How to Create a Successful Story — Before You Start

By Nelson Graves, News Decoder Founder

These tips — based on decades of real world newsroom experience — will help you frame and focus your issue, consider your audience and sources, learn how to work effectively with your editor and ultimately get your story published on News Decoder. Read them before submitting your pitch.

1. Anecdotal vs. general

Many pitches stem from personal experience, which is a natural and good place to start. Our view of the world is shaped in large part by what we see, hear and feel. This is a very good starting point, especially if you can tap into your own energy and passion.

But beware: **what you experience yourself or what you see around you is not necessarily representative of the rest of society**, even in your neighborhood and almost certainly not in the world.



Researchers and scientists collect huge amounts of data that you can use to test your assumptions, to see if what you are seeing applies more generally. Virtually any question you might ask about a topic of interest is being researched by experts somewhere – in academia, think tanks, trade associations, ministries, international organizations, nonprofits.

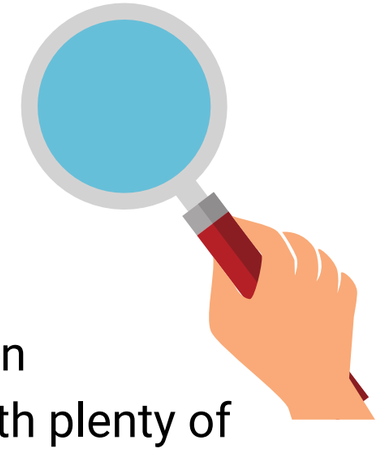
For example, you might believe you are seeing an increase in mental health issues at your school during COVID-19. You can test that hypothesis at the school level by speaking to the person at the school who is responsible for taking care of students' mental health. At a national or even international level, there are many, many experts studying this problem.

Your challenge is to find them, to see if their research supports what you are seeing around you. That's how you can test whether your experience – what I call the "anecdotal" – is representative of a more general reality. Your personal experience is valid and unique, and if it aligns with the broader reality, then what you are experiencing can even be emblematic. In that case, you can use your experience to add a human dimension to your story, to make it come alive for the reader or viewer.

2. Focus

Many students ask very general questions in their pitches, which is fine for a start.

But typically, stories must have a relatively narrow focus or the subject becomes too unwieldy and too vast. Be sure to craft a **simple question** that captures the focus of your story. Start with a broad view, then narrow it to something more manageable.



How can you narrow the focus?

Here's an example: Let's say you're interested in the question of transgender women competing in athletic events restricted to women. It's an issue of global interest, with plenty of different angles. You'll want to get up to speed on what the debate is generally about, but your story needs to go beyond generalities. Try to identify a local issue that captures the gist of the problem; by looking closely at the local issue, you can illuminate the broader picture.

What could that local issue be? There might be a bill before parliament restricting the participation of transgender women in certain athletic events (see this story), or a proposal within an athletic federation, or a petition supported by transgender women. The opposing sides will have their views on the issue, and they will shine a light on both that issue and on the problem more generally. And because you're examining a local issue, representatives of the opposing sides should be willing to talk to you. They will provide you with quotes that will make your story truly unique.

Whenever there is a big topic — human rights, the environment, freedom of speech — there are almost always aspects of the general topic to be found at the local level. By looking locally, you'll be able to narrow the focus to a manageable level and improve your chances of coming up with original material to make your story stand out.

3. Audience

News Decoder is a global website, with readers around the world. You are pitching to be published, hopefully, on News Decoder. Have you made a convincing case that your story will resonate with a global audience? Will a young person in Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Hong Kong or New York be interested?

This is not to say that your story cannot have a local angle. If you look at our Student Posts, you'll see many stories with local, even very personal angles. But typically the author manages to make the story **resonate beyond local confines**.

Take this story about pranks at a school in Mississippi. Almost all young people go through the prank phase, and at some point (hopefully) they realize that their actions have consequences — especially when it comes to the environment.



Or how about this poem? How many young people look in the mirror to see someone they don't think they are? Establishing one's identity is the eternal challenge for young people.

News Decoder is a global website, with readers and viewers around the world. Make sure that the issue you are reporting on has global relevance, that it is of interest to young people around the world.

Many issues that affect you are relevant to young people everywhere, but keep in mind that you cannot assume that a young person half-way across the world will know everything you know about your surroundings.

4. Sources

Students often underestimate their ability to find expert sources, or simply don't think they exist.

Here's a story I love to tell: A few years ago, a News Decoder student in the U.S. state of Connecticut wanted to write about the role music played in the Biafran War. She didn't know where to turn for sources. I told her that in Connecticut, there are several very good universities, and she was sure to find an expert among academics. And indeed she did.

Do you realize how much data is being collected by social scientists, polling firms, academics, NGOs, governments, international institutions? And that there are experts who are asking the very questions you are asking? How to find them? Secondary sources like newspapers and magazines will often point you to experts. You can use your own networks — teachers, parents, other adults — to find experts.

Here's another story I like to tell: When an American student wanted to write about a free speech case in the state of Pennsylvania, our correspondent Betty Wong suggested she speak to Floyd Abrams, the renowned First Amendment lawyer in the United States. She had never heard of Abrams, but she ended up interviewing him and producing a first-rate article.

