

THE
CONVERSATION

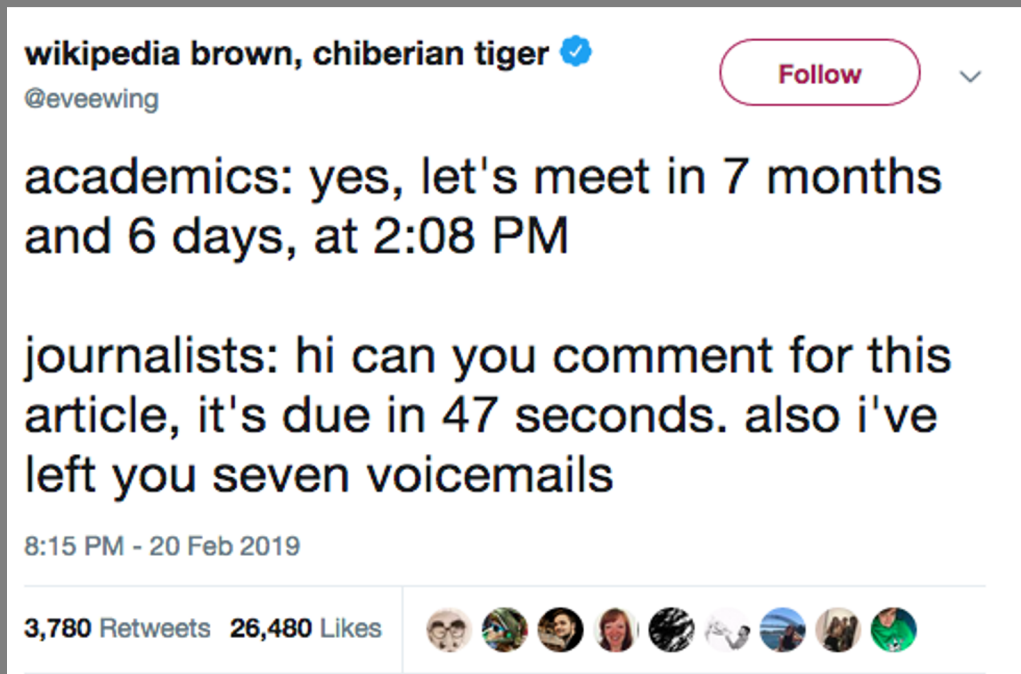
Pitching + Writing Workshop

Nov. 17, 2021

Agenda

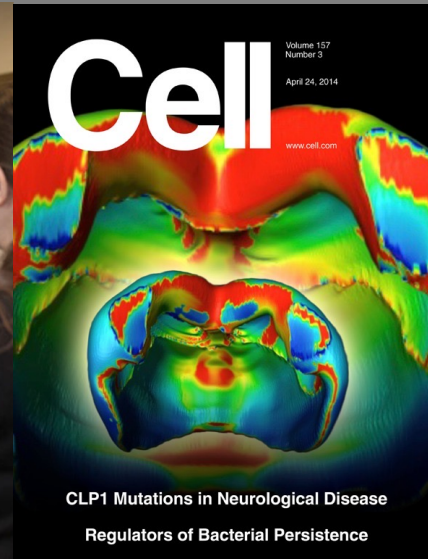
- Knowing your audience
- Connecting with the public
- The Conversation U.S. 101
- What we look for in a pitch
- Pitch examples
- Q&A

