

Panic-Free Pitching
By Anna Sugden

This workshop should give you both practical tips and the tools you need to make the most of your appointment.

Preparation is the key.

1. Mental Preparation

A. Tackling Fears

Dispel the myths and develop a PMA (Positive Mental Attitude).

The myths.

- a. The image we have of editors and agents in our minds.
 - They aren't monsters and ghouls! They're real people.
 - They have a lot riding on these appointments too. They're judged by the new talent they discover. Why shouldn't it be you?
- b. They'll take one look at me and spot I'm faking it/tell I'm a bad writer/see I'm a beginner and reject me.
 - Editors and agents aren't looking to reject people. They're keen for new talent. They want to find that new star, that story that grabs them - again - why shouldn't it be you?
 - We all feel like that. They won't mind if you're a beginner. They'll judge your writing by your writing!
- c. They won't want me because I'm not Nora or Debbie or Anna Campbell etc.
 - Publishing houses need a broad spectrum of authors to be successful. Big names can pull in big money. But they also need new names – tomorrow's big names.
- d. But they've just bought x new authors!
 - The publishing process is slow! Today's new authors will see their books on the shelves, if lucky in 2012, but more likely in 2013.
 - With your successful pitch and subsequent submission, it may be a year or more before you get the call (overnight successes are rarely that!).
- e. They'll try to catch me out with tricky questions about craft and technique.
 - Ten minutes flies by. They want to find out about your story. They don't care which craft books you've read, which workshops you've been to (though if you've been to one of their's be sure to mention it <g>) or how you plot.
 - It's not an exam.
 - They want you to be at ease.
 - They will ask questions – to get a better understanding of your characters and story.
- f. What do I know? I'm no expert.
 - You've spent months/years writing and finishing your book. 95% of people don't even start a book, let alone finish one.
 - You've polished your book until it shines. It's your very best.
 - No-one knows your characters, story, plot twists etc better than you. No-one is more enthusiastic about this book than you.
 - You are the expert on your book.

g. They will say no.

- They might.
- They'll tell you why, offer advice. They may suggest other houses/agents.
- Make sure you're pitching to the right editor/agent. Research up-front. For agents, try to find out ahead of time what they like and dislike. Ask advice from fellow writers.
- Sometimes you can't help the reason they reject you. eg they've just bought several books with that theme or that theme isn't selling right now etc etc. No amount of badgering and arguing will change it.
- Remember this is not personal, it is business.
- No isn't the end. There are other editors or agents and other conferences.
- No isn't no forever. It is no at this time, for this book, with this person.
- It isn't the end of the world – really.

2. Physical Preparation

Common sense, but worth repeating, because nerves make common sense fly out of the window.

A. Time

Give yourselves plenty of time – rushing makes us nervous and flustered.

- Set your alarm a little earlier.
- Decide the night before what you're wearing and try it on (check for rips and stains, iron).
- Find out ahead of time where you have to be and when.
- Find out where the nearest bathroom is – just in case!

B. Appearance

- Business casual.
- Be comfortable, avoid the fidget factor.
- Lipstick – a great confidence booster.
- Avoid heavy perfumes.
- Breath mints!
- Take only business card, pitch cards, purse. No manuscript or synopsis.

C. Practice

- Make the time to practice your pitch. If possible, work with a friend.

D. Calming exercises

- Deep breaths
- Roll shoulders
- Stretch to relieve tension

3. Work Preparation

Pack of different coloured index cards:

- a. You card (yellow)
- b. Elevator (Lift) Pitch (pink)
- c. Blurb (blue)
- d. Book card (green)
- e. (Optional) Questions for the editor/agent

You card

- i. Name
- ii. What do you write? Eg contemporary, category
- iii. Key features of your writing eg emotional, humour, sexy, characters
- iv. What do you add?
- v. Favourite authors / writing hero (can you link to client of editor/agent)
- vi. Writing credits/contest wins
- vii. Biographical points of interest and relevance to the book.

A. Elevator pitch card

A one-liner which describes the main thrust of your book.

What it isn't – a diatribe encompassing every aspect of your story. Rule of thumb - if you have to take a breath before you've finished – it's too long.

What it is - short, sharp, snappy, focused.

There are a number of ways to do this:

- i. Strapline (sometimes called a logline) – the most descriptive.
- ii. Hook, theme and twist – uses well-known story hooks or themes and shows how you've put a unique twist on them.
- iii. High concept (x meets y) – uses a combination of well-known stories/movies/TV shows. Eg Buffy meets The Waltons; Lara Croft meets The Dukes of Hazzard, Bridget Jones meets King Arthur's court.

Depending on your book, one or other may work better. Try each and see which works best.

The Strapline Method.

- a. Start with 'it is a <genre> romance about ...' (eg it is a contemporary category romance about ...)
- b. Consider your story (maybe synopsis or blurb). Take the theme/thread that makes it unique.
- c. Think about:
 - Your initial idea – what sparked you to say you want to write this story?
 - If you can only tell one thing about your story what would it be?
- d. One of the characters is the lead in the story – which one? What is that character's story about?
Note – it doesn't matter whether it's the hero or the heroine.

