

A freelancer's guide to solutions journalism

Journalists are often tasked with reporting on crises, problems and what's going wrong in the world. Investigating the people, places and communities that are instead exploring solutions to some of these issues offers a different approach. For freelancers, **it's a chance to stand out in an editor's busy inbox and a field full of training resources and career development opportunities**. Freelancers who report on solutions to social challenges may find new angles to stories that can separate them from the crowd, find new commissions or establish them as experts in their field through rigorous reporting.

What is solutions journalism?

The Solutions Journalism Network offers the following definition of solutions journalism:

- can be character-driven, but **focuses in-depth on a response to a problem** and how the response works in meaningful detail;
- **focuses on effectiveness**, not good intentions, presenting available evidence of results;
- **discusses the limitations** of the approach;
- seeks to **provide insight** that others can use.

It recommends using the **WHOLE framework** to structure your reporting:

W	What is the response to the problem you're looking at?
H	How does the response work?
O	Offers insight
L	Limitations included
E	Evidence of impact

Useful common structures and formats for SJ stories are available here →



Why it matters

1



When done well, solutions journalism offers valuable, rigorously reported insights to communities on **how to tackle problems**.

2



It can lead to **meaningful change**, whether that's prompting a change in discourse or a new direction of discussion relating to a problem; or inspiring action in audiences and decision-makers within communities.

3



In a 2017 Reuters Institute study, **48% of respondents said they avoided news** because it can have a negative effect on their mood, while 28% said it was because they felt there was nothing they could do about it.

4



News avoidance is a problem for the journalism industry and democracy as it affects people's knowledge of society and their political engagement.

5



Research suggests that audiences prefer, engage more deeply with and are more likely to **trust solutions-focused stories** than problem-focused reporting.

6



Younger audiences show a desire for **news that provides solutions** and not just problems.

What every freelancer needs to know

Where to start

The SJN recommends **identifying an issue or question of concern**. If the questions it prompts are “what could be done about this?” or “who is doing a better job handling this problem?” then it could be a good topic for a solutions journalism story. In your research you might look for new and notable responses to a problem or locations that are dealing with an issue better than others.

Alongside your journalistic judgement of what makes a good story, you’ll also need to ascertain if there’s evidence of the solution’s success, how credible that evidence is and what lessons can be learned from this approach. This can be a useful way to make a story about a specific community relevant to different, outside audiences.

“Solutions journalism needs to have the qualities to focus on our locality but have takeaways that can apply everywhere,” says [Shafi Musaddique](#), a freelance journalist and Britain and Ireland correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*.



Expert tip

“Identify three to five areas of interest or curiosity,” says freelance journalist [Anne Pinto-Rodrigues](#), whose solutions journalism has been published by *The Guardian*, *Yes! Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and more.

“Tap into your previous life, whether you were a student or have other life or work experience; talk to family and friends, tell them this is what you’re looking to do, so if they have examples they can share those with you.”

Musaddique refers to three principles employed by the *Christian Science Monitor* which provide a good approach to solutions reporting. Think of including the following in your story: understanding others – where is the common humanity of the story? Where are we seeing compassion, fairness or responsibility?; models of thought – what has led to this particular development or achievement? How has this shift changed what is possible?; and paths to progress – has a problem like this been solved before? What progress can be reported?

Make sure the solution is genuine

News of solutions to problems can be uplifting and inspiring, however, as journalists, we need to make sure we interrogate the solution we’re reporting on to ensure it’s **genuine**. Drawing attention to problematic solutions could do more harm than good.

Don’t exaggerate the scope of a solution and its impact in your pitch, recommends Nina Fasciaux, international coordinator and Europe manager for the SJN. Show its complexity and the evidence you’ve found of its impact.



Expert tip

You need to take responsibility for ensuring the solution you’re reporting on is real, says Pinto-Rodrigues. For example, take the idea of roads paved with plastic as a solution to waste – in extreme heat in African countries or India these roads would melt causing plastic to disintegrate and potentially leech into the groundwater and soil, she explains.

