

Pitching Tips: 7 Keys to a Great Pitch

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The Pitch Slam is a golden opportunity to sit face-to-face with potential agents, producers and executives who are looking for good writers, stories and screenplays. To take full advantage of this situation, you must pitch your project in a way that succinctly, emotionally and powerfully conveys both its artistic and commercial potential. And because there will be lots of other writers and filmmakers hoping to do the same thing, you want both your pitch and your story to stand out among the hundreds of others these potential buyers will hear.

My book *Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds: The Guaranteed Way to Get Your Screenplay or Novel Read* goes into a lot of detail about how to prepare and present a powerful pitch. But if I were to boil down all of the principles, examples and pitching templates the book provides for creating, rehearsing and delivering an outstanding pitch, it would result in these seven steps:



1. Never try to tell your whole story. This is by far the biggest mistake any writer or filmmaker can make. You've got 60-90 seconds to pitch your story (you want the rest of your time slot to discuss the story with the buyer, or to pitch a second idea if they pass on the first one). If you try to include every important detail of your screenplay, or if you get mired in vivid descriptions of the opening, the characters or the set pieces, you'll run out of time before your prospective buyer has a clear picture of the potential of your project. So instead of trying to weave a tale in two minutes, you want to....

2. Focus on revealing the essential elements of your story. These are the key questions buyers want you to answer for them:

- *Who is your HERO or protagonist?*
- *What is that character's EVERYDAY LIFE at the beginning of the film?*
- *Why will we feel EMPATHY towards your hero?*
- *What OPPORTUNITY is presented to that hero at the 10% point that will get the story going?*
- *Into what NEW SITUATION does that opportunity take your hero?*
- *What specific visible goal or OUTER MOTIVATION are we rooting for your hero to accomplish by the end of the movie?*
- *What CONFLICT will the hero face that makes achieving that goal seem impossible?*
- *What are two ANTECEDENTS to your screenplay – recent, successful films with the same genre, tone, and potential market as yours?*

3. Begin by revealing how you came up with the idea. Don't lead with your title or log line. Titles are close to meaningless, and usually confusing, when a buyer knows nothing about the story at all. And log lines might convey a little bit, but they will have much greater impact later in the pitch (see below). Instead, open your pitch by saying where you first got the idea for your story. It might grow out of a personal experience, or it might be based on a true story, or a novel for which you have the rights, or some article you read that stimulated your creativity. It might even come from other movies – taken a favorite genre and then coming up with a unique twist or element that we haven't seen before.

So you might begin by saying something like, "I have always been a huge fan of romantic thrillers, and I started wondering, 'What if...?'" Or, "I was recently able to acquire the rights to a novel that scared the crap out of me." Or, "You may not be aware of this, but I recently read that..." And then you segue from that initial idea to the key elements of your story listed above. Opening in this way draws the buyer into your story with the same element that got you excited about it.

4. Leave the buyer in suspense. Don't reveal the outcome of your screenplay in the pitch. Complete your presentation by either summarizing the conflict, or by revealing whatever major setback occurs at the end of Act 2. This can often be done when you...

5. Finish your description with the title and the log line. Here is where these elements of your pitch can be most powerful – *after* your buyer knows the essence of your story. So when you complete the description that includes those key elements in item #2, follow with the title, and then a single sentence that summarizes it all: "So basically, my screenplay WHERE'S MY KID? is about a single parent who must rescue her daughter, not realizing that the kidnapper is actually the FBI agent who's leading the investigation."

Notice that we don't know from the log line whether she will succeed – the pitch leaves the buyer wanting more. But if the buyer then asks how the movie ends, don't be coy – tell her.

6. Follow the log line with a question As any good salesperson will tell you, you have to ask for the sale to close the deal. After summarizing with your log line, say to your buyer, "So do you have any questions about my script, or would you like me to send you a copy?" This gives them two options, both good for you: either they request the script, or they are engaged enough with your story that they want to discuss it.

7. Answer the buyers' questions succinctly. For many writers this is the hardest part of the pitch. They have carefully prepared, well-rehearsed, 60-second presentations, and then they respond to simple questions with long, meandering responses – usually in an unconscious attempt to tell the entire story (see #1 above). So listen to exactly what your buyer wants to know about your script, and then answer just that question *in no more than 10 seconds*. If you haven't told the buyer everything she wants to know, she'll ask another question.

And if the buyer passes on your pitch, then use the remaining time you've paid for to either pitch a second project, or to ask for suggestions on how you might improve the pitch she just heard. Don't get discouraged. The main reason that some pitches don't result in requests is not because the pitch was no good; it's because the buyer just isn't looking for that type of movie project. The beauty of the Pitch Slam is that when that happens, you just move to the next table and present your pitch again.

The Pitch Slam – and the entire conference – should be a very special event, and a great opportunity.

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