Scholars and journalists work differently, but they can meet in the middle

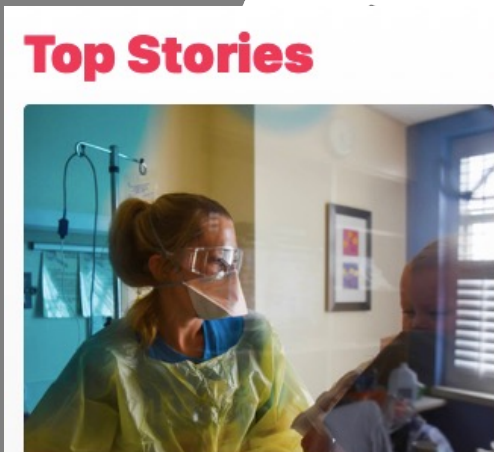


How scholars communicate with each other

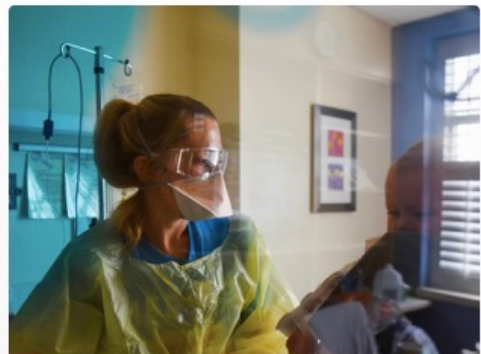
- Journal articles
- Academic monographs and books
- Conference presentations and poster sessions
- Informal channels: blogs, social media



Where the public gets their news



Top Stories



News media + social media

- Shorter, less detailed reports
- Simpler language: NYT articles are edited to a 10th-grade reading level
- Stories provide context and don't assume prior knowledge of the topic

This could be your audience



A pitch defined

pitch
/piCH/

definition

A pitch is a **brief description** of a story intended to convince an editor, producer or publisher to commission the piece.

The general public + how to connect with them

- The “attentive public” – people who consume news
- Members of your local community
- Specialists in your own or a related area
- A set of people who are affected by an issue
- Policy makers and/or funders





"[T]he goal is not to show people how smart you are but to get people to understand what you are talking about."

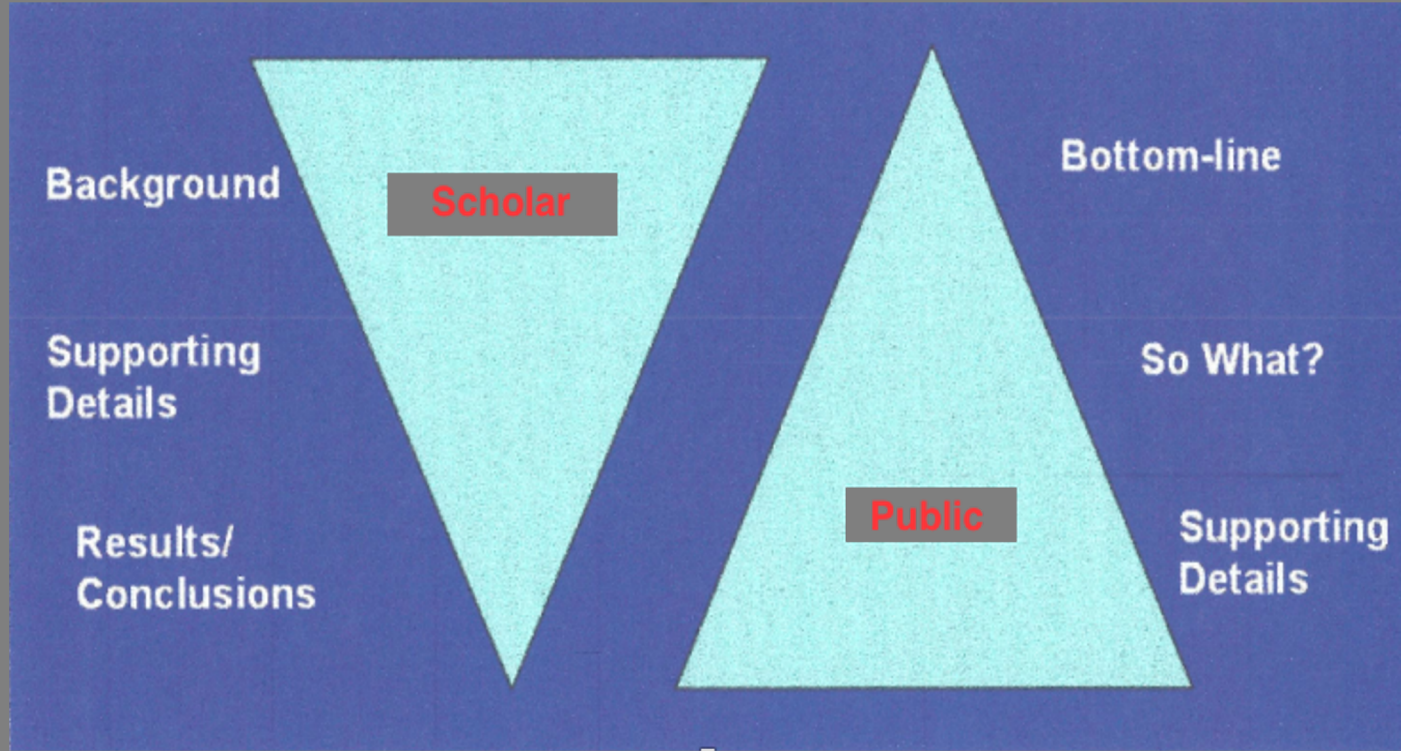
-Dr. Anthony Fauci, Oct. 26, 2020, in a webinar sponsored by the Yale Institute for Global Health