Before you proceed, get insight from somebody who’s familiar with the solution but was not involved in it directly, she says. Adopt a critical mindset – especially if a solution seems too good to be true – and invest time in understanding the full context of the solution.

Identify grants and dedicated publications



Where to pitch story ideas is often the biggest challenge for a freelance journalist and knowing whether a publication is open to solutions reporting can be tricky. If you are new to solutions journalism, you might try outlets with dedicated solutions or constructive journalism series, such as *The Guardian’s Upside*, the BBC’s *People Fixing Things*, *The New York Times’ Fixes* column or *CityLab’s Solutions* vertical. There are also some dedicated titles such as *Positive News*, *Reasons to be Cheerful*, *Nice-Matin* and *YES! Magazine*. [The SJN has a list of publications accepting pitches here](#).

There is also a range of grant programmes focused on solutions journalism, so take advantage of this wave of interest and apply for funding for your story ideas.

Good solutions reporting means looking at limitations too



When reporting on a solution, you need to **look at its limitations** too. This can be challenging: maybe the people involved don’t see the limitations, want to share them or even fully understand them yet. Speak with a range of people involved in the project or initiative. Seek external sources too who can help you assess the solution and its potential, as well as limitations, from an independent perspective.

Expert tip

Reporting on the limitations of a solution is necessary for a strong story, but it can leave your subject, who is trying to do something good, dejected, acknowledges Fasciaux: “Have a conversation with the people you’re interviewing, explain that their story will be a lot more impactful and legitimate if you show the challenges and the difficulties that they went through.”

The limitations to a solution might be financial, geographic, barriers to replicating the solution elsewhere, what it is yet to achieve or an unanticipated risk.

“This is why it’s so important to talk with experts on specific topics to have a clearer idea of what the limitations can be because if you’re just interviewing the one who is implementing the solution, you won’t get a full idea of what the limitations are,” says Fasciaux.

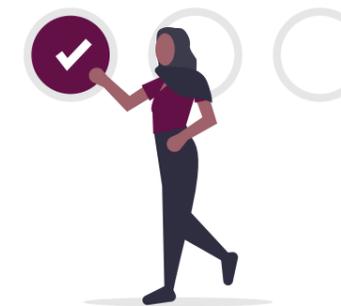
Join a community of practice

Pinto-Rodrigues says solutions reporting helps **keep her hopeful** as both a person and a journalist. Joining solutions journalism groups and forums online offers peer-to-peer support and mentoring too. “The benefit of joining a community of practice is that it broadens your perspective, your understanding of the topics you’re covering and you learn from peers all over the globe,” says Fasciaux.

Expert tip

The SJN runs free, monthly brainstorming sessions to develop solutions journalism story ideas. There is no agenda; the objective is to give and receive feedback and tips from other journalists. Freelance journalist [Priyanka Shankar](#), who has reported for *Deutsche Welle*, *Al Jazeera*, *Are We Europe* and more, has participated in these sessions and taken part in an SJN mentoring scheme, where she received peer support from other journalists working on similar beats. “It helps because, being a freelancer, most of the time you are working alone. It’s really nice to have a fresh pair of eyes and a peer to help you who isn’t a mentor.”

Be specific



This is important in both **defining the problem and solution** on which you’re reporting and the context in which it is working. “If you’re talking about climate change, saying ‘solutions to climate change’ doesn’t mean anything,” says Fasciaux. “What are we talking about? Air pollution? Again there are slices of different problems within air pollution.”

Be precise about what this specific solution addresses and its complexities, as well as where and exactly how it applies. Those circumstances or context might not be the same elsewhere which will affect how another community might adopt a solution.

If your reporting uncovers multiple responses to a problem that work in different ways, you might need to pitch a series of stories in order to give each solution the same rigorous treatment.

