Pitch Sessions

What they are & How to do it

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Disclaimer: For the purposes of this, I have written *only* about editors, and, more specifically, *only* about *me*.

What is a pitch session?

A pitch session is a five to fifteen minute (usually ten, actually) meeting with an editor (or agent), during which you "pitch" your project—*and yourself*.

How do I do it?

There are a lot of different ways. Some editors want to hear a "tagline" and want your pitch to sound like the back cover of a paperback novel. Others only want to hear about the characters. Others only want to hear about the plot. A lot of times people are tempted to say things like, "My novel is like Linda Howard meets *Blade* meets *The Matrix* meets Anne Rice meets *The Mickey Mouse Club*!" Some editors like that. Here is a hint: that *never* works for me. If your novel is *like* all that stuff, that says to me that (a) you can't think of anything else to say about your book and (b) that it's really derivative and probably pretty crappy and (c) that you're an unfocused writer who can't settle on what story to tell.

What do you want to know about?

I want to know about your story. Unfortunately, that includes character *and* plot *and* writing style *and* everything. I suggest writers organize their pitches like this: Title, status, subgenre, word count, style, brief description of the plot including character motivation. This usually takes under five minutes.

For example:

My novel, *The Robot Cheerleader Wars*, is a completed futuristic YA romance of about 90,000 words, told in the close-third point of view solely from the heroine's perspective. Samantha Sue has always been different from the other girls—and she's never known why. But when the new girl in school seems to be casting spells—literally!—Samantha Sue realizes that it's her destiny to fight the forces of darkness. Samantha isn't sure what to do when help comes from an unexpected quarter—Rodney McKay, Intergalactic Space Hero shows up on her doorstep!

He's handsome and charming, and his abrasive wit makes Samantha wish she'd taken Intro to Wormhole Physics instead of Intro to Intergalactic Cheerleading freshman year—but does he have an ulterior motive? Can she balance exposing the new girl in school for the witchy robot that she is with making captain of the Intergalactic High School Cheerleading Squad, capturing the heart of Rodney McKay, and fending off the advances of creepy Jack O'Neill? Of course she can!

She's Samantha Sue, Intergalactic Woman of Mystery and Cheerleader of the Year!

Then you can tell me about yourself. I want to know why you wrote this book, what else you've written, and what you expect from your writing career.

For example:

My name is Samantha Carter, and I wrote this book because when I was a young girl, there were no books about the two things I loved most in the world—wormhole physics and cheerleading! I think this book will really fill a void in young adult romance—I read a lot of them, and am very familiar with the market (and the target audience, since I have an adopted teenage daughter who also reads a lot of them).

I think it's really important for teenage girls to have good role models—and for them to learn that it's not always the Jack O'Neills of the world who make the best heroes. I have pretty realistic expectations—clearly this will be a fifteen to thirty book series, and will rapidly become as popular, if not more so, than the Sweet Valley High books.

I fully expect to be a *New York Times* bestselling millionaire professional writer within the next two years.

I'll probably ask a lot of questions—

Why does Samantha want to be a cheerleader? Why is this set in the future? What do robots have to do with anything? Don't you think maybe using the name Rodney McKay is a transparent clue that you have watched a little too much *Stargate Atlantis*? Don't you think maybe your career expectations are a little high and unrealistic?

—and I will expect you to be able to answer those questions.

What else are you looking for in a pitch session?

I want to work with cool people. I want to work with writers who are enthusiastic about their work. I want to work with writers who are professional. Professional, well-presented writers who can speak coherently about their books are the ones who get media opportunities, because they can represent themselves and their publishing companies in a positive light.

Does a person's appearance—their demeanor, looks—affect the impression and your interest in their pitch?

Certainly if someone has an extremely unkempt appearance and very bad breath and doesn't look me in the eye or act in a polite and businesslike manner, I am taken aback. But I don't care if someone is wearing a business suit, or jeans and a t-shirt. What matters, really, is attitude—and if you've got a bad attitude, nothing, not wearing Prada shoes or smelling like Vera Wang perfume, is going to get you on my good side.

Do you want to shake my hand?

If I offer my hand to you, I want to shake your hand. But if I don't feel well, or you look sniffly, I don't want to touch you! I don't want to catch your cold, or accidentally give you mine—and there's a lot of crud floating around at conventions. Don't be offended if we don't shake hands.

I have questions about your company. Can I ask them?

