

so if a subject has already been extensively covered in the British press, that may hurt your chances. If you're a fairly untested journalist, it's also worth trying to think of ideas that you can bring some unique knowledge or perspective to. You need to show that there's a good reason why you, rather than an established journalist, should write about a subject. Maybe there's an especially interesting, unusual personal experience that you'd like to write about. That can be a good way of getting a first assignment, and if you write it well there's a strong chance an editor will commission you again – and even recommend you to their colleagues. Or perhaps there's a subject that you know much more about than the vast majority of people. Again, it's worth coming up with ideas that would benefit from your specialist knowledge.

The write stuff

When it comes to writing your pitch, it's always good to be very specific in the subject line – that way, an editor will be able to find your pitch in their avalanche of email days later. Simply putting 'Feature Idea' won't help.

In outlining your idea, be friendly, straightforward and enthusiastic – without being boastful or pushy. No one likes a pushy pitch. You don't have to be very formal – just a 'Dear [first name]' is fine. (I always get mildly alarmed by those that start 'Dear Kira Cochrane,' or 'Dear Ms Cochrane,' and *hugely* put off by a 'Dear Sir or Madam'). Then I would write a first line that includes some acknowledgment of the time demands that editors face – something like: 'I'm so sorry to bother you, as I know you must be extremely busy, but I just wanted to get in touch



IMAGE: PHYLIS CHRISTOPHER

about how the article could be illustrated, if, for example, all your case studies have chosen to stay anonymous. End the email with a line or two detailing relevant professional experience – magazines, newspapers or websites that you've written for, or a link to your blog. And make sure that you include all your contact details. That's essential.

Don't send more than two ideas in an email; ideally stick to one. I sometimes receive lists of 20 ideas, which make me feel exhausted, and faintly insulted. It's obvious that these 20 ideas aren't specifically tailored to my pages – a freelance has just sent a round robin.

After hitting send, sit back and wait for a reply. Occasionally you will be met with an eerie silence. Don't get upset (easier said than done, I know). It's easy

persistent. Sometimes it's taken five or six pitches before they've come up with the perfect idea for me, but I have, finally, commissioned them. And then I've commissioned them again.

Viv Groskop, one of the most successful freelancers in the business, says that if you're pitching a precious idea, it's worth including a caveat in the email, along the lines of: 'I know that time constraints might make it difficult to get back to me, but I would love to write this article, so if I haven't heard from you in a week, I'm happy to take that as a polite no and offer it somewhere else.' This saves you badgering an editor for a response, which, it has to be said, would be a sure-fire way to annoy them. Editors are looking for people who make their lives easier. If you come up with a great idea, you'll be doing just that.

So there you have it. Do your research. Be friendly, straightforward, and brief. Never send more than two ideas at a time. If an editor says no to an idea, don't be downhearted – and definitely don't email them straight back explaining that they're wrong, and should reconsider (you'd be amazed how often this happens). Be quietly persistent.

And be happy. As Groskop says, freelancing can be 'incredibly enjoyable – it's interesting, fun – and you're in control of your own life.'

What could be better than that? ■

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The way to wow an editor, amazingly enough, is with your unrivalled professionalism, and the first step is to do your research.

because I had an idea that I thought might work well for your section.' A note of humility is good. You're not saying that the idea *will* work for them, but that it might, and it would be worth them reading on.

Always, always keep it brief. One paragraph is great, two paragraphs is fine, but any longer and your pitch could go unread. Explain the idea simply, detailing how you would approach the article – are you proposing a first-person piece, a series of case studies, an interview? Think about visuals: it's always good to have a clear idea

to imagine that a 'No,' or no reply, means that an editor detests your idea, thinks you're stupid, and is laughing about you with their colleagues. This is a ridiculous notion. They will have looked at your email, ruled it in or out, and moved straight on. I sometimes used to feel so embarrassed about a rejection that I wouldn't pitch to that editor again for months. But this is no way to conduct a professional career: since becoming an editor, I've developed a huge respect for freelance writers who are quietly