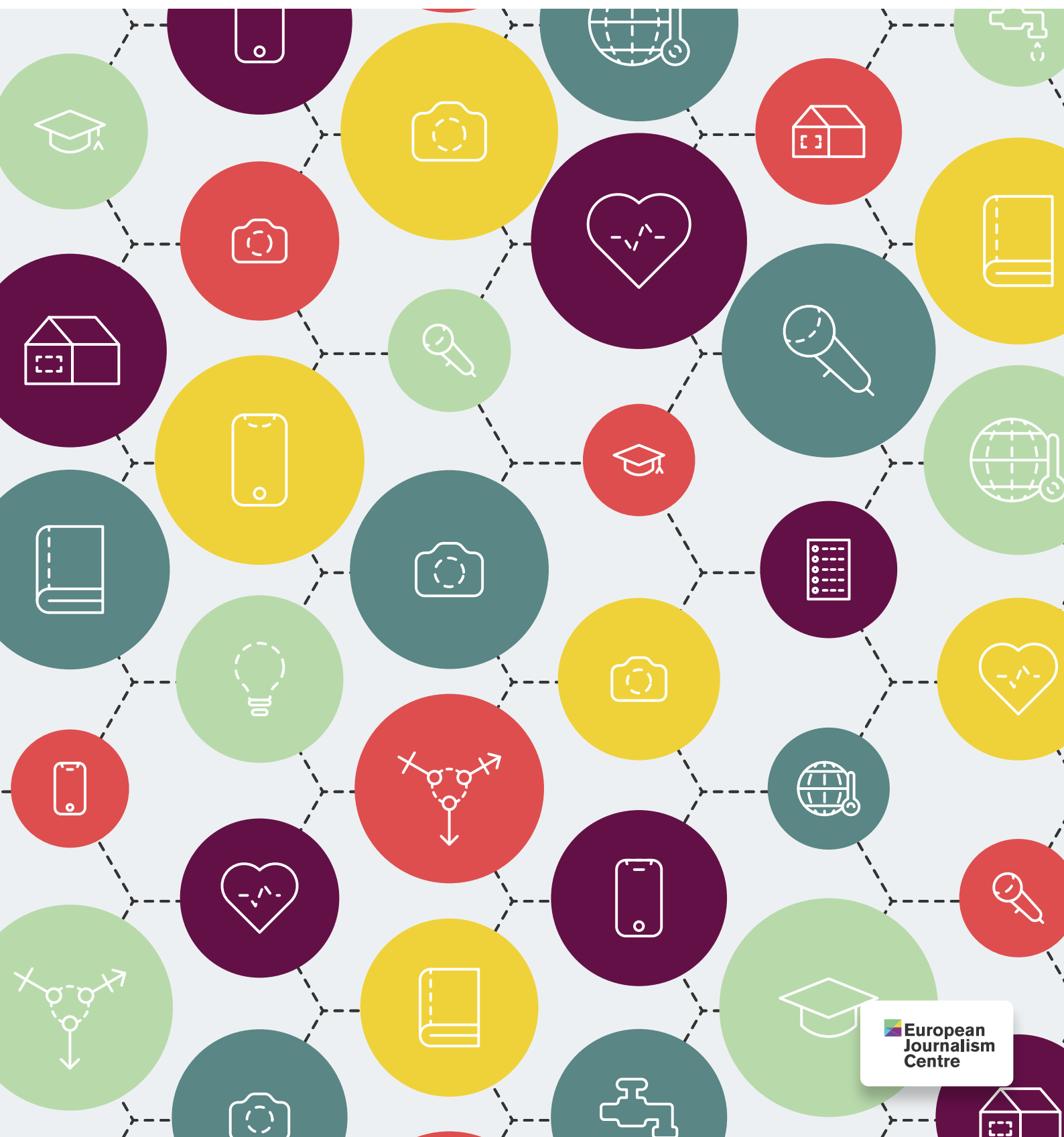


A handbook for pitching development stories





Introduction

Welcome to the [European Journalism Centre's](#) guide to pitching development stories as a freelance journalist. This handbook is based on real-world advice and experience from both editors who receive pitches and freelance journalists who send them.

What is a development story? For the purposes of this guide, we're defining a development story as coverage that brings attention to the global social, cultural and political issues and challenges affecting the development of people, communities and places. This includes but is not limited to economic issues and includes topics ranging from access to education, provision and equity of healthcare, migration and gender equality to the impact of climate change on the lives and prospects of people, communities and places.

