

THE ART OF PITCHING

A Guide for Doc Filmmakers



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Framing Why Your Story Matters to Potential Partners and Funders

A Guide for Documentary Filmmakers
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INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! You have done the extraordinary work of making a film, and gone further by developing an impact vision and clear set of goals. The catalog page has all the key information folks need to know, but let's assume that most folks are going to just glance at it in advance.

The pitch cannot capture the entire story of your film or specific of your planned campaign, it can make folks want to see it, and put it to good use.

Think about the script as telling the story of a future in which your film contributes to positive change in the world. Whether you hope it leads to a specific outcome, or simply strengthen an existing movement, shift thinking, etc. your goal with the verbal pitch is to help the audience imagine that possibility and want to see your film in action.

Most pitch presentations in the documentary world are 7 minutes long, a good split is 4 minutes (give or take) to speak and 3 minutes for your trailer. The FIFDH is a series of one-on-one meetings lasting 25 minutes, so after introductions, plan to spend 7 minutes pitching, then have a solid 15+ minutes to talk with the representative.

I. TEN KEY QUESTIONS

We know that developing a complete impact strategy and campaign plan takes time, and you are likely still in the midst of making your film! You are already deep in process as evidenced by the Impact Statements in the FIFDH Catalog.

You may have already started working through the [Impact Field Guide](#), the [Fledgling Fund Impact Workbook](#) or other strategy guides, and downloaded the worksheets. If so, great!

We developed the following ten key questions to help you prepare to write your pitch script, and to have on hand as you meet with potential partners.

PROCESS TIP: For this exercise, do not try for perfect answers that might go in a grant application. Each of you should give yourself a few minutes for each question and write what comes to mind. Compare your answers. Note where you have different answers and need to get on the same page. Note where you have more research work to do.



But, don't do that work yet! Go ahead and gather your notes and move on to writing out your pitch script so you have a draft.

Just as your film changes over time, crafting an impact strategy and campaign is an interactive process. It will change as you hear back from potential partners and funders so that you shift your strategy to meet the needs of the movement or the organizations leading this work.

1. **What's the story** at the heart of your film? You need a logline that captures the imagination of the audience and invites curiosity, and tells us who we will meet. These are really, really hard to write.

Here are examples for the 2014 documentary *Virunga*, and our notes.

- "An inspiring documentary about four people who demonstrate heroism while trying to protect a wildlife sanctuary in the midst of a civil war."
 - This one is OK, but don't tell me it is inspiring, show me. If someone demonstrates heroism, why not call them heroic? And we don't know where this is happening.
- "Virunga tells the story of four characters fighting to protect Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, home to the world's last mountain gorillas, from war, poaching, and the threat of oil exploration."
 - This is a bit too much context, and the film is about people not 'characters.'
- "Virunga offers a heart-rending glimpse of natural wonders vulnerable to the atrocities of greed -- and the people devoting their lives to defending them."
 - This one is powerful and poetic, but doesn't offer enough context of where.
- "A team of brave individuals risk their lives to protect the last mountain gorillas."
 - Super short and effective if that's all the space you have. Would be good to know where it takes place. And 'natural wonders' might be more appealing to audiences who don't yet know they will love the mountain gorillas.
- A powerful combination of investigative journalism and nature documentary, *VIRUNGA* is the incredible true story of a group of courageous people risking their lives to build a better future in a part of Africa the world's forgotten, and a gripping exposé of the realities of life in the Congo.
 - This is from the film's website and it is perfect. It sets up drama at the human level, and tells us why this film matters - because this part of the world is otherwise forgotten in the media.

That said, this one is 50 words, if you don't have that much space, you could cut out the 'incredible true story' for a documentary pitch and call it an "investigative nature film."

- **Why you?** Why are you making this movie? And how do you fit into the story of change on this issue? Why you or your team in particular? What do you bring to this that no one else does? What's new about the approach or idea that your film brings to the issue(s) addressed in the film?

You may wish to directly address your relationship to the affected communities and/or your subjects. If you are part of that community and have direct experience, note that. If not, how have you addressed ethical concerns around representation and concerns about extractive filmmaking. Can you frame your approach to the impact work such that you are listening first and seeking to work in partnership with the relevant community rather than providing a solution they may not want?

Natalie Bullock Brown and Sonya Childress address these issues beautifully in "[The Documentary Future: A Call For Accountability](#)" in Documentary magazine.