Expert tip

Pinto-Rodrigues recalls reporting on bee fences created on some farms in India as a way to reduce conflict between elephants and farmers: “We had lots of people who said, we tried the fences and it doesn’t work, but that’s because it’s not in the right environment or context. It’s critical to understand and explain in your piece the context in which the solution works.”

Start with the problem, says Fasciaux: “The definition of the problem that the response is trying to solve is really key. You cannot omit the problem; the more precisely you can define it, the more relevant your story will be.”

Applying solutions journalism to complex topics

The solutions journalism approach can help journalists explore topics and report on stories that are **complex, polarising or contentious**, and which might not have obvious solutions, says [freelance journalist Shankar](#).

The [Complicating the Narratives model](#) is a framework based on conflict mediation methods designed by the SJN to encourage more nuanced and inclusive reporting on divisive issues. It includes [ideas for different questions to ask during your interviews](#). “You use conflict mediation techniques to report, including listening deeply,” says Shankar. “You constantly embrace complexity through listening deeply and that helps you uncover the underlying motives and then eventually you get to the solution.”

Solutions journalism can “give your readers a constructive space to wrestle with different and difficult issues,” says Musaddique. Journalists reporting on solutions need a “nuanced understanding” that progress on a problem won’t always be material – a quantifiable figure, for example – but might be immaterial: “I think we need to veer away from that very rigid idea of solutions journalism. Go back to values and always seek to strengthen and enlighten people.”

Pitching a solutions story

If you follow our advice to be specific, you’ll need to show in your pitch **why the audience of this publication should care** especially if it focuses on an effort outside of their community. You’ll also need to show evidence of the response’s impact, including its breadth and depth. The evidence can be qualitative or quantitative and even from similar initiatives elsewhere so long as it’s referenced in your pitch. Acknowledging the limitations of the response will also add weight to your pitch.

When setting out how you will report the story, don’t just focus on those involved in the response; suggest experts, scholars, experts and those affected by the solution as possible interviewees. This is good practice and will help convince editors sceptical of solutions stories.



Expert tip

SJN co-founder [Tina Rosenberg](#) also notes how she seeks to understand the response’s replicability in the pitches she reviews: “For the Fixes column, the best solutions story pitches often have four ingredients. They show that the idea is (1) innovative, (2) replicable, (3) backed by evidence, of whether or not the response worked, and (4) is worth showing and learning from.”

Avoid advocacy

Solutions journalism isn’t about advocating for a specific response or about proposing a solution that doesn’t yet exist. **Stick to the evidence** and don’t over claim or over promise about a solution, says Fasciaux. Make sure you have the qualitative or quantitative evidence that shows the response is working.

Report on what is happening rather than declaring a permanent fix to a problem. Good solutions reporting should be nuanced, exploring the solution’s successes and failures, showing where there’s support and scepticism and where there’s more than one response to a problem. You’re looking for a good story not to “find” the ultimate solution.

Including the limitations of a solution in your report will also steer you away from advocating for a particular solution above others and allow you to report on solutions that are interesting but might only be partially effective.

Expert tip

Think about the vocabulary you use, says Fasciaux, even the term solution can suggest that a response to a problem is indisputable or permanent: “Let your reader make their own conclusions about whether it’s a good or bad response. It’s not about saying, this is working, and we should all be doing this, but rather that these are the responses out there to this problem and then providing this information for your audience, so they can make the best possible decision for themselves.”

Don’t ‘silo’ solutions reporting

The solutions journalism approach is applicable to most stories and reporting beats, says Fasciaux – treating it as something separate might put off editors unfamiliar with the concept. Reframe it as reporting on responses to problems as opposed to finding a positive story.