What's your goal?

- Sparking curiosity with a cool science story?
- Adding context to something in the news?
- Influencing the public to make informed decisions?
- Advocating an action or position?
- Proposing a new regulation or law?



Don't 'bury the lede'; start with the news



A few things to keep in mind

- Pitching is a challenging process.
- You can't control some factors – i.e. the news cycle, what the outlet already has in the works, internal policies that affect its commissioning decisions.
- But you can control some things.

Things you can control

- Remember your audience
- Start with the news
- Avoid jargon
- Don't euphemize . . .
- Or turn nouns into verbs
- Always do your homework
- Consider staggering your pitches
- Show; don't tell

- *And for TCUS: Emphasize facts, figures and scholarship*



The Conversation U.S.

Promote truthful information and strengthen journalism by unlocking
the rich diversity of academic research for audiences across America

- The Conversation is a nonprofit, independent publisher of expert research and news analysis.
- Written by academics, edited by journalists, for the general public
- Scholars write explanatory journalism pieces (**not op-eds**) within their area of expertise in a rigorous and collaborative editorial process.



Who we are

Our authors

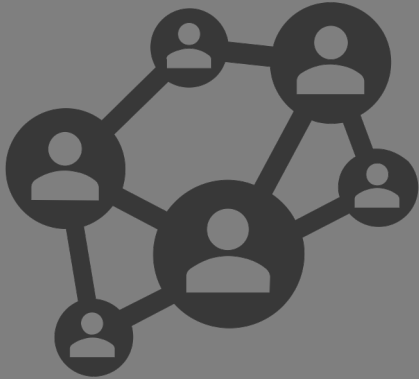
- Authors must be a current faculty member or researcher at a U.S. college or university.
- Authors must provide links to research or other evidence throughout their stories to back up their statements.
- Authors must fill out a disclosure form listing any conflicts of interest.
- We can't publish a story without final approval from the author.



Who reads us

- By writing one story, scholars can reach audiences in many different publications.
- Our articles are free to read and free to republish through a Creative Commons license.
- We partner with The Associated Press, Yahoo! News and Apple News.

Why write for us?



- Our model delivers evidence-based information to millions of people. In 2020 alone, TCUS stories received more than *200 million total reads*.
- Gives experts a greater voice and impact in shaping scientific, cultural and intellectual agendas
- 1:1 professional development with editors

The kinds of stories we publish



- News commentary + analysis
i.e. historical perspectives, analysis of events in the news, longer exploratory pieces, “ideas” articles
- New research + discoveries
i.e. Research Briefs
- Curiosity pieces
i.e. Curious Kids, basic explainers, religious literacy, Scientists at Work, Ethics + Religion desk’s series on rituals

