



## Marketplace



## Getting constructive stories published



### Essentials

**Main topics:** Looking for publishers, who to target, pitching a constructive story, selling constructive stories to editors, arguments supporting a constructive approach, impact of constructive journalism on audiences and revenue

**Summary:** For journalists wanting to work on constructive stories, it's important to think about what kind of publications might be interested in such stories, and how to pitch one to a commissioning editor, especially because the constructive approach is new to many decision-makers. Pitches are more successful when journalists have done preliminary research and presented key information concisely. They should say why the story is important, how it's going to be covered and why the reporter pitching it can do it well. Convincing skeptical editors requires journalists to have pro-constructive arguments at the ready. That includes referring to impact studies on audience response and potential effects on revenue.

#### Looking for publishers for constructive stories

Before sending constructive story ideas to potential clients, freelancers should put thought into which outlet would be most suitable and receptive to a constructive approach. In a solutions story, is the response relevant to a small community or a bigger slice of the population? Does the platform or media outlet already run solution-focused stories? To what extent does the constructive approach need to be discussed – and with whom?

**Community connection:** Local solutions are usually easier to find, so constructive storytelling often starts at the community level. Freelancers can even focus on their home communities and offer their stories to a local media outlet covering this area. If this is where they started their careers, they might be able to reactivate ties with their former editors. Constructive storytellers should also have a clear image in mind of the potential audience. Are several communities in the neighborhood struggling with the same or a similar problem? Could the solution inspire people living in other areas of the country, or in other cities or regions in other countries? The answers will determine whether it would be best to approach media outlets at a regional, national or international level. Of course, the bigger the outlet, the fiercer the competition.

**Publishers to target:**

- **Media outlets and platforms:** Increasing numbers of media outlets are open to alternative ways of storytelling. Sometimes outlets publish constructive stories but just don't label them as such. Freelancers should research what kinds of stories the targeted outlet publishes and see if a constructive approach is a good fit. The constructive media community is still small, especially in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. So freelancers often have to sell editors on the constructive journalism idea in general as well as on the topic being pitched. (See section "How to sell constructive stories to editors" later in this chapter.) The Solutions Journalism Network has put together [a list](#) of organizations accepting pitches for solutions stories. These are mostly for print and online articles.
- **Foundations:** Many foundations feature journalistic content on their websites and they may be willing to fund constructive story production. Reporters should understand the political, social, economic, charitable or philanthropic agenda of the foundation and decide whether they want their name to be associated with what it stands for.
- **Development organizations and NGOs:** Organizations with a development cooperation portfolio might also be interested in forward-thinking storytelling coming from countries they work in. But, here again, journalists should learn about the organization's agenda before approaching them.

 See Handout 18: Grant/Fellowship/Award Opportunities

## Pitching a constructive solutions story

A pitch should summarize the story, explain why it's important to tell, why it's relevant to the outlet's audience, how it will be produced and – especially in cold pitches – why the journalist pitching it is the best person to tell the story. A pitch of a solution-focused story answers the same questions but should always relate to both the problem and the solution.

Pitching a solutions story can be more complicated because some editors still view them with suspicion, thinking they will be PR for the group implementing the solution. There are a few things that you'll want to flag clearly in your pitch.

Put together a short list of the kinds of experts you might interview. Find people known in their field, scholars, professionals who have worked on the frontlines for years. You also want to find people directly impacted by the solution. How is the solution working, or not, for them? This helps the editor conclude that you are serious about your reporting – you're not planning on just interviewing the do-gooders and calling it a day.

**Why this story? "So what?"** The editor should get a clear idea of the story and why it matters. Including a strong human element helps. In a constructive pitch, solid data can go a long way in convincing editors. And, the bigger the problem, the more weight the pitch will carry. The pitch is also more likely to be successful if the story relates to discussions the outlet's audience are already having, especially if the problem affects their lives. Often there is a backstory to the solution that can make a pitch stand out to busy editors. That's why good research is crucial.

**What's the proof?** Indicators that show that the response is worth investigating are important. Think hard data and multiple sources. But the limitations of the response are also

important to consider. Even a response that is not working as intended can be worthy of coverage. A hard look at the results will show that you're not planning on writing a puff piece.

**Why now?** In a pitch, the "why now" can usually be answered by finding a news peg. Why should this story be published now as opposed to last week or a year from now? But often, stories relate to problems that have been around for a long time. If there's not an immediate news peg, maybe the amount of time that has passed could act as the peg (example: "This initiative started three years ago, and the story would look into the impact of its work so far."). If an initiative or a group had committed to a certain target by a certain time (example: educating 1,000 girls from xxx town by the end of the year), that self-imposed deadline will be a good peg. Anniversaries, holidays or "international days" can also serve as pegs, but pitches should be submitted early because planning usually takes place far ahead of the day itself.

