

## **Pitching, Baseball, and Selling a Romance Novel**

**By Maggie Jaimeson**

All the multi-published authors I've talked to keep saying, "Pitching is an art. How well you do it depends upon two things: the idea behind your story and how well you present it." Great. That helps a lot. NOT!

I've given presentations to thousands of people, taught classes, run small groups, even acted in plays and a couple of movies. But I have to admit, I'm already stressing about doing the pitch at nationals. I know how important it is. This could garner me actual requests to send a partial or a whole manuscript and the request will be predicated not on my writing but on my presentation. This means I have to be charismatic, erudite, and witty all at the same time. And do it all within five to ten minutes. Yikes!

A pitch is a verbal synopsis of your book. It must convey characters, setting, time period, conflict, theme, and show how the characters will grow prior to the resolution. It does not tell the plot. The purpose of the pitch is to hook the editor or agent with the emotional appeal of your characters and the freshness of your story or the unique way you've handled an old idea. Think movie trailers, back cover blurbs with a resolution, or the one line reviewer blurb you want to see on your book. Then think delivering that blurb with the enthusiasm of a seasoned actress.

Okay. Now I'm way beyond scared. I'm paralyzed. When I get scared, I do research. I try to take control by planning and practicing. I've been talking to authors about this process, looking up articles, reading research about managing perceptions, and inundating myself with words. But it wasn't until a recent discussion with my oldest son, who happens to be a pitcher for a Division 1 college team, that I put it all together for myself.

What goes into a great baseball pitch? Sure there's all the years of mental and physical preparation—the constant practice until it becomes a part of your muscle memory. But what about when you are in the big game, facing down your opponent? My son told me two things that I think will really help: 1) Mental preparation: Know all the different types of pitches and which ones fit which batter. Should it be a fast pitch? A slider? A curveball? Knowing what to pitch has everything to do with knowing the other team and each batter's idiosyncrasies and your appearance of confidence. 2) Focus: Pitch to the catcher's glove. The catcher is on your side, is trying to help you, and is giving you cues throughout the game. Concentrate on the catcher, not the batter.

**Know the types of pitches—Know the buzz words and how they fit in the genre**

## Articles

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It used to be that the romance genre could be easily divided into three categories: contemporary, historical, and paranormal. Then within each of those categories you defined yourself as single-title (longer length) or category (about 60,000 words). That easy division doesn't apply anymore. Take a look at the eight categories defined by RWA for the Golden Heart and RITA awards and you will know where you have to start your pitch.

- Traditional
- Contemporary
- Inspirational
- Historical
- Regency
- Mainstream
- Suspense
- Paranormal

Once you've put yourself in a category or two, you also need to think about the length and where that fits. Do you write novellas? Short or long category? Or Single-title? Combine the novel type with the length, and then add a sub-category description or theme (e.g., Traditional with an Americana setting, Paranormal ghost story, Mainstream family relationships, Suspense FBI thriller) and you have the first line of your elevator pitch.

When someone asks me, "What do you write?" I'm going to answer, "I write single title contemporaries and romantic suspense with themes around healing from the past."

Okay, that part was easy, but what about the three line synopsis? I recently struggled to take a five to eight page synopsis and cut it down to two pages. I cry in frustration every time I have to write a cover letter with a two paragraph blurb for a new novel. How can I possibly get the essence of the story and characters into only three lines?

A writer who has been in RWA for a long time gave me a great article written in 1996 by Melissa Senate, a Silhouette editor. In it she listed several typical hooks and theme types. I've put it into a table and added a few of my own ideas.

<b>Book Hook</b>	<b>Theme Types</b>
Babies/kids	Abandoned, arranged, lost, adopted, biological, inherited, borrowed, secret, switched-at-birth
Single parents	Struggling, unwed, clueless, divorced, surrogate, blended families
Cowboys and	Think taming, wild, independent, quiet confidence

## *Articles*

western settings	
Amnesia or repressed memory	Marital status unknown, criminal background, parent, missing groom/bride, presumed dead, possible murderer
Twins	Different, identical, fraternal, switched identities, mistaken identities
Weddings	Marriage of convenience, fake fiancée, mail order bride, virgin bride/groom, runaway bride/groom, immigration status, royal, shot gun/forced marriage, left at the altar, terms of the will, by mistake, stop that wedding!
Reunion	Estranged, lost, thwarted, divorced, childhood friends, young lovers grown older, family arrangements, death of loved one
Unequal positions of power	Boss/secretary, royal/commoner, master/slave, house holder/staff, any combination where the lower position person wonders when they will be noticed
Bad boy/ bad girl	Challenge to tame, misunderstood, circumstances forced behavior, guilt drives change, opposites attract
Transformation	Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Pygmalion, Ugly Duckling, healing, overcoming long odds, naïve to worldly, untrusting to trusting, cynic to realist, pessimist to optimist
Fairy Tale	Sleeping Beauty, Snow White
Mismatched pair	Large age difference, wrong side of tracks, star-crossed, mentor/protégé, virgin/rogue, best friends/lovers, opposing occupations (arsonist/fire investigator), rolling stone/homemaker, country/city

The final part is describing the two main characters in the romance. By description, I do not mean a physical description. This characterization needs to somehow capture the person in a single phrase, revealing the conflict between them and showing both internal and external variables. I couldn't possibly list all the characterizations here, but I've given a start. As you read each word or phrase, think of the picture that forms in your mind. Is it enough to capture the essence of a character? Which words go together to summarize the internal and external essence?