News commentary + analysis

Bitcoin is now 'legal tender' in El Salvador – here's what that means

Netflix's 'Midnight Mass' joins a long line of horror that plays with Catholic beliefs

\$1.2T infrastructure plan offers lucrative target for fraud

New research + discoveries

25-year-long study of Black women links frequent use of lye-based hair relaxers to a higher risk of breast cancer

Teachers say working with students kept them motivated at the start of the pandemic

Bilingual people with language loss due to stroke can pose a treatment challenge – computational modeling may help clinicians treat them

Curiosity pieces



What the world can learn from the Buddhist concept loving-kindness

What is the metaverse? 2 media and information experts explain

Is chewing on ice cubes bad for your teeth?

What we look for in a pitch



- *Is the story of interest to a general audience?*
- *Is the story timely?*
- *Is the author an expert on what they're pitching?*
- *Can the angle be covered in 1,000 or fewer words?*

Not considered a pitch...

- A blog post or link to a story that has already been published
- “I’m an expert in the field of microeconomics. Do you want me to write for you?”
- A press release or grant announcement
- A draft of a story article or an outline
- “Our university is part of a consortium that’s studying plant disease X. See this webpage for more information.”

Common reasons pitches are rejected

- Reads like an opinion (or advocacy) piece
- Not for a general reader
- Not timely
- Too speculative
- Not focused enough/too broad
- Full draft sent instead of a pitch
- We already have a similar piece in the works.

Is my pitch written for a general audience?

- Have you included a clear explanation of why this matters (i.e. how it affects readers' daily lives)?
- Have you avoided jargon and acronyms?
- Have you used clear, precise language and concrete examples?

Is my idea timely?

- Is the topic currently being discussed in the news?
- Is there an upcoming milestone, anniversary or event related to your idea?
- Have you published new research on the topic?

Does my idea read like opinion, advocacy or speculation?

- Have you avoided “should” and “must” language?
- What scholarship or evidence will the proposed story rely upon?
- What is your expertise in this particular area?

Does my pitch propose to tell *one* story?

- Have you focused on depth rather than breadth?
- Have you condensed your information and focused on only the key points?
- Can the thrust of your story can be summed up in one sentence?

Our pitch form

The pitch: What's your story?

Story ^{*}
..

In one or two sentences, what's your story? (50 word limit)

Significance ^{*}
..

Why is it interesting or significant for non-academic readers? (100 word limit)

Other key points

Why is this a good time to do this article? What is your expertise in the subject? (150 word limit)

Multimedia

Do you have any photos, video, audio, graphs or other material to help illustrate your story? If so, please describe them. (200 word limit)

Available at:


<https://theconversation.com/us/pitches>

Strong pitch (Science + Technology)

Story: How accessible are UI/UX design tools? Not very. People with vision impairments could contribute to and improve technology design, but popular design tools aren't currently accessible to them through their screen readers. As accessibility researchers, we'll break down the prototyping tool landscape and discuss ways to improve it.

Significance: Few technology designers are blind/low vision. Lack of representation is problematic, when many user interfaces (smartphone apps) already aren't accessible to blind people. Designers use UI/UX prototyping tools to create mock-ups of digital interface designs, to test before coding. However, these tools are inaccessible by screen reader technologies used by blind people to access screen elements.

Key points: We'll evaluate 4 popular prototyping tools and how they work with 2 screen readers. We have comparison charts. We'll identify which tools are most inaccessible and where to make improvements. Inaccessible UI/UX prototyping leads to inaccessible design. Making these tools accessible could empower blind technology designers.



Interesting question that identifies a problem

Simple explanation shows that scholars can write for a lay audience

States their expertise and clear explanation of the story

Helpful context

Clear explanation of why it matters

Strong pitch (Politics + Society)


Story: My story explores what happened to the Denver unhoused community through the year 2020 as COVID-19 hit. I explore the locational strategies and spatial patterns of the community in relation to the resources of the city core.

Significance: The population experiencing homelessness in Denver increased by nearly 15% from 2018 to 2019. This trend, combined with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2020, led to a distinct crisis for unhoused communities.

