

# What Is A Pitch?

By Chris Abbott

"Why do they call it 'pitching'?" asked an actress friend of mine early in my career. I had no idea. Why *do* they call it a pitch? And while we're asking pertinent questions, what the heck is a pitch, anyway?

We all know what writing is. Writing is sitting alone in the dark with *IT* and it's *ITS* turn.

Writing is pacing the floor, praying for inspiration, procrastinating as long as humanly possible, and then, in desperation, taking Mary Heaton Vorse's admonition-- "The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair"--and turning out page after page of moldy straw which somehow, by the time you're finished, has turned into gold.

That's writing: mind-numbing, lower-backbreaking, soul-twisting hard work. But what is pitching?

Pitching, it turns out, has little or nothing to do with writing. What it has everything to do with is selling. Pitching is the initiation rite you have to endure before being allowed the honor of writing (and getting paid for it!)

There may be some long-forgotten reason this torturous ritual is called pitching. If there is, I've never heard it. It seems to me that this process of trying to sell a story is called pitching because of its obvious similarities to baseball.

You stand alone on the mound, facing the enemy, sweat pouring into your eyes, holding in your hand the one thing that can get you a deal: your best curveball idea. Your heart pounds, you concentrate only on that miniscule area identified as the strike zone where you have to place your idea or face being taken out of the game. You know that you only get one shot. One chance to put your great, big, tremendous, fabulous idea through that tiny, microscopic little window of opportunity. And by the way, everything you say and do during the pitch counts.

You wind up, you throw your best idea at them with every skill you've ever learned, with all the hope you've ever held in your heart, and then you sit back and wait. Because now it's out of your hands.

My friend Jeri Taylor (*Star Trek: Voyager*) once told me that there's no such thing as a good pitch that doesn't sell. What difference does it make how brilliant you are if you

don't walk out of that room with a sale? She's right. No question about it. But I didn't always think so.

When I first started writing, I had a slightly distorted image of the writer's life. I thought that writers spent most of their time sitting around the pool, working on their tan, throwing out bon mots to their writer friends until lunchtime and then went down to the Polo Lounge to see and be seen. Or, if they were a little down on their luck, they'd go to the Hamburger Hamlet for a burger and a beer. They wore blue jeans and athletic shoes and white linen shirts. Every Friday night they went to The Mucky Duck in Santa Monica for ale and darts.

I never envisioned any of them working fourteen-hour days, seven-day weeks, scrambling their brains to figure out how to fix a script so that the star, the studio, the line producer and maybe even they themselves were happy with it. I never envisioned any writer going years without a day off because if a show is going to have any scripts when the crew and the actors return from their month-long hiatus in Bermuda or the south of France, then the writer must stay in town during the hottest, smoggiest time of the year to churn out material for the network to reject.

No. I envisioned writers at Hollywood Park placing two-dollar bets on the Exacta and amusing their friends with clever ideas for movies that no one would ever make.

My idea of the perfect pitch would have gone something like this: there's a "drive on" pass waiting for you at the gate. You park in a reserved space and jog up the stairs to the Office of the President. He's waiting for you. He tells his secretary to hold all calls. She does. You amuse him with small talk and then ever so modestly mention your little idea.

The President of the studio loves your idea. It's the best idea he's ever heard. In fact, he loves your idea so much that he now loves you. He'd kill to make your inventive, charming yet blindingly commercial idea into a major motion picture, but unfortunately, he's already bought an idea just like it. Not identical to it. No, in fact, he likes your idea better than the one he just bought. But what can he do? He's already committed funds to some other inferior writer who's going to turn in an inferior product and, as heartbroken as he is about the situation, there is absolutely nothing he can do about it. Maybe you can do business together another time.

Now that, in my opinion, is the perfect pitch. They loved you, you don't have to actually sit down and write, and you still have time to make the third race at Hollywood Park.

I even tried to start my own version of the Algonquin Round Table, thinking that without argument the most enjoyable thing about being a writer is hanging out with your urbane friends making caustic remarks that will be studied in Graduate School programs for decades. Unfortunately, it never worked out. I think it was because there is not a single bar in Los Angeles with the ambiance of the Algonquin. It can't have been lack of wit on our part or lack of drinking, either, for that matter.

If your idea of writing bears the slightest resemblance to mine, you don't need to read this book. In fact, you really don't want to read this book. This book will give you the tools you need to sell your ideas, and then you're going to be working day and night for 20 years and never get a day off again which will seriously interfere with your social life! So please, do yourself a favor: put the book down and go back to your grande, half-caf, three splenda, soy latte.

For the rest of you, I'm afraid the moment of truth has come. Do you want to be a "Writer"?

Or do you want to write?

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