

Survivors Against SESTA:

Guide to Getting Stories You Care About Told

When you have a story to tell that isn't being told in the media, or an angle that isn't being reported on, getting coverage of that story is "earned media." Sometimes you have to work to convince the right reporter to tell the story or to get an editor to publish your perspective, but when you successfully pitch and get a piece placed, you are controlling the narrative. When you launch a big campaign this way, it puts our opposition on the defensive - they have to work with the frame you've established.

Pitching an Article You Want to Write

THE PITCH

An easy format for a pitch:

1. **Intro:** keep this short and casual
2. **Synopsis sentence** - encapsulate the entire article and tone as concisely as possible, and include a tentative title. (ex: "My article, "Why We're Fighting FOSTA," details through short interviews with sex workers and a brief intro to the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) the ways in which FOSTA has adversely affected the lives of sex workers, including my own.")
3. **About the Article (ATA):** This is where you flesh out the synopsis. Try to outline the sequence of details/events/info that the article would follow if written.
4. **About Me (AM):** Include information about yourself and your writing experiences/publications. If you don't have any publication record, don't worry - just write about yourself. Don't be afraid to include a personal note, and/or why you think THIS publication is a good spot for the piece.
 - a. Include a couple past clips (past published pieces) if you have any. Even a blog post works!
 - b. Feel free to include a list of where else you've been published or quoted.
5. **Expected word count:** include this at the end. You may want to cut and paste an article from the publication you're submitting to into a doc and see how long their typical articles are. You don't want to pitch a 10,000 word story to a site that typically publishes 800 word articles. (Which brings me to another point: KNOW THE PUBLICATIONS YOU ARE SUBMITTING TO! Look through them.)

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

DOs	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• DO run it by someone for proofreading.• DO read your pitch out loud so you can proofread on your own.• DO know what your minimum is. Would you be willing to write the piece for free? In my opinion, no one should write for free, except when it's a compelling project or for a not-for-profit publication. Writing for free encourages publications to extract free labor from writers. That said, you may think your story will be REALLY useful. Okay, go for it. It's always up to you.• DO send up to three brief pitches in one email if you've a couple story ideas/angles that all work for a publication. That way, the editor can choose which one best fits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do NOT spend more than an hour on the pitch. If you can't write a pitch in an hour, imagine how long it will take you to write an essay!• Do NOT say your rate unless you are an established writer. When they come back to you with a suggested fee for your services, you can always ask for more. (If they offer you \$100 for 800 words, for example, you can write, "Thanks for detailing the fee! I would love to get a little more for this, since having my name attached to an essay on sex work is a little high stakes for me, and because I am an expert on the topic.")

AFTER THE PITCH

- If you pitch and don't hear back, DON'T WORRY. Wait 4-5 days, then send a follow-up email. Follow-up emails don't bother anyone. Don't worry that you're "bothering" a publication. Just be polite. (ex. "Hey there! Just following up on my pitch. Hope you're doing well and looking forward to hearing back from you!") If you don't hear back after a follow-up email, move on. Rejection and even being ignored is NORMAL for writers who have not published anything yet. You are not a bad writer just because you don't hear back. Your story is still valuable and important, and you can find another venue.
- Know that many publications are slow to pay. Find out (only ask this after they accept your piece) when you can expect payment by.
- You may be asked to sign a contract. In which case, you will need to use your legal name for payment. Make sure you add a note -- either by email or by writing ON THE CONTRACT ITSELF -- that you are only to be referred to by your work name, if that is your preference AND note that all checks need to be made out to your birth name. It is rare that a publication will be willing to submit payment to you under your work name. They have to keep records for their own taxes.