Previous research addressed several aspects of COVID-19 and homelessness: (1) Unhoused individuals are more vulnerable to pandemics, (2) encampments may be safer than shelters in terms of COVID-19 spread, and (3) displacement of encampments has significant impacts upon the health of unhoused individuals. However, existing literature does not include GIS data of encampments, shelters, services, and geographic movement.

Key Points

I have spent the last seven months on this research, and Denver has continued to enforce inhumane homeless legislation. If this research were more widespread, it could contribute to a change in policy.



Clear, succinct explanation of proposed story

Why it matters

Interesting research that addresses what's missing in the conversation

Scholar's expertise

Strong pitch (Arts + Culture)

Story: Ansel Adams is famous for his black-and-white photographs of America's wilderness. His signature style is revered and often imitated. How did he learn that style? Adams dropped out of conventional schooling as a child and was a self-taught photographer, but his work as a commercial photographer informed his famous style.

Interesting question about a well-known figure

Significance: We assume that talented people are just innately talented, but Adams leveraged his experiences into future success, building from a childhood amateur (making snapshots in Yosemite Valley on vacation with his parents) into one of the most recognizable photographers of the 20th century. He not only learned from other art undertakings; his experience as a commercial photographer changed the way he approached the medium and allowed him to be more effective in his artwork. This ability to transfer experience, skills and knowledge seems widely applicable to how Americans think about their own lives, skills and careers.

Surprising finding based in her research

Why readers will care

Key Points: I am about to publish a book on Adams, presenting new research. Adams has a controlling trust, which means little research about him is published (the last scholarly book came out in 2002). For such a beloved, familiar and accessible cultural icon, there is remarkably little available. I am the chief curator at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, and Adams's archive is here. In addition to the release of my book (Feb. 2020), there is the anniversary of his birth (February 20, 1902).

Why scholar is *the* expert to write this piece

Clear news peg

Strong pitch (Health + Medicine)

Story: What is the potential side effect of the J&J vaccine for COVID-19? The side effect is a blood clot in the veins that drain blood from the brain. It is called central venous sinus thrombosis (CVST).

Significance: How would I suspect that I have this? The CDC and FDA are recommending that people who have received the J&J vaccine within the last 3 weeks who develop severe headache, abdominal pain, leg pain, or shortness of breath should contact their health care provider.

Key Points: A similar and rare problem of blood clotting with low platelets in the cerebral venous sinus and also in the abdominal veins and arteries has been seen with the use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine used in Europe (182 cases in 190 million doses). The European Medicines Agency (EMA) investigated this and concluded that CVST with low platelets be listed as a possible "very rare side effect" of the vaccine.



← Clear news peg

← Anticipates question readers will have

← Why it matters

← Interesting comparison and context that will add further insight

Strong pitch (Environment + Energy)

Story: Llamas have gotten recent press as potentially contributing antibodies for COVID-19 cures and also for becoming the most popular animal items at toy conventions. What this new media coverage leaves out is the history of how Andean peoples have domesticated, used and remade the llama over centuries.

Significance: Writing the cultural contributions of Andean people out of the story of llama's popularity and utility greatly diminishes the contributions South Americans have made to modern science, technology and culture. By contrast, recognizing and celebrating the long and intertwined history of llamas and their kin provides insight into the boundaries between wild and domesticated species.

Key points: Two New York Times articles in under a month indicate editorial and popular interest. I've published on the wild llama cousin, the vicuna, and have an animal history project underway on the "Llama Diaspora."

Author Details: Professor of History and Director of Environmental Studies Program



← News peg

← Interesting, surprising idea and clear explanation of story

← How the story will address what's missing from the conversation and add new insight

← News peg

← Expertise

Pitch that needs work

Story

Is racial equity a conservative or a liberal concern?





Significance

Although conservatives and liberals disagree about racial inequity, they should agree on five important truths.