2. **What is the problem** that will your film / campaign address? Can you state the problem succinctly? Is your film part of a larger social movement to address this problem? If so, what does your film bring to it? **Example:** "The Invisible War" a film about the proliferation of rape in the US military. The problem was that rape was all too prevalent but victims were both not taken seriously, or punished for speaking out due to the culture and chain of command structure within the military.
3. How will your film work as a media tool? The Impact Field Guide provides a terrific framework about the story environment and how different types of stories function. Some ideas: Raise awareness. Shine a light on an under-reported story or injustice. Shift public opinion or advance an alternative perspective on a big issue? Provide context to a story that is only narrowly understood.

PRACTICAL TIP: For your FIFDH pitches, try to use the theory of change or simply the language that is used by the group to whom you are pitching. For example: aid groups talk about capacity building; movement leaders talk about grassroots organizing; cultural strategists use the term "narrative shift."

4. Who are your target audience(s)?
Is the natural audience for your film the same as the audience you wish to influence?
 - Who holds power on this issue? Who influences them?

- Where are they likely to interact with your media? Reverse engineer where your audience 'lives' and how you can reach them.
 - Live events, conferences, email, twitter, Facebook, direct print materials? (technographics)
5. Where will general audiences see your film? (Distribution) Is theatrical actually important or simply desirable? Public TV or cable in the US? On-line distribution? How important is educational distribution and to what age groups? Note if you have some distribution agreements in place.
 6. Where will your campaign take place? (Scope of impact campaign).
Geographical: Regional, State, National, International...How does it differ from the geographical roll-out of the film? Knowing where the film can do the most good is key for the FIFDH pitch as you are talking to groups that have international constituencies.
Example: Skylight Pictures wanted to ensure that broad audiences in Guatemala were able to see their 2011 film '[Granito](#).' Much of that audience didn't have access to cable or broadband, so they gave it away. If allowing folks that sell pirated DVD's to sell the film in the local market gets it out to the community, then make sure they have good quality copies.
- TIP Beyond the Pitch: Consider how to ensure that your distribution partners allow you to get to the priority impact audience(s)?
7. Who are your ideal partners, and what do you offer them? This will require deep research, to identify organizations, funders, activists, academics, etc. right for you. Defining your impact audience, points to what kinds of partners and organizations you need to reach them. What do you offer to partner organizations?
 8. What tools do you need to reach and engage key audiences? Beyond the film itself, what about social media, a robust website, screening guide, campaign actions, short films or gifs, what makes sense for your particular film and campaign? These are on the menu for your impact options and could be one of your 'asks.'
 9. How will you define success and evaluate the impact of your campaign? You may not know this early on, but you will need to define it for funders. Ultimately success would be solving the problem, how might your film and campaign

Example: The ultimate goal of The Bully Project was to end bullying for children in schools, the meta goal was to create a culture where bullying is not acceptable. The impact goal was simple: reach 1 million kids with the film and the campaign.

II. AUDIENCE IS EVERYTHING

What do you know about the actual group of folks who are designated to hear and respond to your pitch? Can you contact them in advance to let them know you look forward to 'meeting' them? If not, get their email contact information asap and follow up with them!

TIP for the FIFDH pitch: Your audience has access to "influencers," and each organization has its own communications strategy. Their key question is how can this film help us engage key constituents and advance our goals. In follow-up conversations, ask about their priority audiences, or communications challenge, your film may be a great tool for them.

Audience Groups may include the following, your task is to define them relevant to your story and prioritize them for your campaign.

- o Public Opinion. But what public? Parents, registered voters, people who drive?
- o Policy makers, elected officials, and political influencers
- o Brands and companies that could become allies, or whom you want to change
- o Press and mainstream media
- o Influential non-profits who can affect change on the issue
- o Foundations/funders who can support your work or campaign beneficiaries
- o Online audience and affinity groups
- o Other audience specific to your story

III. TRAILER TIPS

First, let's acknowledge that there are multiple types of trailers, there's the trailer for the completed film, there's the trailer you send out to prospects and won't have the opportunity to introduce and broadcasters, funders, festivals may all have different length requirements. You're creating a pitching trailer, so you do get to introduce it and note essential context. I asked my friend Kristin Feeley—who is a genius at working with filmmakers and editors and is Deputy Director at the Sundance Documentary Film Program—for her thoughts. Here's her quick take:



“Length: visual material should be 3-4 minutes (or less) of a 7 minute pitch. It is tempting to let the sample carry the pitch but pitching is a balance of bringing the filmmaker forward along with the film. The sample provides a foundation from which the filmmaker emerges to explain what the film is and why they are the best person/team to tell it!