**Why me?** The journalist pitching should explain why he or she is the best person to produce the story. Does he or she have expertise or a track record in covering these kinds of stories? Good access to relevant sources and characters? Is there a particular source or particular approach you have in mind that could make the story stand out?

**How?** How will the story be covered? What's the format and target audience? For longer visual products – like a documentary – the pitch/synopsis should explain who will feature in the documentary? What's happening? Where? When? And how will all this be shown?

**The other necessities:** The basics are important: a phone number, email address or other contact information. Include links to previous pieces so the editor can quickly vet your work. If no response has been received after a week, checking back in makes sense. Editors are usually overextended, and most will appreciate a polite check-in if some time has passed.

#### **General recommendations:**

- **Preliminary interviews** with the main characters are recommended before submitting a pitch. Be clear with interviewees that this is research and there is no guarantee they will appear on TV/the radio/in the paper, etc.
- **A story, not a topic!** "I want to report about sextortion" is the wrong approach – it's vague and lacks detail. Instead, the pitch could offer a story about how sextortion survivors in a region have launched online initiatives to help other victims. A story is specific and has characters.
- **Catchy headline and a brief pitch:** The pitch should be brief – no more than 250 words. Documentary filmmakers ideally send both a brief pitch/synopsis and a longer proposal of two to five pages. A good synopsis will make the commissioner more likely to read the full proposal.
- **Don't assume knowledge:** When pitching to foreign publications/editors, no assumptions should be made about knowledge of a country or community. Whatever seems obvious to the journalist may be completely new information to others. The basics should be explained and why they matter. People have to understand the basics before understanding the nuances.
- **Get the facts straight:** Fact-checking is part and parcel of any piece of journalism, whether it's breaking news or an Instagram story.
- **Information sources indicated:** Unless it's an opinion piece, editors want to know about the sources of the information in the pitch. Links to them are a good idea.

- **Don't overpromise:** Journalists shouldn't mention that they'll get interviews with big names in their pitches unless they really have access to those individuals.
- **Work samples:** The pitch should contain links to previous pieces or attach a few to the email itself. Examples of previous constructive stories are even better.
- **Is it a good story?** If it's difficult to give a brief summary of the proposed story or if it seems boring just summarizing, it might not be worth pitching.

↘ See handout 7: Pitching guidelines

↘ See handout 19: Pitching a constructive story

↘ See handout 13: Tips on pitching

### How to sell constructive stories to editors

In addition to arguing the merits of the individual story idea, journalists pitching constructive stories sometimes have to convince editors of the benefits of a constructive approach – especially if it's something new for the media outlet. Often, editors and managers who have worked in the traditional journalism mode for a long time express skepticism when hearing a story idea that presents a solution or frames an issue in a more positive way. The journalist pitching should have sound arguments in favor of the constructive approach ready. Convincing editors can be more difficult for freelancers – they might not know the editors; the editors might not know the journalist. But it's not impossible.

**Start with a trial:** Successfully pitching a single story can be a major step forward in getting a foothold in the market. Depending on the size of the problem, constructive story topics have huge potential for further exploration and follow-up stories. If the original story was well received and editors were impressed, the freelancer could offer a follow-up series.

**Getting decision-makers' attention:** Introducing new formats, new styles of storytelling or new ways of audience engagement are usually top-down decisions. It's crucial to find out who decides. Is it the senior editor? The editor-in-chief? Is it best to approach them directly, through an assistant, at a conference, via phone call or email? A direct way is to ask for a time slot of ten minutes and pitch constructive journalism along with the story idea. If they're not biting, see if there's someone else to approach or fine-tune the pitch to make it more convincing. Getting people to change ingrained habits isn't easy.

**Strategic approach:** How can decision-makers be convinced that it's worthwhile integrating constructive storytelling into their editorial line-up? Try the following approaches:

1. A short description of the core concept of constructive journalism as an answer to some of the problems facing journalism today (see Module 1 handouts)
2. Strong examples (2-3) from other journalists (or even yourself) showcasing constructive journalism as a viable means to reach audiences and as a profitable addition to the organization's editorial strategy
3. A good story/format pitch
4. Counterarguments to accusations that constructive journalism is time consuming and expensive and that it doesn't sell. Present impact studies (see below)

## “Selling” arguments

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Depending on the media outlet’s own circumstances and the level of resistance from decision-makers, the following arguments might help convince decision-makers to try out a constructive approach – or at least a few stories:

- **Stand out from the crowd:** An argument can be made that everyone else is doing traditional, problem-centered journalism. Why not add some constructive pieces to the mix and give readers/viewers something they can’t get everywhere else? Does the media outlet need to only focus on the latest local shooting and its disturbing details, or could a reporter cover an approach in another city or region that has an approach to reducing gun violence that seems to be working? Constructive journalism can make an outlet’s coverage distinctive and become its USP.
- **Impact studies:** While the number of studies is still limited, there’s a growing body of evidence arguing for a constructive approach. Constructive stories are more engaging to audiences, shared more often and can boost trust and loyalty. All of these can lead to a more stable audience base for a media outlet, more subscribers or members, and more revenue. (Statistics from studies are below and in Module 3, Chapter 2.)
- **It’s good journalism:** Constructive journalism is rigorous, critical storytelling. It’s not “fluffy, happy news” or “wimpy” journalism. It adheres to the standards of quality journalism – it’s critical, unbiased and fact-based. The reporter’s job is to hold up an accurate mirror to society, after all. If they only cover negative events and developments, they aren’t providing the full view. For example, if they only cover food insecurity and hunger but ignore innovative agricultural responses that are trying to feed more people, they aren’t telling the whole story.

**Search for like-minded staff members:** Alliances with newsroom staff members who are open to a constructive approach can be helpful. They might also need allies to support their efforts and convince their superiors. This can be a win-win: the freelancer gets a trusted contact within the organization; staff members can build a trusted team of collaborators delivering timely and substantial constructive stories.

↘ See *handout 20: Pitching checklist*

## Impact of constructive journalism on audiences and revenue

For skeptical editors and media managers, presenting data on impact can help convince them. Because constructive journalism got its start in Europe and the United States, the impact studies which have been done so far almost exclusively relate to those markets. Even so, the results are likely applicable to audiences in other regions as well. The number of studies is still limited but growing year by year.

For a more detailed look at studies and statistics, see Module 3, Chapter 2. Below are some main takeaways from the studies that have been carried out so far:

- Constructive stories are shared more often than traditional ones.

- In surveys, readers of solutions stories report they would read more articles from the newspaper in which the solution article appeared.
- Readers are more engaged with local constructive news stories.
- Constructive journalism can win over “indifferent audiences”, that is, people who have lost trust in the news.
- News consumers spend more time with constructive stories and tend to spend more money on the news, especially when it comes to subscriptions.
- There are other indications of a connection between constructive journalism and stronger revenue streams for media outlets, although the strength of that connection has yet to be determined. More research is needed.
- Foundations and donors are often interested in supporting constructive journalism with its beneficial social impact.

📌 See *handout 21: Impact of constructive journalism (for reporters)*

## How to promote your stories on social media

With today’s news overload, journalists have to go the extra mile to make sure their story is seen. After all, what is the value of a good story if no one reads/watches/listens to it? If you are part of a news organization, then you will most likely already have access to your media outlet’s analytics dashboard. If you are a freelancer, don’t shy away from asking editors to share your story analytics with you.

**Don’t shy away from recommending certain platforms:** Tell your editor which platform you think is right for your audience. For example, in Egypt Facebook is the main social media platform. Sharing the story only on Twitter means you are missing a big audience. If your story is more relevant to younger people, you want to share it on TikTok, and so on.

Whether you are a staff member or a freelancer, you should still work on promoting your story independently. Here are some tips as to how to do that:

- **Promote your story on your personal social media pages.** Remember Facebook’s algorithm favors personal pages over brand pages. So, promote your work on your own social media accounts and make sure your posts are public so they reach more people.
- **Have a strong presence on social media.** This will allow you to tap into your pool of followers to extend your reach. Moreover, if you are already active there, you will know how to effectively use each platform to boost reach.
- **Share your story on relevant platforms and groups.** If your story is about a Facebook group, make sure to post it on that Facebook group and to share it with the people who were featured in the story and encourage them to share it among their circles too. If you’ve produced a solutions story, the Solutions Journalism Network might accept it on their [Solutions Story Tracker](#).



### **More information**

#### **Pitch your (solutions) story, Solutions Journalism Network**

<https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/journalists/pitch>

#### **Successful pitches, Freelancers helping freelancers**

<http://www.successfulpitches.com/see-successful-pitches/>

#### **Jessica Reed, #Pitchclinic**

<https://medium.com/pitch-clinic/pitch-clinic-week-9-8baed4604f95>

#### **How to prepare a solutions pitch - 10 tips from journalists in our network**

<https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/how-to-prepare-a-solutions-pitch-10-tips-from-journalists-in-our-network-2912de9b2e20>

#### **What editors are looking for in solutions pitches**

<https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/what-editors-are-looking-for-in-solutions-pitches-f45b4d3e3b22>

#### **5 pitches that became solution stories**

<https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/5-pitches-that-became-solutions-stories-214be1a372ff>