Good development reporting will often explore situations where several of these factors are at play. [The topics outlined by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals](#) and

where these goals intersect can provide a helpful starting point. Development stories may explore national or international efforts to reduce poverty and inequality or improve health and education with a focus on their long-term impact or sustainability. Good development journalism should consider the perspective of those most affected and reflect their lived experience and agency while interrogating the structural imbalances and power dynamics at play. It will critically evaluate the processes and mechanisms involved in development, such as aid agencies and government programmes.

This guide is created in the framework of the [Freelance Journalism Assembly](#) and is primarily intended to support freelance journalists in improving their pitches and chances of being commissioned and/or hired by news organisations and publishers. We know that editors receive a high volume of pitches and truly hope this handbook helps you prepare winning pitches that stand out from the crowd and can improve your stories on development issues.

Tips from development editors and freelance journalists

What makes a great development story?

We asked editors who run global development, global health and global society desks within newsrooms for their advice on pitching – starting with what makes a great development story.

Don't know where to start for story inspiration?

Check out our guides for freelance journalists on

- [Reporting on climate change](#)
- [Reporting on refugees and migration](#)
- [Reporting on poverty](#)
- [Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

🎯 Macro in the micro

Focus your pitch on a specific situation, person or response. Show how it illustrates and links to a wider issue. This will ensure your pitch is a story and not just an idea and that you understand how it relates to a broader development topic.

❓ Ask a question

That hasn't been answered: this will help you avoid too broad a pitch or a story that's already been covered widely. Could you return to a community where an intervention has been introduced and question its success or progress?

😊 Think impact

Editors, especially in smaller newsrooms, have to think carefully about where they put their money and time. Show that your story would have an impact: who can it reach or how could it be used by those living through these development issues?

👤 Focus on the human

A strong character can bring a development news story or feature to life. Root your story in the ways that their daily life is affected by an issue or an intervention and show this reality to your audience. Don't reinforce stereotypes and show the person's dignity and strength – these are people, not victims and not just your case studies.

🕒 Look long term

Think about the world events that have an effect on gaps in educational, employment, digital, health or economic equality. How will the aftermath of these events affect people in the long-term or how are people responding?

🗨️ Line up interviews with local people, experts and officials

Not just international or Global North NGO workers and academics, international aid agencies or government officials. Include diverse voices and perspectives in your pre-reporting and pitch. Involving under-represented voices in news media can help uncover new perspectives, challenge stereotypes and better reflect reality. You don't need to have all your sources confirmed in your pitch but show you're going beyond the received narrative.

🗣️ Play to your strengths

If you have a country or subject specialism within development topics, make this clear to your editor.

➡ News hooks

If there's sudden national or international interest in a development issue that you are researching or a region that you regularly report on, use that window of opportunity to pitch multiple stories and that public attention to sell your stories.

🔦 Show you're a great storyteller

How you write your pitch should demonstrate how you will tell the final story. Show the editor that you can write a compelling pitch, demonstrate your reporting or writing style and that you have access to great characters. It's an advert for your future story and more likely to get the editor's support, especially if you need budget or expenses.

⚠️ Go beyond problems

Pitches that focus on how people, an individual or a place are solving or adapting to a problem can stand out for editors and audiences. Define the problem but look beyond it for your story to find a new angle and give your audience a sense of hope or agency.

🔄 The systemic approach

For investigative pitches and stories, think about the scale of your idea. You might find the story through an individual case, but does it indicate a wider pattern or a systemic issue?

How to structure your pitch

Think in headlines: the person you are pitching may have to repitch it to their editor or team. Give them a headline in the style of their publication and include it in the subject line of your email if pitching by email. Have a powerful summary of the story (possibly the introductory paragraph or lead) prepared.

Why now? What makes this story newsworthy or right for publication at this time? Include a suggested deadline if the story is time-sensitive owing to current news events.

Why you? Do you have access to sources, places or data that are critical to the reporting of this development story? Do you have a scientific background appropriate to a global health story or a set of data skills that will help you investigate aid money? Allude to these in your pitch when it's relevant to the story you are suggesting.

Local and lived perspectives: do you have language skills, a cultural understanding or agility, that will help you access and tell this story? Make it clear in your pitch. This is also part of the "why you" section of a good pitch.