Yes! Definitely! Asking intelligent questions shows that you have a brain, and that you've done your research. *Do not,* however, say something like, "I've never read a Tor book

before. I don't really read fantasy novels. But I am writing the best one ever! Can you tell me about Tor Books?" That just shows that you're a moron. If you want to write genre fiction, read the genre. Do your research. Find out about who I am and what company I work for before you sign up to pitch me a story.

What are some tips for a good pitch?

Do not tell me that you are nervous. You only have ten minutes! Spend that time on your book. I don't care that you're nervous, and I don't care that it is your first pitch—I want to hear about your book!

Don't fiddle. If you are bad at speaking to strangers, or remembering things when you're under pressure, write your pitch on index cards and read from them—but make sure to make eye contact while pitching at least a few times. Eat a breath mint before you go in. Don't sit too close to the editor, or too far away. Speak clearly—do *not ever* mumble.

Remember that you know *everything* about your book. You wrote it. These are your characters. You have spent months, maybe years!, of your life with them. You probably love them all, even the evil ones. Seriously, remember that. Enthusiasm counts *a lot.* Enthusiasm tempered with professionalism and good humor counts for a million billion points.

Practice, practice, practice. Go over your pitch with a friend, or in front of a mirror.

Can I bring my pitch and let you read it?

You can, but it's always best if you *interact.*

Can I bring my manuscript and give it to you right then? What about a copy of my last book? What about my synopsis and cover letter?

I do not want anything. I do not want to carry anything around with me! Some editors like it when writers give them business cards because they make notes on the back. I tend to lose business cards, and I make notes in the notebook I carry everywhere. In general, handing *any* editor any materials other than a business card is a clear sign that you have no idea what you're doing.

My book isn't finished—can I still pitch?

Of course. To me, anyway. But if you're a writer who has never had a novel published by a real publishing company before (by which I mean a royalty paying print house—and, sorry, most e-publishers, even if they do POD copies of your book—do not count), your manuscript will have to be finished before I can offer you a contract.

It is always better to have a completed project. That way you can say to me that you will send it to me as soon as you get home—if I've requested it.

I'm writing a series. You want to know about that, right?

Yup. But here's some free advice: If you're a first time novelist, don't start with a series. No, seriously. I know you see Robert Jordan everywhere, and he's a million books in, and he's a bestseller, and Laurell Hamilton wrote a series! Blah blah blah. Fine.

Guess what? You're not Laurell Hamilton—and she wasn't always a bestseller.

Your best bet is to write one standalone book, with a lot of cool secondary characters, set in a neat world. Hell, write a book about two brothers who kill demons in the Midwest, the reluctant hero Samodo and his caretaker/sidekick Deanwise, and how Samodo meets and falls in love with some woman who helps them kill demons or *whatever*. Seriously.

Then, guess what? There are at least two possible books you can write that are connected to that and set in the same universe—the tale of Samodo's new wife's best friend, and the tale of Deanwise falling in love.

Okay, so you're not writing a romance? That's easy—The Continuing Tales of Samodo and Deanwise and the Demons They Kill in the Midwest.

No, *really.*

The magic words are, "Of course, if this works for you, I would be happy to discuss developing it into a series or setting more works in this 'verse."

Here is the problem with beginning your writing with a series: Let's say that I don't like the first book, or the second book, or the third book. I am not going to want to see more books set in the series. It's likely that if I reject the first book, I won't want to see any of the rest of them. So you're in the middle of writing the seventh book out of thirty, and you think you're really hitting your stride, and readers will love it—but, hello, I was bored by the first one! I don't want to read seven to get to your best! work! ever! You just screwed yourself, totally.

You didn't request my book at the pitch session! Sob!

Zip it. Life sucks. Move on.

There are tons of reasons why I wouldn't request your book—for example, if it's about Samantha Sue up there. Editors say no a lot—we have to. We get a lot of submissions, thousands a year! We could already have something similar to what you're saying. It could sound like you don't really have a focused story.

Publishing is cyclical, and you need to remember that what you see on the shelves now are books that were mostly acquired *at least 18 months ago.*

Even though it feels personal, *it's not.* I am looking for really good books. I am looking for new writers. I want to find cool things to publish, *I really really do.* So if I am saying no, I have a good reason, and it's about *the project*.

The second thing to remember is to take the rejection gracefully, and thank me for my time. *I will remember you did that.* I will also remember if you cry, or try to use some other emotional manipulation to get me to request/buy your book (I'm dying. My mother is dying. My house is being repossessed.), and I will never want to work with you. If you're rude to me, you're going to have a really hard time selling me a book.