It's not called a "teaser" for nothing! The sample can give a sense of the film's tone and POV. It can offer a sense of cinematic language and possibility but it should leave you wanting to see more and also with questions you want to explore.

The visual sample doesn't have to tell the whole story! It should highlight the greatest strengths of the project and the aspects of the film that help it to stand out to funders (if character-based give a sense of access and a character's complexity and potential journey. If a survey, it should give a sense of scope and speak to the central question of the film. If it's a personal film it should clearly demonstrate the intimacy of the relationship with the filmmaker and POV of the film.”

This may seem obvious, she added “Note that anything you include should be mindful of legal and ethical issues. You should not include any footage that your protagonists would not want to be made public or put participants at risk so the trailer should be vetted both legally and ethically.”

In other words, be careful that the dramatic moments that you choose for the trailer do not inadvertently re-victimize your subjects.

DO'S

- Place a title card at the top but keep it up just long enough to read.
- Use multiple music cues.
- Use your best material! Don't hold back.
- If you plan to use this beyond the live pitch format:
 - Use an additional title card up top to place us in the location / time frame if that's not clear from the visual material.
 - Include key above-the-line names (director, producer, production company) and contact information at the end.
- Consider using a lower third to identify the main character(s) if they are not identified in audio.

DON'TS

- Do not use well-known music for which you do not have the rights. While it may serve to create just the right mood, an audience of film professionals will immediately wonder if you have the rights and that takes them out of the moment.
 - Do not use too many text cards throughout the trailer (other than open / close). Lots of text on screen might pull your audience out of the world of your story, so be judicious in how you use them.
-

IV. THE IMPACT DISTRIBUTION MENU

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Film campaigns offer organizations tremendous opportunity to power-up their communications and marketing efforts. Some potential outcomes include the following:

- Energize the base
- Bring new people to their issue (new demographic, etc.)
- Help reach new geographic area
- Raise money
- Find volunteers
- Educate about complex issues
- Humanize the issues
- Connect with other partners

NOTE: Obviously, this menu is not to be included in your pitch presentation! Look over the menu and determine what you need/want, and listen for what your potential partners need and want.

As filmmakers, Impact Strategists and Producers, Partner Organizations and Movement Leaders we all work off the same menu. Forging partnerships is all about finding what you have to share with each other. We can think about the options in overlapping phases and associated activities.

- A. Knowledge and Strategy
- B. The Film - Screening Opportunities.
- C. Ancillary content and activities
- D. Networks and Access
- E. Press and Media Influence



A. Knowledge and Strategy

NGO's and movement leaders have deep experience on the issues and can help the film team determine and refine campaign goals.

- Lead or host a brain-trust meeting to create coalition and attract foundation support
- Review impact strategy and provide insights and suggestions
- Keep each other apprised of changes on the ground as the situation evolves.

B. The Film - Screening Opportunities

- Private In-Person Events - Design and implement in-person events that reach the right audience in the right way.
- Private Online Screenings
- Public Screenings
- Theatrical Release
- Broadcast & Cable Release
- Streaming Media (Netflix, Amazon, Disney+ etc.)

C. Ancillary Marketing & Informational Content

- Short Video
- Website Content
- Social Network Messaging
- Direct Email
- Mobile messaging
- Customized Viewers Guide
- Guide for Educators
- Funding for creation of the above elements

D. Networks: access and relationships

- Access to influencers: provide the imprimatur of a recognized leader in the field National leadership that can connect to grassroots audiences
- Access to funders

E. Press, Earned Media and Influence

- Press Release
- Press Conference at an official event
- Quotes in press kit, or spokesperson for the film in certain contexts.

TIP for the FIFDH pitch: you have a series of 25 minutes one-on-one meetings with each organization. Can you tailor the three things to the organisations whom you are pitching?

