

Shapeshifting: Letting a project evolve, from conception to delivery

Don't assume you've got a story – and then go ask for records. Ask for records – and then see if you've got a story. And when it comes time to pitch your editor, don't pitch an idea. Pitch a story that you've already started developing.

Be wary of conventional wisdom. “People won't read long stories.” That's the CW – and it's pap. People won't read stories if they're long and boring. People won't read stories that are short and boring, either.

When it comes time to frame a story or project, be bold. Don't limit yourself at the outset. Experiment. If it doesn't work, you'll find out soon enough.

Don't assume that your paper won't go for a particular story.

If you've got an idea for an approach, try it. Write it. Write it fast. Don't noodle. Then share what you've written with other folks in the newsroom. Solicit lots of readers, early on. Learn quickly if your approach is working or has sufficient promise.

Talk with your editor – early and often. Enthusiasm's infectious. Let your editor share in the joy of discovery. Don't wait until the writing starts to let your editor help you.

Even if you think a particular element of a story or project is dead, don't be afraid to continue reporting it out. You might find something that resurrects it.

Don't feel the need to hoard. If you've got something good that you can break off and run before your big story or project, do it. Prime the pump.

Very long stories or non-traditional projects work if they are tightly conceived in story, structure and theme. Sturdy architecture carries the weight.

Too often, projects sag under the weight of formula: overview (with bullets); the case study; the solutions. Don't assume that your project needs to have all – or any – of these elements.

Afterward, track what worked – and what didn't. Try to learn from each story and project.