Timeliness: Timeless

Key Points

Racial inequity is in the news but is an ongoing concern. I taught a course titled "Race and Justice." The article is written: 2968 words

 Too broad, unfocused No details about the five truths or indication of research; reads like opinion No demonstration of expertise beyond course Already written, plus much longer than our pieces (~800-1,000 words)

Pitch that needs work

Story: Ranking of people, schools, products, countries and just about everything else is part of our daily life. We are in a paradoxical relationship with ranking: "Ranking is good because it is informative and objective; ranking is bad because it is biased and subjective, and occasionally, even manipulated."

Too broad, general; not sure what proposed story is

Significance: Everybody with whom I have talked in the last several years has seemed to agree that the topic of ranking is hot. A ranking procedure may reflect either the reality or the illusion of objectivity. In addition, ranking might be the subject of manipulation.

Anecdotal, no research mentioned

Objectivity attempts to represent the outside world without bias or presuppositions, while subjectivity results from personal cognition or preferences. While making objective rankings sounds like an appealing goal, there are at least two different reasons why we may not have objectivity: ignorance and manipulation. We should learn how to navigate between objectivity and subjectivity.

Too broad; not new or surprising; reads like opinion

Key Points: Recently a dozen of articles in The Conversation discussed ranking, the social game we all play. Stories about the problems of ranking of colleges and universities, political candidates, livable cities, artists and tennis players were given. In this article, I will reanalyze these stories from the perspective of my recent book.

Not something we do in our model


Pitch that needs work

Story

The Passion of Britney Spears. From Southern Baptist to Kabbalah to possibly Catholicism, Britney Spears' religious life speaks to her struggles, her faith, and her fandom.

Significance

Two weeks ago, she caused a social media firestorm when she announced she was converting to Catholicism (in a now-deleted post). This inspired me to look into her religious biography, and I wrote a piece tracing her story from Southern Baptist to modern Kabbalah, to even looking into Hinduism, and now maybe Catholicism. It covers the moral panic around her performative sexuality, but also the praise she got for being a virgin.



← No indication that this is research-based

← News peg has passed

← Already written

← Interesting idea, but no mention of research

Pitch that needs work

Story

It turns out "Yoopers" will save money if Line 5 closes down if they invest in heat pumps, rather than freeze to death as alarmists claim. A new study shows that solar photovoltaics and heat pumps provide lower cost heat to Michigan's Upper Peninsula (the UP) than propane currently provides.

Too regional/specific to Michigan

Significance

Many Yoopers fear catastrophic heating prices if Line 5 closes. Line 5 is a pipeline system carrying propane from Canada across Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas. The pipeline crosses the Straits of Mackinac, leading to concerns about a potential oil spill from the 65-year-old pipeline. Currently, there is an huge debate about Michigan's attempt to close Line 5 permanently. Shutting down the pipeline could have significant impacts on those living in the UP - that often are remote and use propane for heating. The Michigan government is considering subsidies for propane transport by train/truck as potential solutions.

Does not indicate that this is reflective of trends elsewhere or that it would be broadened to a national audience


Pitch that needs work

Story: This pitch explains Thucydides' Trap and argues that there are at least two ways to avoid Sino-American war.

Significance: Graham Allison has made the point that China's rise is a story affecting our individual fates because in the end the question of whether a new world order will be born or the status quo preserved is less important than the question of whether the outcome will be determined peacefully or whether China and America are destined for war.

Timeliness: Timeless

Key Points: First, based on the diplomacy and leadership of the US and China, Kevin Rudd's "constructive realism" and Jin Canrong's "Chess war" might be a solution to avoid military conflict. Second, the institutional "Soft Balancing" of a third party to the U.S. or China is another.



← No indication that this is for a general reader

← What is the research? Are these people we should know?

← Jargon, which is more evidence that this is not for our general audience

Reminders + best practices

- Always check our site and search the proposed topic before pitching.
- Reach out to BU PR | Social Media! They are news experts.
- Please pitch via our pitch portal.
- If at first you don't succeed . . .



Thank you for your time.

Questions?

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