Be succinct: outline the problem or development topic that your story is related to but don't give pages of history or background. Focus on the most relevant, specific details and even the solutions that your story will cover.

Evidence: what data, information or research have you found to support your story and angle? You can include ideas for organisations and individuals you'll speak to here too.

Find the right fit: show that your story fits the editorial line of the media or specific outlet you are pitching. Give examples of how this story would complement its existing coverage.



Understand the audience: who will be reading, watching or listening to this story? Think about the audience of the publication you are pitching and highlight in your pitch how your story will serve this audience. If the audience is more specialist – global development professionals for example – you can reflect this in the language of your pitch or suggested interviewees.

Additional content: let your editor know the suggested format of your story – is it reportage, first-person testimony, a Q&A? – and if there are additional elements available, from photos to infographics.

Make it relatable: If you're pitching a story about a place unfamiliar to your audience, highlight the common themes that connect them to the characters in the story and why this story matters to a non-local audience.

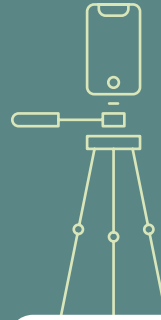
Something far away from an audience's experience can be hard to grasp, but a pitch that shows the "living reality" as not that different will interest people. "If you find out what touches your audience, you can start to shift the agenda because people are more interested," says freelance journalist Lisa Plank.

Timeline: if your story will involve travel or a specific event, don't give an editor short notice. Pitch at least two weeks in advance or longer if there are more moving parts to the story. This accounts for your editor's diary and gives them enough time to respond and plan how your story will fit their schedule.

Financials: be upfront about your own fee, the fee of any collaborators and whether you've received any grant funding to support this story or cover any expenses. Break down the expenses that you would need covered with estimate costs, for example, travel, visas and entry requirements, accommodation, food or safety equipment.

Be open, honest and show your skills: development stories often involve travel. Sending someone abroad, especially if they are a freelancer new to an editor, is a risk; show your editor why it's a small risk worth taking through an organised pitch.

How to pitch visual stories



1

What do your visuals include and what do they exclude? Is this right for your story and fair to your subjects? Are you unconsciously subscribing to a predetermined narrative of how this community is “seen”?

2

If the same images of the same part of the world are being published repeatedly, think about how you can move the story on or tell it in a way that an editor hasn't seen before. Show the variety of your approach and make sure you're not reinforcing a received narrative in your imagery.

3

For pitches unrelated to the daily news agenda, think about the individual visual stories and characters that you can focus on in your pitch that tell the longer-term story or macro situation through the micro.

4

Make a virtue of your visual style in your pitch and show how your images will tell a story on their own. “Too often pictures are just illustrations for the media. They should help you interpret the world around you. You are looking to work with a photographer because they have a certain style or interpretation,” says Adrian Evans, director of international photography and video agency [Panos Pictures](#).

5

Build a time allowance into your pitch, especially if you are not from the place where you'll be reporting. You need time to let people know why you are there and build relationships with your subjects before photographing or filming them. “The more time you spend in a community the more likely you are going to have meaningful imagery,” says Evans.

6

Certain publications just don't run photo stories. Don't pitch to them. Consider building relationships with staff writers on publications that do accept these stories to improve your chances of placing a visual story. From research, you'll get an understanding of what outlets like to experiment with visual storytelling as well as straight reportage.

7

You don't necessarily need to change your visual style to fit the visual style of an outlet, but have a clear version of the story that these visuals can tell and why it would work for the audience of this publication.

8

Don't strip the style from your images; show it off in some sample images in your pitch. Don't make it look like an outsider looking in. Where events allow, give the people being portrayed some agency over how they are being portrayed. You can tell when those pictures are collaborative rather than meeting an NGO's mission or an outside narrative, says Evans.

9

If you are primarily a visual journalist, team up with a writer for your pitch. It increases your chances of placing the story with a mainstream media outlet: the photographer will have links to the picture editors and the writer may have links to other desk editors.

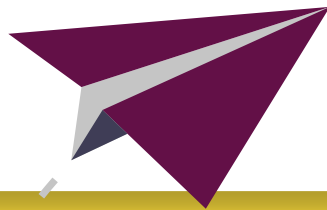
10

If planning multimedia elements to your development story, make sure the different elements can stand alone, that way you can pitch a photo essay to one outlet, a video to another, an infographic to a third and so on.