I don't have an agent. Is that okay? Can I pitch anyway?

Yes. Lots of publishing houses work with unagented authors. Different career paths work for different people. Some writers get agents during the process of the first negotiation.

(Calling the agent of your dreams and saying, "I have an offer from Publishing Company Fantastic on the table for three books, and I'd like you to negotiate the deal, and if you like my work and would like to continue working with me after that, I'd love to discuss it at some point" works pretty well, as far as I've heard.)

Some writers wait until they are a few books in before finding an agent to help them plan their career and negotiate better contracts. Some writers get agents first and have their agents send the work after I request it at a pitch session. Different strokes for different folks.

What else do I need to know? I feel like something is missing here.

You need to know about the secret handshake! Haha, there's not one. Doesn't that suck? Getting your book published is a hell of a lot of work—and it takes a hell of a lot of luck, too. You might get it right on the very first try, or it might take you another fifteen years.

(Here's an anecdote: *The Challenge* by Susan Kearney was the very first book she ever wrote—but she didn't sell it until twelve years later!)

So you don't like my book. Screw you, bitch!

Yup, that's right. Take it somewhere else. You never know who is going to buy what I've rejected. It's happened before and it will happen again.

Some stuff I've rejected has gone on to be a terrific success at other houses (and some stuff has flopped, not that I take satisfaction in being right or anything).

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For a while I was writing a column called "Ask the Editor" for an RWA newsletter. In the April 2004 column, I answered the question "What are your top ten 'don'ts' to do at a conference (from an editor's POV)?"

Here's my answer, in its entirety:

I don't have ten Don't sentences for you. In fact, I have one: *Don't be an idiot.*

That's the most important right there. I know that sounds callous, but you'd be surprised how many people actually know how to behave professionally and politely until they get to a conference. What you need to remember is that common sense is *key*. Use your common sense. Remember to take deep breaths. Remember that this is not life or death, and no babies or puppies will die if you stumble over a few words, or accidentally say something silly.

But here are a few more specific dos and don'ts...

• **Don't** accost an editor in the bathroom. A polite "I enjoyed your panel" is acceptable; a thirty minute discourse on your manuscript is not.

• **Don't** be rude to other people. (A good rule for life in general, by the way.) You never know who is listening. A polite extrication from an uncomfortable situation can win you more points than you realize, by showing your professionalism. (See? Show-don't-tell works in real life too!)

• **Don't** expect that an editor will remember who you are, especially if you either (a) just recently sent your work unsolicited, or (b) met for ten seconds after a panel at a conference three years ago.

• **Do** re-introduce yourself in a polite manner designed to make the editor feel more comfortable about not remembering you. The best way to do this is to make sure you say your name. Here's an example: "Hi! My name is Betty Writer-Wannabe. I'm sure you don't remember me—we met briefly at the Conference In The Trees last year. I loved your panel on How To Not Be Silly And Ridiculous!" This will put the editor at ease—and all her to say, "Oh, Betty, thanks so much! How have you been?" And the editor will be more inclined to remember you because you were gracious.

• **Don't** ask the editor to fit you into her pitch schedule. The editor does not make up her pitch schedule. However, it's okay to offer to buy the editor a drink. Which brings me to:

• **Don't** talk about your book right away. This is what we call "schmoozing" or "networking". Talk about other stuff. Talk about dogs and cats and books you've read. I know that I certainly enjoy talking about things other than business—and sometimes those are the most memorable conversations. An editor will ask about your writing—or not.

Sometimes the editor will slide you her business card and say, "I had a great time chatting; if you write what I'm buying, why don't you send it to me?" If so, you're lucky. If not, catch her at the next convention—or write a polite letter with your proposal saying how much you enjoyed chatting at Convention X, and your discussion about So-And-So's prose style led you to believe that perhaps she'd enjoy looking at your book.

• **Do** keep in mind that there are other people who want to talk to this editor. If people are standing around waiting to have a conversation with her, don't hog her time! Be courteous—that will win you points. Saying, "I'm really enjoying this conversation, but I see there are other people waiting to talk to you—maybe we can finish this over a drink at the bar later tonight?" is a polite way to leave a conversation with an editor, and the editor will understand that you are being nice to your sister RWA members.

• **Do** remember that you know all about your book. You love writing. You are enthusiastic about your own projects. This is what you want to do! Your enthusiasm, tempered with professionalism and a good sense of humor, will serve you well when talking to an editor about your work.