Down on his luck

Arrogant

Guilty

Rough-and-tough outside, soft inside

Dependable

Untrusting

Hypnotic

Dedicated

Cynic with a soft heart

Disillusioned

Dependable

Too good to be true

Intelligent

Sensitive

Naïve

Misunderstood

My first try at this was to recoil from the thought of describing a clichéd character. But then I realized that certain catch phrases do form a common bond of understanding.

So, here's my first stab at a three line pitch for my novel *Undertones*.

*Undertones* is a single-title contemporary romance about healing and letting go of the past to embrace a difficult but ultimately rewarding future. Faced with a Hobson's choice between building a musical career or finding true love, Michele Scott learns that persistence is the bond that bridges the two when she meets Jason Blackstone, a man with roguish charm and a never-give-up attitude. Set in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest and the milieu of bluegrass music, a small town farm girl and a big city entrepreneur learn to find a balance between careers and love that requires both trust and commitment.

This may not be the perfect pitch yet, but it does most of what I want. It provides all the information for category, novel length, theme, conflict, characterization, setting, and shows the characters will grow. Now, I have to work on making every word sing and then practice the verbal delivery.

### **Research your opponent and approach with confidence—Research the editors or agents and be passionate about your work**

Learn which editors and agents will be at the conference and find out everything you can about them. Here's my list of research tasks:

1. Look them up on the web. Google their name and see who they represent, what books have been sold/published with that person. Look for websites describing their company, practices, likes or dislikes
2. Look them up in Publisher's Marketplace. Authors will often name their editor or agent with the sale of a book. Track what they've bought/represented.
3. Look them up in the Romance Writer's Report. I plan to go back through every issue I have and see when they were mentioned and in what context.
4. Ask author's at local RWA chapters and ask on mail loops. Someone is bound to know the person and be able to give you the inside scoop. Discover who is acquiring and in what categories. For example, an editor for contemporaries and paranormals may be over-inventoried in paranormals right now. That means you want to only pitch your contemporary to him or her. Don't waste your time or theirs on pitching a paranormal.

Most important, be sure what types of books that editor or agent buys/represents. You don't want to pitch your great historical to an editor who only buys contemporary paranormals.

When you walk into that meeting, present yourself with confidence and professionalism. Here are some key pointers for any presentation.

1. Be on time and be prepared. Arrive ten minutes before your appointment, so you can enter the room exactly on time.
2. Dress appropriately. You don't have to wear a suit, but don't wear jeans and an advertising t-shirt either.
3. Greet the editor or agent with a smile, thank him or her for their time and introduce yourself.
4. Plan to improvise. What will you do if you fumble the pitch? How will you recover?
5. Have more than one pitch ready. It might be that the first novel you pitch doesn't excite the person, so have a pitch ready for another novel you've completed or are working on.
6. The 'leave behind'. If they don't ask to see a partial or your novel, ask them if they are interested. Hand out a business card with your novel name and, if possible, a website.

Remember the editor or agent is looking for a great idea and for a writer who wants a career. It is often said that there is no new plot or idea in novels. That means the passion and manner of your presentation is what will make it great or fresh. In a pitch meeting, your writing ability comes second. If the editor likes your idea, he or she may be willing to work with the writing to make it better. It takes a lot of time and effort to make a new author commercially successful, no matter how well you write. So, it's not only this one book that you are pitching, but the belief that you are able to produce many subsequent books, build a readership, and grow your career.

### **Build muscle memory—Practice, practice, practice**

This is the easiest one for me. Once you get your pitches down in writing, say them aloud every day. Ask friends and family to listen and give feedback. Then, practice and be prepared for success. When the editor or agent says, "Sounds interesting, tell me more," you better have more to say.

Again, I turned to published authors with the question. "Then what do I do?" They said the key is to be prepared and enthusiastic. If they want to hear more, go back to the plot. Summarize it by keeping to the character arc. Describe the first meeting, two or three

turning points in the middle, the moment when all seems lost, and then finish with the climactic resolution that will make the reader sigh or get a tear in her eye.

As the time for the pitch meetings gets closer, ask members of your local RWA chapter to listen to your pitch and then follow-up with questions. Role play the whole meeting over and over again, varying the questions, the personalities, the outcome.

Okay, I'm feeling better now. How about you? With lots of practice, I think I can actually pull this off and make a good impression.

### **Pitch to the glove—Editors and agents really are on your side**

Remember, the editors and agents taking appointments at nationals are there because they really DO want to buy/represent a good manuscript. They really do want to see you succeed. So pitch straight to the glove. If needed, picture your best friend or your writing partner in that chair. Talk to him or her from your heart.

So, wind up your pitching arm. Practice your pitches in writing on the Diva forum, then build that muscle memory with friends, family, and other RWA members. Practice pitching more than one book and be sure to practice expanding on an idea when asked questions. Then pitch straight to the glove.

We'll be waiting to hear how it went. I'm expecting good news from every attendee--a request for a partial or full. As for me, I'm practicing my sliders and curveballs—no fast balls for me.