Where to pitch

To work out where to pitch development stories, do some research. Map out which national and international outlets have development desks or run similar stories. Look at specialist magazines and agencies, online-only publications and where foundations with an interest in development are funding media. Check where successful development story grant applicants placed their stories too.

To get you started, below are some suggestions of outlets and organisations that have previously been open to development stories. You'll need to do your own research to work out the best editor to pitch.



Advice on pitching work to NGOs

You may also be able to pitch stories to NGOs for their websites and campaign materials. To do so effectively you will first need to understand the NGO's strategic focus. What is its mission and how is this reflected in its communications? Research what areas and regions the NGO operates in and pitch a story that feeds into its main areas of work. If you are not local to your story, establish whether the NGO will work with freelance journalists not based in a location.

Think ahead: NGOs want the debate and conversation in their given areas to move on. As a journalist can you get ahead of the curve and find stories relevant to an NGO that they're not already across?

Consider the audience of the story you are pitching. Is this for the NGO's supporters or to secure the NGO wider media coverage? If you have good links with media outlets, reference this in your pitch.

An NGO may have strong guidelines on the tone, focus and types of stories it will run in its communications. Look through previous publications or for online guides to get a sense of this and consider whether you and your story are willing to meet these restrictions.



1843 Magazine (UK)

Al Jazeera

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (UK)

Civil Society (UK)

Climate Home News

CNN - As Equals

Dagens Nyheter (Sweden)

Daily Mirror - NextGen International Project (UK)

Devex

Disclose (France)

Euronews

L'Express (France)

Foreign Policy (US)

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and

Sonntagszeitung (Germany)

Frankfurter Rundschau (Germany)

The Fuller Project

gal-dem

Global Voices

Global Citizen (France)

Goats and Soda, NPR (US)

Grist

The Guardian - global development desk (UK)

The Independent (UK)

The Irish Times (Ireland)

Les Jours (France)

Mongabay

Mother Jones (US)

New Internationalist

The New Humanitarian

OpenDemocracy

El Pais - Planeta Futuro (Spain)

Rest of World

RiffReporter (Germany)

SciDev.net

Scroll.in (India)

Society (France)

Spiegel Online and Spiegel's Global Society Project (Germany)

Der Tagesspiegel (Germany)

Die Tageszeitung (Germany)

Third Sector news (UK)

Unbias the News

Vanity Fair (France)

de Volkskrant (Netherlands)

VRPO (Netherlands)

Welt (Germany)

The Wire (India)

How to make the most of your pitch

Pre-reporting

Do enough to feel confident that you can deliver this story. "If an editor says can I call you, I know I can answer questions," says freelance journalist Corinne Redfern. "I want to know that the people I need to speak to are open to being interviewed, comfortable speaking to me and if there are conditions. Do they need to be anonymised?"

Ask your network

Can you pitch different versions of this story to different international outlets? Ask your network of freelance colleagues what outlets in their market would take development stories and map out international opportunities for pitching.

Pitch a package

If you are likely to pitch your story to different international publications, could you make this a feature of your pitch? Suggest that there are opportunities to collaborate with other media and potentially feature multiple translations of your story and expand its audience. This may appeal to editors at titles who have worked with partners before.

Do the investigative leg work

If you're pitching an idea for an investigation, explore whether it can be investigated. Is the information needed "locked down" or is this a story that will be more open to investigation in a few months' time? Work out what you will need to prove this and show this in your pitch. What evidence could you get – that's more than just a quick internet search – even if you don't have it yet?

Challenge power dynamics

Speak to people who might not be in positions of power who are local to your story, whether that's elderly people, women or the LGBTQI+ community. "People who are not normally given the mic but who have the most interesting stories," says Gercama.

Ask about accountability

In your research, establish who or what is accountable for any issues in your story and who has the power to change a situation? Show this knowledge in your pitch and data or ideas for sources.

Apply for grants

Development stories, especially those that involve travel or investigations, can take time and it's likely you'll need to do some pre-reporting before you pitch. Grants help cover this time and effort and might allow you to work with other journalists.

Pitching in another language?

If a phone call rather than an email would be easier, let the editor know. If your story can be told visually or with fewer words written in a language that's not your first, make this part of your pitch. Be clear that you would be willing to collaborate during the editing process to make the story work for an audience in another language.

