

TIP SHEET

TOP 10 THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN PITCHING AN IDEA TO RNJ

1. ***Read the magazine regularly and look through back issues to:***
 - a) Assess the tone/style of features – RNJ is not a peer reviewed magazine so we tend to stay away from anything too academic. Our features are based more on real-life nurses who have stories to tell, and whose voices come through the page.
 - b) Determine a reasonable word count – If you read the magazine, you know it's always 32 pages. If you look at it closely, you'll see that the front and back sections are always filled with the same standing features – columns, newsbits, media, calendar. What we're left with is what's referred to as the "island." That's the centre of the magazine where all the features end up. The island can range anywhere from 8 to 14 pages depending on the time of year. In the spring, for instance, the May/June issue has an island filled with news from the AGM and Nursing Week. That leaves us with limited space for other features. It's a bit of an anomaly but it's something to keep in mind. The rest of the year, we typically run a cover feature that ranges from 4-6 pages along with several shorter features. Given the way line-ups are created for each issue, you have a better chance of publishing a 700-800 word story than you do a 1400-1500 word story.
 - c) Find stories with which you can tie your submission as a follow-up piece that builds on what's already been covered – For example, RNJ publishes a cover feature about mid-career nurses going back to school. The story presented a return to school as one of several options for nurses nearing retirement. As a follow-up piece to this, we publish a two-page spread about what retired nurses are doing after they finish their last shift. You have a story to tell about a retired nurse who is doing something out of the ordinary. Given the link to the two pieces that have already been published, this would be considered as a follow-up piece and you should consider presenting it that way.
2. ***Put yourself in the reader's shoes*** – Say you're involved in an innovative project or pilot in Sudbury or North Bay. Try stepping away from what it means for your organization and ask yourself why would a nurse in Peterborough or Ottawa want to hear about my project? How is it relevant to the work they do? Is it something they could implement in their own workplace? Is it something that's being rolled out across the province? Or are you just really excited about it and want to share the good news? Whatever it is, you need to draw the reader in. If it's about being excited, make the reader excited. If it's being rolled out across the province, let the reader know what they can expect. Make it worthwhile for them to read your story.

3. ***Find a new or unusual angle for your story*** – If a story’s been done before, nobody’s going to invest valuable time reading it again. You wouldn’t. As you formulate your submission idea, consider this: “Dog bites man”...not news. “Man bites dog”...that’s news. Give your idea an unusual twist.
4. ***Develop an “abstract” or synopsis before you start writing*** – It’s important that you not put too much work into an idea before you’ve spoken to someone about it. In the journalism industry this is called a “Query Letter” and it’s a one-page synopsis of what your story is about and why it’s something that would work in the magazine. You use this not only to sell your story idea, but also to help develop the idea. This is vital because it means you and the editor are on the same page when it comes to the focus of the article, and the approach that needs to be taken.
5. ***Read the newspapers, watch the news, and tie your submission to something newsworthy*** – You should be able to answer the question “why write about this now?” If you’re tying your story idea to something in the news, to a big government announcement, to an election, or to something that’s already getting press, it’s likely your story will be more relevant to readers. That’s not to say it’s absolutely necessary to tie every story to something bigger – it’s not. But it sometimes helps.
6. ***Think anecdotes and scenes*** – A story is always more interesting when you bring real people into it. Pay close attention to the stories you read over the next little while and you’ll notice that the ones that really draw you in are the ones about people. You’ll also notice that writers want to put the reader where the subjects of the story are. That’s what a “scene” will do. Tell me (the reader) where the subject is standing, what they smell, what they see. Tell me how they feel and I (the reader) will feel like I’m right there with them. Now I (the reader) have got something invested in this story and I feel like I can relate to the person I’m reading about.
7. ***Check your facts*** – It’s always important to make sure what you’re writing is accurate because, if it’s not, it compromises the integrity of your writing and the integrity of the magazine.
8. ***Use quotes wherever possible but don’t let the quotes tell the story*** – Quotes are a really good way to bring your story to life. Just be careful not to overuse them because sometimes it’s more concise and clear to paraphrase, and to leave the quotes short and punchy.
9. ***Hook your reader right from the start, don’t wait until paragraph three or four to tell them what the story is about*** – People live busy lives and you’ll lose them if you don’t get straight to the point.
10. ***Don’t be afraid of constructive criticism*** – Even the most seasoned writers are edited. After hours of research and rounds of revised drafts, writers usually end up with something they think is perfectly clear. Sometimes they’re bang on. Sometimes they’re not. Editors offer a fresh set of eyes on a story, and it’s an editor’s job to point out areas where the average reader might get lost or lose interest.