You may not know it, but **most of the questions you ask are being asked by experts somewhere in the world**. To continue with the COVID-19/mental health issue, the question, "How has COVID-19 affected young people's mental health?" is being examined by many, many researchers and scientists around the world. The challenge is to find those experts. Sometimes they are cited in reputable secondary sources, such as quality newspapers and magazines.



You don’t want to plagiarize what those secondary sources have produced, but there is nothing wrong with noting who those reporters' sources are and pursuing them.

Secondary sources like newspapers or websites can help you get up to speed on issues, but your challenge is to produce something that is original and unique, not simply redundant. Don’t rely on secondary sources for the gist of your reporting. To be distinctive, turn to the primary sources — the experts or those directly affected by the issue or shaping the issue. Set your sights high.

Don’t underestimate the power and reach of your own network. Your family, your parents’ friends, your teachers all have networks you can tap into. You’d be surprised at how their networks can help you research your questions.

5. Originality



More often than not, there is already a great deal in the public domain about the topic that interests you. Your job is not to summarize what is already out there, as if you were creating an encyclopedia entry. News Decoder’s global audience is interested in distinctive work that breaks new ground. **Think about how you can produce something that is truly original.** That often means looking locally, close to home.

And a relatively easy way to gather original material is to conduct interviews.

To produce something that is original and unique, interview an expert or experts, and/or someone affected by the issue. To help you sharpen your interviewing skills, take our E-Learning course on interviewing. It takes about 45 minutes – time well spent.

6. Perspective

It can be difficult to see multiple sides to stories, especially in polarized times. But to create a great story, it's necessary to suspend your convictions and assumptions, and tackle the issue with an open mind.

Two students were committed vegetarians when they set out to do a piece about the meat industry in the U.S. state of California. They went into the story convinced the meat barons are bad guys. But by seeing what the meat companies are doing, they came away with a more rounded view — perhaps not totally convinced, but with their eyes open.

In your story, bend over backwards to try to take into account multiple viewpoints, even if — or especially if! — those viewpoints are different from your own. You don’t have to agree with them, but if they are legitimate, you should try to understand them.

7. Simplicity



Many stories try to be too complicated. If your thoughts are muddled, your approach will be, too. When we ask you to summarize the key point of your story in a single question, we ask for a reason: to help you boil down the topic. Often the question is too complicated or shows blatant bias.

Start by asking two simple questions: **What is the problem? What are the solutions?**

When you start writing, write very simply – short sentences that get to the point. Make each sentence its own paragraph – that ensures that your story moves along briskly, that it doesn't get bogged down in long, complicated paragraphs.

In general, when discussing an issue, imagine that you are explaining it to your family around the dinner table. Use language that they understand and which conveys your thoughts in a simple way, especially if those thoughts are complex.

Aim to write no more than 40 sentences, with each paragraph — apart from quotes — no more than two sentences.

8. Color and quotes



When reporting, especially when out and about, be sure to note elements that stand out and which you can use to **bring the reader or viewer to the scene**. Journalists call this "color."

For example, if you visited a factory, what did you see? What sounds did you hear? Was there a distinctive smell? Did you taste something?

Use all of your senses so you can transport the reader to that spot.

Listen carefully when interviewing. In your story use the quotes that best capture the gist of what the person is saying and which push your story forward. Let your story give voice to your sources. Use full quotes — that is, quotes that are full sentences — instead of broken quotes.

Checklist



Use this checklist to help you craft your pitch:

- ☐ **Can you craft a simple question, in no more than one sentence, summarizing the main point of your story?**
- ☐ **Have you identified the principal problem that the story is addressing? Potential solutions? Obstacles to the solutions?**
- ☐ **Have you narrowed the topic so it is manageable and has a local angle that you can examine?**
- ☐ **Will the story resonate beyond your narrow confines and be of interest to readers around the world?**
- ☐ **Have you identified opposing sides to the story?**
- ☐ **Have you identified expert sources or data? You should conduct at least one interview with an expert in crafting your story.**

When you can answer all of the questions, you're ready to submit!

Journalistic Behaviors

The editorial process involves teamwork.

How you conduct yourself makes a huge difference. It can be more important at the outset of your relationship with editors than the quality of your work. It can determine whether the organization will want to work with you in the future.

These basic behaviors will serve you well, not only in working with News Decoder but in any professional relationship.

- **Stay in touch.** If you are communicating via email, check your inbox at least once every day. Respond to each email, even if it is only to acknowledge it. Show your editor that you want to help.

- **Read any emails** you receive carefully and follow directions. If you are asked to make edits directly in a Google Doc, be sure to do so.

- **Respond to requests for fresh edits promptly**. If you go on a trip or are otherwise unavailable to respond, let your editor know in advance.

- **Accept constructive criticism** gracefully. The editors know their audience better than you do, and they shape content to the audience's needs, not to your ego.

- **Thank your editors** for improving your work.

- Remember that the publication's **readers, listeners and viewers are what really matter** — not you or the editors. The publication's primary responsibility is to serve its public.