Negotiate your time

Use the unique selling point of your story to negotiate for more time if you know that the people you will interview will require more time to open up. Assess what time the story needs in advance to resist pressure from editors.

Get to know outlets' deadlines

Development stories are often time-consuming. To make the most of your research and reporting, pitch different angles to multiple publications. Knowing those publications' deadlines and spreading your pitches across different schedules – a weekly magazine vs a daily newspaper vs a quarterly journal, for example – can help you manage your time too.

The right place to pitch

Check if there's already a correspondent or staff writer covering a region, community or stories similar to your pitch. Assess whether your story fits with the outlet's coverage or style of covering a topic. If not, consider pitching elsewhere.

Proof your pitch

Swap pitches with other freelancers working on these topics to get feedback before sending it to editors. "The more people working on these kinds of stories the better," says Redfern.

Pitch strategically

As development stories can take a long-time to report or produce, be strategic about where you pitch. "Can you do fewer, more in-depth pieces that might command better pay? I look at who pays \$1-2 a word and increasingly try to target those," says Redfern.

Don't worry if things change

The final product might not look anything like your original pitch. At the pitching stage, you are showing an editor that you have thought the story and its workings through. Don't over-promise and build in that room for the story to develop in your pitch.

Collaborate for a new format

Freelance journalist Ingrid Gercama says working with a photojournalist or pitching a photo essay can offer a new angle on a development topic, especially if there's no immediate news hook. When a development story isn't a news story in essence, "you have to be creative" to make it new.





How to pitch collaborative projects

We spoke to Tina Lee, head of publications and editor-in-chief of collaborative journalism network **hostwriter**, about how to pitch a collaborative project.



Q Why collaborate?

A In your pitch, I want to know why you are well placed to tell this story. Sometimes people pitch but have no connection to a story or don't have access to elements of the story. They might think pitching will secure them the budget to travel to a location, but you need to have this set up. That's where collaboration comes in handy. It's a very different story if a journalist based in the US who has studied political assassination pitches a story on the impact of the assassination of Haiti's president on the country's people; versus pitching that in collaboration with Haitian who has studied Haitian politics. You have a much better story already. I know that you're on the ground and you're going to give me some interesting insights, you're not just speculating.

Collaborate with people with different skill sets to find a new story idea. We'd like to see more "follow the money" stories about development, for example, and not just a focus on human stories, though they are necessary and worthwhile. If in your research or reporting, you find an interesting loose end but it's not in your wheelhouse and you don't know where to start with it, find someone who does know about that area or field and collaborate.

○ Extra tip

Highlight the **added value** of collaboration in your pitch – maybe you are working across borders and are able to give a wider view of a story or provide multimedia elements as a result.

Q What development stories can work well as collaborations?

A Stories about aid and how it's being spent. The country providing funds has a specific idea about what they intended to fund and the country receiving it has a specific idea for how it's spent. Having someone work together from the funding country with someone from the receiving country is a perfect combination and might involve no travel for your collaborators.

Another effective story that might involve travel is: what are aid workers up to in different countries? For this story, it's useful to work with a collaborator on the ground. This story on aid workers driving up housing prices in the Democratic Republic of Congo is a good example. How would you as an outsider understand that? If you're just visiting you are likely to only see the aid workers' perspective. You need to have the local context to understand.

Q What do you look for in a contributor who wants to collaborate?

A We're not looking for people who are going to exploit local journalists. We want them to be presented as equal team members. Share some details of all the collaborators involved in your pitch [so an editor can factcheck]: who are they, where do they live? I'm always trying to confirm that a person exists and doesn't work for a government or other agency.

○ Extra tip

Make it easy for an editor to fact check who you and your collaborators are to build trust.

Q How can freelancers find collaborators?

A You can meet in person through conferences or journalist meet-ups; you can use the Hostwriter boards or even cold call people working on that topic. Some people are open and excited to collaborate with others and they make that obvious, I think, on their public profiles and also by being in an organization like Hostwriter or other kinds of journalism groups. But be aware that some people prefer to work more privately or just with people that they know and trust.

Q Where can you pitch collaborations?

A Unbias the News is a similar size to Rest of World, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Scroll.in and The Wire. Looking at smaller newsrooms that could work for your story and their competitors or those of similar size can be useful. Try to find places that aren't necessarily big but pay relatively well and show if your work connects to something the publication has already worked on.