Pitching a Story to a Reporter

- Don't be afraid
 - Reporters are looking for stories. Many of them work freelance. If you come to them with an idea, a few facts, and perhaps even folks who'd be willing to be interviewed, you've done some of their work for them already.
 - Simultaneously, be prepared for them to say no. They might say no for reasons that have nothing to do with your pitch--they might have a full schedule, or know of a colleague writing a similar piece, or feel that they aren't the appropriate writer. Don't be discouraged. Thank them for their time and move on to another reporter.
- Know the reporter before you pitch a story to them
 - This does not mean you need to have personal relationship or previous contact with them, but you will be more successful if you're familiar with the reporter's other work (which will tell you whether they're interested in the topic you want to pitch) AND if you generally like the way they write (which will tell you whether you'll be happy with their treatment of the topic). If they've written about the same topic, but a while ago, that's a good sign they'll be interested. If they've written on the same topic very recently, think about how you can pitch your story with a different angle or new material.
- Think about what angle to pitch the story from
 - Do some googling to see what other pieces you can find on the same topic. See how recently they were published. Media platforms frequently publish about a topic in waves, so you're likely to find a lot of stories about one thing clustered within a few months of each other.
 - If it's been a while since your topic was in the news, now is a good time to pitch it.
 - Alternatively, if there are a lot of stories being written about it right now, find a reporter who has not yet written about it or a unique angle for the story.
 - A good strategy is to find a way to link your topic to something else that's been in the newsworthy right now (for example, when FOSTA was going to a vote, I spoke to a couple of reporters about how it was likely to block information sharing between sex workers that was similar to the "whisper networks" used by people in other industries - this linked the conversation about FOSTA to recent news stories about the MeToo movement as well).
- Write the pitch
 - If the reporter is someone you've talked to before, reach out to them by the same method you used to speak with them previously - whether by phone, text, or email. If they're someone you don't know, ask your friends and acquaintances to see if anyone knows that writer and can introduce you. If that doesn't work, look for the reporter's social media accounts. They likely have a public email address

that they've made public precisely because they want to hear from folks with stories to pitch.

- Keep your pitch short. Think about the most important and most unique parts of the story. Try not to write more than a paragraph. The first sentence says who you are and what your relationship to the story is. The next couple of sentences say one or two unique, exciting or important facts. **The last sentence says why you think this reporter is the person to write this story at this moment.**
- Know that you have to give up control
 - Once you've pitched a story to a reporter and they've accepted it, the story is, for the most part, out of your hands. It means you won't have any control over how the story is ultimately written or published, over what kind of headline it receives, who else is interviewed in the story, or even whether it gets published. Sometimes, a reporter will take on the piece and write it in the way that you had pitched it, but their editor makes substantial changes or doesn't accept it. By being familiar with the work of the reporter you've pitched to, you minimize the potential for the story to be told in a way you don't like, but there are no guarantees.

After the pitch: what do I do if it all goes wrong?

If the reporter takes your piece and writes it in a way that you don't like, you still have options.

If they are in the process of writing the piece and their interactions have departed dramatically from your expectations - if they are rude or disrespectful of your boundaries - you can stop cooperating and sharing information immediately.

If they've finished the piece, and it is significantly different from the story you wanted to have told, you can approach another reporter - OR you can write it yourself (see all the tips in the previous section).

Even if a reporter wrote the piece you pitched to them in a way that wasn't to your satisfaction, you may still want to maintain a friendly working relationship with them. They might have gotten it wrong not because they were trying to be disrespectful, but because they simply didn't have the perspective necessary to get it right.

Sometimes, the reporter writes something that is just a little bit wrong, but it seems like they could get it right in the future, or the piece contains enough good/useful information, or it's published where a lot of people can learn from it. In these cases, I will just let it lie. I'll notice what they got wrong so I can try to be more clear in sharing information with reporters in the future. Sometimes I think of those stories as an investment - now that reporter knows me, and I can reach out to them again.

Remember that when you are pitching to reporters, you are also building relationships. If those relationships are good, the reporters you've pitched to are likely to reach out to you next time.

However, I've also had reporters change my words and my stories in ways that were so disrespectful and harmful that I felt the need to publicly disavow the story, to call them and ask

them to correct it, to write something explicitly contradicting what they've written. Those are reporters I know I will never work with again.