Expert tip

“The central crux of solutions journalism is what values are at play and what values are at stake. News and news events are driven by the worldviews of those involved, so instead of reporting on just events – saying this and that happens – it’s more about analysing thoughts and ideas, to help make sense of what’s happening,” says freelance journalist Musaddique, who has applied solutions journalism thinking to a diverse range of topics, from [legislation to protect victims of domestic abuse](#) to [the European Super League](#).

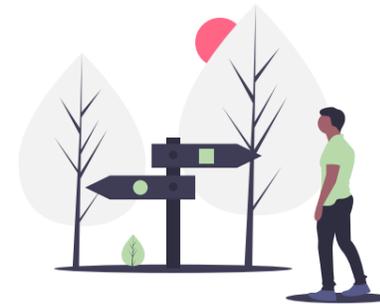
“My piece wasn’t about football, it was about the nature of capitalism, about the process of history. It [solutions journalism] asks if there is a different perspective to a story that people think they know. It can tap into the overlooked nuance that’s missing from the public discussion.”

Look backwards as well as forwards

By its very nature, a focus on solutions can often lead to a fixation on the future and how an initiative might change a community or place, or meet a problem. Looking at how people approached problems and **introduced solutions in the past** can, however, be a rich seam of story ideas.

“Seek to understand the complex structural and historical inequities that have created existing problems,” writes [Tara Pixley](#) on solutions photojournalism. Your reporting can share lessons from past responses to crises and problems and help inform the solutions of the present and future.

“Solutions are in flux; they’re never definitive,” explains Musaddique. Having an understanding of the historical context relevant to your solution or the particular geographic location of your story is often lacking in solution stories at the moment, he says: “It’s all very based in modernity and going forward, which is important but there’s a need to look back at history and tap into good academic sources, rigorous historical archives and speak to people on the ground – those things are essential to solutions journalism.”



Expert tip

If you’re reporting on a problem that doesn’t have a solution now, you can look in the past, see how it was approached then and make a comparison, says Shankar. [When reporting on funerals and repatriation of bodies during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), she looked at how deaths and repatriations had been handled at the height of the AIDS crisis to discuss potential solutions. This approach also creates scope for a follow-up story when a contemporary solution is developed.

Take inspiration from other solutions reporting

Look at solutions stories that have already been published, solutions-focused publications and the [SJN’s Solutions Story Tracker](#) for inspiration. What stories might benefit from an update? What regions haven’t been covered? What solutions might apply to communities where you are? Familiarising yourself with solutions reporting will not only spark ideas but also help you understand what good, balanced reporting on solutions looks like and the story elements required. It can also help you identify which publications might be open to solutions-based pitches.

Journalists can submit their published stories to the tracker. If they don’t get accepted, don’t worry – you’ll still get feedback on what aspects of solutions reporting were missing from your story or could be strengthened.



Expert tip

Pinto-Rodrigues says she has used the story tracker when researching story ideas and during reporting. [When reporting on food security and farming millet in rural India](#), she could search by geography and find out what solutions were being applied in different regions. It’s a good way to find expert sources on problems and solutions too. There’s even [a database of solutions leads here](#).

Musaddique recommends looking at your own life and values in relation to complex problems for story inspiration – it means you’ll be even more invested in finding and interrogating the solutions in your reporting.

Applying a solutions lens can be a new way to tell an old or ongoing story, for example mass shootings in the USA, migration or climate change, by looking at where solutions are being tried out in response to a problem, adds Fasciaux.

Resources from the Solutions Journalism Network

Basic toolkit – SJN	>	SJN Guide – reporting on health	>
Solutions Story Tracker – SJN	>	SJN Guide – reporting on violence	>
Solutions Journalism – Facebook group	>	SJN Guide – reporting on education	>
Solutions Journalism Talent Network for Freelancers – SJN	>	Thinking Inclusion + Equity in Solutions Photojournalism – Tara Pixley	>
How to report on solutions remotely – SJN	>	Integrating Solutions Journalism into your workflow (and short stories) – SJN	>
Solutions journalism and datajournalism – SJN	>		