• **Don't** be pushy. If an editor says she doesn't want to see your material, she doesn't want to see your material. Pushing will usually end up with you getting a really quick turnaround and a very impersonal rejection letter. Wait until you have something the editor would be more interested in, and send it with a polite letter explaining that while your last project didn't work for the editor, perhaps she would enjoy this one.

• **Do** remember that publishing is a business, despite writing being an art. The business of publishing is a hard and difficult one. Sometimes an editor is forced to reject a work she really wanted to publish. Don't make it harder for the editor by demanding detailed explanations as to why your book wasn't purchased. If she offers criticism, take it in the manner it's intended—as help for your next project. Editors want to publish books, which means they want to help young wannabe writers become published writers.

• **Do** remember that editors are people too. Sometimes they are tired. Sometimes they are cranky. They need liberal applications of compassion, green vegetables, vodka, chocolate, and (sometimes) nicotine. Be understanding of their flaws the same way they are understanding of yours.

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...And, finally, here is my June 2005 column on the best pitch I've ever received.

Ask the Editor—June 2005

Welcome back to Ask the Editor, a column where I confirm your deepest fears—I mean, uh, a place where you can ask whatever you like, completely anonymously, and receive a brutally honest answer from an editor.

This month I'm going to talk about the greatest pitch I've ever heard. Recently I attended a multi-genre conference, and sat through about four hours of pitch sessions. Or, rather, I was supposed to sit through four hours of pitch sessions—about half the people never showed up.

(Here's a note to writers, both published and unpublished: one of the fastest ways to get yourself on my "Not Nice" list is to schedule an appointment with me and then not show up. Especially at 9 am.)

This was the last pitch of the day, and I was tired. In walks a man who says to me, "You don't know who I am, but you're my alpha and omega." That certainly caught my attention! He went on to tell me that when I first started out at Tor, I picked his fantasy novel out of the slush pile and passed it up the ladder.

I didn't remember him, but he remembered me—and he scheduled a pitch with me because he remembered me. He remembered what I liked about his book, and what I didn't like, and he had talked to the conference organizer about what I was acquiring now.

He did research! To make sure I was the right person for him to pitch to! Oh my!

Already I was thinking to myself, "This guy is a professional. And he's interesting."

Then he pitched his novel to me. It has a bunch of elements that I really like: angels, demons, vampires, hot sex, ambiguous morals. It was pretty obvious the book was almost tailor-made for me.

No where in this pitch was the book compared to any other books or any movies. It didn't have to be. I was given, immediately, only the information I needed to know about the hero: he's a vampire who isn't very powerful, but who is old enough that human blood can no longer keep him alive—

And it continued. This pitch was perfectly orchestrated to make sure that I had no superfluous information. The man kept eye contact with me the whole time. He was obviously excited about his writing and his book, and he allowed that excitement and passion to show through.

I knew I was going to request his full manuscript before the pitch was even half over.

I interrupted him several times to ask questions, and never once did he stumble. He knew his material backwards and forwards, knew everything about his characters, knew everything about the world he created. But he didn't try to give me all the information at once—he waited for me to ask questions, and then he elaborated. Why does human blood not sustain this vampire? How come he's not very powerful even though he's old?

He'd obviously rehearsed the pitch more than once, and he didn't take more than his allotted time. He was, in fact, done by the two-minute warning, leaving me ample time to say, "SEND IT. Now! As soon as possible!"

His excitement about the project was infectious. His persistence, that he didn't give up after his first manuscript was rejected—and the fact that he took his time and made sure his next project was the right project—assured me of his dedication to the craft of writing as well as an understanding of the business aspect of publishing. His knowledge about his project made him a professional. His understanding of what I, as an editor, am looking for, both within the genre he prefers, as well as in other genres, impressed me.

I was so impressed, in fact, that not only did I request the full manuscript, but I also called him into the smoking lounge later that evening to pitch his manuscript to a large group of conference attendees. They were all just as charmed as I had been.

I even listened to the pitch again—and then I wanted to read the book even more. He elaborated on several of his previous points, still only giving as much information as was necessary, rather than too much.

As he left, more than ten people vowed to buy his book as soon as it hit the shelves.

His wonderful, engaging pitch certainly doesn't guarantee that the book is good, interesting, or well-written—and the fact that I was so excited about his pitch doesn't mean I'm going to be able to buy the book even if it is good and interesting and well-written. But when that manuscript lands on my desk, I'm going to drop everything to read it.