Other Formats to Know

- **Press Release:** Somewhat in decline and can take a lot of energy to write; most pitches can be done without a press release though they are useful for cold-emailing reporters. A one-page document front-loaded with all the important information about an event, rally, or political announcement (who/what/where/when/why). Contact information for 1-3 folks should be at the top. Other paragraphs should contain several quotes from people involved (it's a win if the reporter copy-pastes a quote from your press release into their article) and what opportunities for coverage there are (doing a thing in a cool location? Video or photo opportunities? Access to sex workers for interviews? Say so!)
 - Press releases generally generate quantity rather than quality coverage. If you send out information to hundreds of journalists, you're bound to get a couple of hits.
 - If you are running a campaign, doing this work for an organization, or see yourself needing to send out multiple press releases on the same subject, you can build out a database of 100+ journalist contacts to send multiple press releases to and to reuse for later press releases. Spend an afternoon searching related keywords on publications and in Google News to find relevant journalists who are on your beat. Reporters usually list their contact emails at the beginning or end of a story, but you can also find contact info by searching their name and "email" or "contact" in Google or through their public social media accounts.
- **Sign-on Letter:** Written in support of or opposition to a developing story - like a bill, court case, event - authored by an organization or group of people that then takes on the task of getting other orgs to sign on, and then delivers the letter to a target. Sign-on letters can be "open letters" that are just published online, or they can have a specific addressee. They should have a strong viewpoint and a specific demand. Sign-on letters can be a good way to gauge who is down for the cause, and give you a list of orgs and individuals to build with in the future.
- **Letter to the Editor:** Very short opinion or fact-based piece (usually 100 - 150 words) written in direct response to a recently-appearing newspaper or magazine article. Somewhat in decline because of internet comments, but if you track local newspapers and weekly magazines, they all have a LTE page and it is one of the most read pages in most pubs. LTEs should respond to a line or idea in a piece with one fact or idea, grounded in your own experience or expertise. See pg 16 of the RedUP media guide for *How to Write An Angry Letter*.
- **Op Ed:** Opinion editorials exist in all major newspapers, news magazines, and in some form on most news and politics websites. They are usually around 750 words (exact length depends on the outlet), are written by subject area experts, and express a clear opinion with an evidence-based argument. Personal stories often serve as the jumping off points for successful op eds, but they are not the substance of the piece. The resources at <https://www.theopedproject.org/oped-basics/> are excellent.

Building Relationships With Reporters

Journalists are highly competitive by nature and are becoming ever more competitive in today's environment. If you offer solutions to the needs of a working reporter then your message(s) are likely to be part of future articles. One way to do this is to position yourself as a source/resource. You can maintain contact with a reporter who you've met on a story, OR you can reach out to reporters. Here's how to seek out writers and develop relationships with them:

1. Find reporters to target. Always look at the byline on any article about sex work you read that you don't hate and then google the writer, find them and follow them on social media. Figure out if they are a freelancer (and could pitch at a variety of pubs) or a staff reporter (might get the chance to do a bigger piece at the outlet they work for), and look at the history of where they've published in the past six months. Share their work when its good and compliment them.

2. Contact the reporter via email or social media. Twitter DMs are usually also a legit way to be in touch, FB not so much. This is a personal contact, not a press release. You're there as a resource, not with a specific pitch (yet). The goal is to develop a working relationship with a reporter. Say something like:

I really like the piece on XXXX you recently wrote at [outlet]. I see that you cover a lot of stories about [name your issue]. I'd like to be a resource. I've been a sex worker and I have a lot of thoughts and stories about [your area of expertise]. I'd love to brainstorm ideas with you sometime or answer any questions you have generally about sex work in this political climate. Here is my contact information: [email and phone number]

3. Building the relationship. If the reporter doesn't need you for a story immediately but makes contact, that means he is willing to use you as a source/resource. Ask where and how you can be useful. After the first conversation, if there isn't an immediate story, maintain contact by liking/reposting their stuff on social media, and sending them links to stories or threads that speak to an angle they expressed interest in, congratulate them on career milestones and stories that are good but about different issues. You now have a reporter who will (hopefully) pay attention to your call/email. You should strive to build ongoing relationships with 2-5 reporters - the aim is to have someone you can fasttrack a story to, get good depth of coverage, and never have to send a press release out into the void again.

4. When you have a story idea, pitch it to your reporter first. Write your reporter a brief email offering any story BEFORE you send out a press release or offer it to another reporter. If there is a report or other publication coming out or information that is currently private but may be public soon, let them know you can offer them an embargoed copy that no one else will see until the release date (and give the date). Tell her that you're offering it to her first because of your relationship. Make sure the reporter knows that you've got a deadline (24 – 48 hours) and you'll offer it to other reporters after that.

Tina Horn, RRW, and Conner Habib all contributed their knowledge and experience to this guide. Some of the information in this document is adapted by Audacia Ray from the Red Umbrella Project's *Speak Up! Guide to Media Tactics to Amplify the Voices of Sex Workers*, published in 2013. [Access the full guide as a PDF here:](https://survivorsagainstsesta.org/media-training/)
<https://survivorsagainstsesta.org/media-training/>