THE RULE OF THREE

The rule of three appears in literature from its earliest beginnings and now in advertising and catch phrases. From the Latin: "omne trium perfectum" (everything that comes in threes is perfect) and "Veni Vidi Vici" (I came, I saw, I conquered, attributed to Julius Caesar) to "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) the motto of France and American marketing Just Do it (Nike). You can go down a rabbit hole in nearly every culture and discipline, but let's stick to the task at hand.

The outline for your pitch script is three parts: first, the introduction and context, then the sample media, and finally your impact vision and invitation to the pitch audience, aka your "asks."

We suggest that you limit yourself to three. Yes, you need more than three things, but best to refine your pitch for clarity, and make it memorable. If this feels too limiting, you may want to include the idea that you are open to suggestions and all opportunities to work with you to address this problem.



V. SCRIPTING YOUR PITCH

OK, you now have loads of information and greater clarity on what you need to prioritize. You have just a few minutes, which is a couple of pages to tell your story.

As you saw in the great sample 'Good Pitch' presentation for "The Silence of Others" from Almudena and Robert Bahar, the best pitch has a natural flow to it, and likely follows the following order.

CHECKLIST FOR YOUR SCRIPT

Beginning

- Your name(s) and where you are in the world
- Film title and your role in the project
- Logline for the film - story focused and memorable
- State the problem
- Intro the trailer: what context does the audience need?

Middle

PLAY THE TRAILER

End

- Trailer outro: what bears repeating, and what's left unsaid?
- Timeline: when will the film roll out and be available to partners. Note urgency or confluence with events relevant to folks you are pitching
- Priority audience for achieving impact
- Three things / actions you are seeking
- How can the pitch audience get in touch with you?
- Thank you!

TIP: Time yourself reading out loud. If it is too long, cut back, don't try to rush your presentation. Speak slowly (slower than might feel right to you) and clearly. If you are a native English speaker, your natural pace and accent may be too fast and localized for an international audience.

VI. PRACTICAL TIPS: YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

REFINING YOUR PITCH BEFORE THE BIG DAY

- Camera - frame yourself as you would an interview subject. Is your eye line aligned with the camera?
- Lighting - as above, consider buying a ring light as they are designed for
- Sound - a direct input is most reliable, apple earbuds work well and are less distracting than headphone wires, but be careful you can turn them off just by touching them. Go with in-ear headphones rather than a bulky headset.
- Test Your Tech: double check your wifi connection for video streaming, and hardwire your internet connection if possible.
- Personal Appearance - How would you dress as if you were going to a business event at the UN? What do you tell interview subjects not to wear? Go for a collared shirt, a soft color, muted pattern, you get the idea.
- Background - keep it simple and fairly clutter-free. Everyone loves a bookshelf in the background, and a plant provides a natural touch. If you have a poster for your film, why not hang it in the background?
- Script placement and eye line: for a live event, we recommend using note cards so you can flip through the key points and not be shuffling sheets of paper. For an on-camera pitch, you need your script to be aligned with the camera so you are not looking down. Consider placing the key text full screen in a large font. If you can memorize it great, but keep a copy of the key points nearby in case you get nervous in the moment.
- **Important Multi-Presenter Consideration & Tips**

Who speaks, when? Are you pitching solo, in a pair or more? If more than one person, will any of you be in the same place, or are you zooming in from multiple locations? The switch from one person to another affects the flow of the presentation, and creates opportunities for technical errors. An easy approach is to have one person intro the trailer, and another person do the outro and make the 'asks.'

 - Can you safely be in the same room? If so, great.
 - If you are in different locations, make sure your backgrounds are similar, so you look like part of the same team?
 - Make sure the production team can accommodate three different 'B-Square' (or Zoom) logins for your pitch, and that they know what order you plan to present.
 - If you are a team and the pitch is on line, go back and forth just once during the pitch to avoid potential tech errors or delays.



- Practice Makes Perfect

Why not record a practice pitch and watch it with a friend? Then fix what didn't work for you. Maybe you can use this recording again to send out to other potential partners?

Good luck with your pitch!

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Story Matters works with media makers and change makers to help craft the best possible presentations of their work. We provide consulting services in impact campaign strategy, media arts program creation and activation, fundraising and live event and meeting facilitation. We know that your story matters, and we are here to help you realize your vision and create impact.

The "Ten Key Questions" were originally developed for the [Good Pitch](#), a global program which provides a platform for the best new documentaries to partner with change makers and funders to create high-impact social justice impact campaigns.