Example for Legacy of Love - *A contemporary, category romance about a Texas cowboy who inherits an English sheep farm.*

Hook, Theme & Mix

Legacy of Love - Cowboy, inheritance battle, fish out of water. The twist is the English sheep farm. Eg *A Texas cowboy gets involved in an inheritance battle over an English sheep farm he doesn't want.*

High Concept

Eg. Bonanza meets Crocodile Dundee (cowboy, fish out of water)
Bonanza meets Emmerdale (cowboy, Yorkshire farm)
Bonanza meets What a Girl Wants (cowboy, English inheritance)
Bonanza meets The Full Monty without the stripping! (cowboy, Yorkshire, fish out of water)

Blurb card

Why do I need a blurb? More detail, tells the key elements of your story, useful for query letters as well as pitches, website excerpts, future back copy!

What does an editor/agent want to hear from a blurb?

- i. Characters – Interesting? Appealing? What is their GMC (goal, motivation, conflict)?
- ii. Plot – Is there one? Could it sustain a whole book? Interesting?
- iii. Romance – Is there a hint of a spark? Is there conflict?

Remember – as with the strapline – don't waffle on and on! Fit it onto one index card and keep it legible. Between 100 and 250 words.

Four main elements to a blurb:

- i. The hero's story
- ii. The heroine's story
- iii. The overall theme of the story (conflicts, challenges)
- iv. The final question

a. What do we need to know about the hero/heroine?

- i. Who he/she is?
- ii. What he/she wants?
- iii. Why he/she wants it?
- iv. What/who is standing in his/her way? (or why not?)

Yes, it's all about the GMC. Check out Debra Dixon's book or workshop!

Eg Legacy of Love.

- i. Who – Texas cowboy, Scott Devlin
- ii. What does he want – to sell the sheep farm he's just inherited
- iii. Why – because it's a sheep farm, it's from his no-good father and because he wants to buy a ranch back home. Could add one final motivation – his internal motivation which is to finally gain respect in his hometown.
- iv. What/who – The terms of the will and his co-inheritor, Dreena.
- v. Finally add an emotional depth and hint of sexual attraction – he believes his father turned his mother to drink, Dreena
- vi. *Cowboy Scott Devlin's dream inheritance from his no-good father – the man he believes destroyed his mother – isn't a ranch at all – it's a run-down sheep farm in Yorkshire, England. Worse, he shares ownership with a gorgeous woman who thinks the world of his late father. If he can convince her to sell the farm, he can return to Texas and buy a place of his own, finally gaining respect in his hometown.*

For my heroine. Can you spot the different elements?

Former rebel Dreena Barry refuses to sell her dream inheritance from the step-father she loved - the man who rescued her mother from drink - because it gives her a chance for a fresh start away from her past. No damn Yank, no matter how sexy is going to sell it out from under her. Especially not the man who broke her step-father's heart.

- i. Who – Former rebel Dreena Barry
- ii. What – to keep the farm
- iii. Why – it's from her beloved step-father and it offers her a fresh start away from her troubled past.
- iv. What/who – Scott and the terms of her inheritance
- v. Depth – her step-father rescued her mother, Scott

The final section summarises the challenges they face and the emotional conflicts. If possible end with a question – to hook the editor/agent.

Eg. *Soon it's the growing attraction between them, as well as an unscrupulous developer, the two are battling instead of each other. Will their tangled emotions towards the schemer who brought them together force them apart or will they find their Legacy of Love?*

B. Book Card

- i. Extra info about your book eg key turning points and twists, key themes, secondary story threads, setting (if relevant)
- ii. What kind of story is it? Eg secret baby, amnesia, reunited lovers etc
- iii. ONE interesting fact about your hero and heroine
- iv. If not in your blurb – internal conflict
- v. Length and is it finished? (be honest!)
- vi. Why it fits their business/line?
- vii. Is it reminiscent of anything else (Movie, TV show, book, cartoon) or a combination.
- viii. Relevance/interest (eg hockey book if you love hockey)
- ix. Was there an incident in your own life that made you want to write this book? How is it relevant?

And Finally ...

Some handy tips and do's and don'ts

- i. Smile, shake hands, make eye contact [maybe make them do that!]
- ii. Don't put your handbag on the table between you - it's a barrier
- iii. Don't take your synopsis or manuscript - they won't want to carry it home with them. They may not even take your business card!
- iv. Be enthusiastic, try to speak clearly and succinctly
- v. Be honest!
- vi. If you make a mistake/go blank – don't panic! Be honest about that too.
- vii. Practice pitch beforehand
- viii. Find out about the person/house beforehand
- ix. Listen to advice, don't argue! (Question for clarification or to raise a suggestion but don't be belligerent)
- x. Don't be a group hog! Don't respond or react to other people's comments or pitches.
- xi. Don't ask basic questions or things you could have found out with a little bit of research eg word count, website address
- xii. Don't badger them if they say no
- xiii. Preparation is the key!
- xiv. Whatever the outcome, be professional and thank them for their time.

Bio:

Anna Sugden is a three-time Golden Heart finalist who has won numerous awards for her writing. She is a founder member of the Romance Bandits and a regular contributor to The Healthy Writer blog. She joined Romance Writers of America during her six years living in New Jersey. She currently resides in the UK.

Her background includes thirteen years in business, working in marketing for a major blue-chip multinational, and six years as a teacher.

You can find out more about Anna at www.annasugden.com .