

Writing & Editing for Digital Media: Whiteboarding a News Story

Content creators often have to first pitch the story, or an argument that a story is worth telling and worth reading. Your mission here is to develop a fully realized story pitch for an original piece of local reporting. You are not writing the story yet. You are doing the foundational thinking that makes great stories possible. In a subsequent assignment, you will report and write the article you pitch here.

One critical distinction before you begin: A topic is not a story idea. "Homelessness in Rome" is a topic. "A former high school teacher living under Turner McCall bridge who tutors other unhoused residents" is a story idea. The difference is specificity, human presence, and narrative possibility. Your pitch must clear that bar.

Learning Objectives

By completing this assignment, you will be able to:

- Generate specific, audience-centered story ideas using ideation strategies from Chapter 5
- Identify and apply news values to evaluate and sharpen a story idea
- Select an appropriate story form for your content
- Think in terms of multimedia
- Identify real, named human sources you will interview

The Assignment

Prepare a story pitch document of approximately 600–900 words covering each of the six components below. Use the section headers provided. Publish your pitch to the course blog.

Component 1: The Story Idea

State your story idea in two forms:

The Headline: Write a working headline for your story, one that captures what is specific, timely, and compelling about it. This is not a topic label ("Local Food Insecurity") but a genuine, specific headline ("A Retired Postal Worker Turns His Garage Into a Neighborhood Pantry — and a Waiting List Has Formed"). Complete headline writing guidelines are found in Chapter 4.

The Pitch: Write 3–5 sentences describing your story as if you were pitching it to an editor in a budget meeting. Who is at the center of the story? What is happening, and why now? What makes it surprising, important, or human? What does it reveal that readers don't already know?

Component 2: Primary Audience

Who, specifically, will want to read this story, and why? Think of your audience not as a demographic checkbox but as a real person. Use Chapter 5's funnel: Start general (age range, geography, occupation or life stage), then narrow down to the values,

motivations, and informational needs that make this story relevant to them. Answer these questions in paragraph form:

- Who is the primary audience for this story?
- What do they already know or believe about this subject?
- What do they need from this story that they don't currently have?
- Where on the information-to-sensory spectrum (Chapter 5) should this story land, and why?

Component 3: News Values

Chapter 5 identifies eight core news values: impact, conflict, proximity, timeliness, prominence, novelty, human interest, and visual interest. Your story will likely lean on two or three of these more heavily than the others.

For each news value your story meaningfully relies upon:

- Name the value
- Explain in 2–3 sentences specifically how your story activates it

Don't simply assert that your story "has impact." SHOW it. For instance: "This story relies on proximity because its central subject — rising insulin costs — directly affects the estimated 14,000 diabetic residents in our county, many of whom receive care at the clinic at the center of this piece."

Component 4: Story Form

Chapter 5 introduces a menu of story types: news or feature article, profile or personality feature, how-to feature, historical feature, travel or adventure feature, localizing story, behind-the-scenes feature, event story, advance story, and sidebar.

Identify which story form, or combination of forms, best serves your idea, and explain why in a short paragraph. The medium shapes the message. A story about a local ceramicist's creative process calls for a very different form than a story about a proposed rezoning. Don't just name the form; argue for why it is the right container for this particular content.

Component 5: Multimedia Component

Identify at least one non-text element that would make this story richer, more accessible, or more shareable. Your options include photography, video, audio, an information graphic, a data visualization, a map, a timeline, or an illustration.

For each multimedia element:

- Name the type of content
- Describe specifically what it would show or convey
- Explain what it adds that the text alone cannot deliver

Specificity is everything here. "A photo" is not an answer. "A photo essay following the ceramicist from raw clay to finished glaze firing, showing the 14-step process she developed over 20 years" is an answer.

Component 6: Human Sources

Stories live or die on their sources. List at least three specific human sources you intend to interview for this story, people you can reach. For each source:

- Provide their name (or role, if you don't yet know the specific person) and title
- Why this source?
- How you plan to contact them

Using AI

You may use genAI to brainstorm story ideas, as Chapter 5 describes, to identify potential sources, to collaborate with for writing the headline, and for brainstorming multimedia options.

Post your completed pitch to the discussion thread dedicated to this assignment. Help each other. Comment on classmates' ideas with constructive criticism and ideas, possibly with connections to sources.

The best stories are already out there. Go find one.