○ Extra tip

Check if the outlet you are pitching to runs stories financed by other institutions, such as NGOs or grant-making bodies.

Pitching ethics and etiquette



Pre-reporting

If sources or characters in your story have experienced trauma, consider if you need them to relive their experiences during the pre-reporting stage. You don't need to include graphic details of a story at this stage either.



Be persistent

Send a follow-up email or call the editor you've pitched to if that's your relationship, but don't overstep the mark. Check whether an editor welcomes DMs on social media, for example, before sending them a message on Twitter.



A fresh idea

Make sure this story hasn't already been covered by the publication you are pitching or more broadly. If it links to existing coverage, show how it builds on previous stories and adds something new.



Development stories

May involve long processes or change over time and don't always fit into a tidy narrative. Pitches and stories want to be engaging but not at the expense of accurately portraying the realities faced by the communities affected. Don't squeeze a development story into a storytelling format if it means cutting out necessary evidence, nuance and explanation of the processes involved.

As [Devox](#) says:

Our job is to equip people with the tools they need to make empowered, rational decisions that help their families and communities. That's the real story.



Planning a trip?

Contact editors in advance to let them know you'll be on location and sending pitches. This gives editors a chance to ask questions or commission specific angles.



Move beyond tropes

Challenge established narratives (especially when reporting on the Global South) and be open and critical when researching and analysing information. You'll find new stories and under-reported angles, while better serving the places and people you're reporting on.



What are the consequences?

If your development story talks about taboos or social norms or traditions being broken, consider the ramifications for your sources. Have multiple conversations with them to discuss the issue and show this consideration in your pitch, for example, why a certain source might need anonymity.



Share the process

If you're reporting for a Global North outlet on a story based in the Global South, check if your sources are familiar with the publication. Take them through it and where else the story might appear -- social media channels, for example, might be more familiar to them. Sources might not want to be in a certain publication and you need to respect this. Update them if the outlet publishing your story changes.



Equal pay

If you're collaborating with journalists from different parts of the world, make sure you are all paid equally.



Involve your sources and contacts

Especially if you are not part of the community on which you are reporting. Share your story idea with them as a conversation starter, encourage them to disagree and explain that their perspective is appreciated and can enrich the resulting coverage.

"I explain who my readers are and tell them a little about what the story will look like and what readers might need to understand," says Lisa Plank. "I have to include information that's common knowledge for them but might not be for my [German] audience. Show people that by talking to you they are able to change the narrative. You are not exploiting them for information; it's shaping media coverage together."



Share your published stories with your sources

This can improve trust in journalists and the media and show sources the results of their insight and agency.



Timeline

Have you already done the reporting or is the reporting yet to be completed? Let your editor know when you pitch.



Duty of care

In your pitch, explain what consent you have sourced from interviewees and what due diligence you have done on individuals, organisations or communities. It tells the editor that you approach your work carefully and that this reporter has taken time to think the reporting process through. This builds trust. Your editor may also ask you about what steps you have taken in this area, so be prepared.

Resources

Covering migration - What is development journalism?	>
The Cross-Border Playlist	>
European Journalism Centre - How to pitch your development story	>
Hostwriter - 5 things to keep in mind before you write that pitch	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - Pitching: expanding to specialised media with video and presentation	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - Pitching is a love affair: Seduce, engage and win publishers' hearts by Toby Moses, TV editor at the Guardian with video and presentation	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - A freelancer's guide to reporting on climate change	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - A freelancer's guide to reporting on poverty	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - A freelancer's guide to reporting on refugees and migration	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - A freelancer's guide to solutions journalism	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - A freelancer's guide to reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals	>
Freelance Journalism Assembly - A freelancer's guide for reporting on vaccines	>
Solutions Journalism Network Story Tracker - Sustainable Development Goals	>

Many thanks to everyone who spoke with the [Freelance Journalism Assembly](#) and [European Journalism Centre](#) for this handbook, including:

Adrian Evans - director - [Panos Pictures](#)

Ingrid Gercama - [freelance journalist](#)

Chrissie Giles - global health editor - [The Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#)

Tina Lee - head of publications and editor-in-chief - [Hostwriter](#)

Lisa Plank - [freelance journalist](#)

Corinne Redfern - [freelance journalist](#)

Josephine Schmidt - executive editor - [The New Humanitarian](#)



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