HOW TO PITCH THE WAR HORSE

To pitch for The War Horse, we ask that you submit a potential narrative lede, as well as a nut graf, a “War Horse graf,” and a source list.

You’ve seen most of this before, but we find that every newsroom defines a “nut graf” differently, so we break it down a bit more so you know exactly what we’re talking about. We use “War Horse graf” so you know what your editor’s talking about if she asks you to develop that out a bit.

We love pre-editing, and this is part of it. It keeps everyone on track, allows us to pitch your story to other news organizations, and keeps you organized. (We write, too. We know how it feels to end up with a notebook dump and too many hours’ work. We’d love for you to feel well-organized and happy through the process, even if it means doing a mini outline. We promise it’s not as bad as the one Mrs. Kolanowski made you write in fourth grade.)

After we have the pitch and the organization, we can play with it more. It’s possible it’s more of a plot-points story than a section-by-section story. But even plot-point stories need a “War Horse graf” up top to entice the reader to keep going.

This is working for us, too. We have extraordinarily long read rates, which means once someone clicks on your story, they stick around. Nobody’s got time to do all that work and not have a long read time, right?

Your editor is always happy to talk through this -- listen to what you’ve got and help you come up with the main points. That can be when you pitch it, and then throughout as you do your interviews, find something interesting, or hit a snag.

So. The pitch:
THE WAR HORSE PITCH

1. A potential narrative lede: (As usual, this is not set in stone. You can also make it up a bit—what you expect your source to tell you.) This can be a person's experience, or someone who fought for change, or whatevah. Set it up as long as it needs to be (we're long-form, so it doesn't have to be quick, but it does need to be compelling).

2. A nut graf: Why is this important? What's the main big point? Why are you telling us this story?

3. A War Horse graf: This story is about 1) Section one  2) Section two 3) Section three. It's three or four quick sentences: Women often refused to report sex crimes because rapists often received punishments that didn't seem to fit the crime, past attempts at reform caused some commanders to focus on brushing assault cases under the rug, and reform won't be easy. Or something. You don't have to give details, just a general idea of what you'll be writing about. If it's a plot-point story, it could be something like, “Ultimately, her decision would lead to a murder.” In other words, you don't have to give away the game--but hint at why the reader should push through the next 742 (or however many) paragraphs.

When it's time to write the story, use that War Horse graf as an outline. We can play with the formula for sure, but after we get the pieces in place. Even a narrative story should have that bit of a tease--I've given some examples below.

4. A source list: three or four people to immediately call to report out this story.
SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES

1. How the Marine Corps Struck Gold in a Trash Heap During the Defense Department’s Fight Against Climate Change by Sonner Kehrt


Narrative lede:

For years, Marines at Air Station Miramar, a busy Marine Corps installation in Southern California, knew they were sitting on something precious: an enormous pile of trash. For more than six decades, the Navy had leased land to the city of San Diego for the Miramar Landfill, which collects nearly a million tons of garbage a year. As organic material in a trash heap breaks down, it produces methane. Methane is a greenhouse gas, and landfills emit substantial amounts of it across the country—the equivalent of tens of millions of cars on the road for a year. But if the Marines could collect and treat that methane, it could be used as a renewable energy source. “We knew back then that that was a resource that could be used to power the air station in an emergency,” says Mick Wasco, the utilities and energy management director at the air station.

So in 2012, Air Station Miramar tapped into the trash pile. Working with an energy partner who helped provide methane gas from the landfill to parts of San Diego, engineers at the air station began to pull in methane to provide energy for the base, as well. Today, the air station gets nearly half of its power from landfill methane gas.

But the methane has also made something else possible: complete energy independence.

The methane gas supply, combined with solar energy, a diesel and natural gas plant, and battery storage, means the air station can remove itself completely from the outside power grid. Its separate microgrid will allow it to operate all mission-critical equipment and even serve as a
hub for nonmilitary emergency personnel if wildfires or heat-induced blackouts knock out power to San Diego.

“We’ll be able to operate for 21 days all of our flight line and all of our critical loads without any external fuel supply,” Wasco says of the microgrid. “Everybody and their mother wants one.”

**Nut Graf(s):** Projects like this exist all across the Department of Defense—from initiatives as small as replacing thousands of conventional light bulbs with LED bulbs to systematically assessing the threats climate change poses to every major military installation. For years, reports from the Pentagon and from outside agencies have warned that without proper planning, U.S. military bases and personnel will be left exposed to and unprepared for the coming climate crisis. Because of this, projects like Air Station Miramar’s microgrid have proliferated, despite climate-related whiplash between administrations.

In January, President Joe Biden released an [executive order positioning climate change](https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/cea/executive-order-on-climate-change/) at the center of U.S. national security, which means officials will spend even more energy and attention on programs that help prepare the world’s largest military for possibly the greatest threat it has faced.

“It really represents a new chapter in awareness of the climate crisis and its impact on DOD,” says Sherri Goodman, who served as the first U.S. deputy undersecretary of defense, environmental security, and who is a senior fellow at the Wilson Center and a senior strategist at the Center for Climate and Security. “I think they’re very deadly serious.”

**War Horse Graf(s):** Climate change isn’t only about the environment: Climate change makes everything the military already worries about worse. A shrinking polar ice cap doesn’t just mean thinking about polar bears. It means thinking about geopolitical dynamics and national security, as China and Russia build up their icebreaker fleet. It means thinking about humanitarian and environmental emergencies, as people move away from northern villages sinking into the permafrost and oil tankers start to transit through the Northwest Passage. Melting ice north of Alaska means higher sea levels in Miami.

“It really put climate on the map for DOD,” Goodman says.

Sonner then wrote her story using that paragraph to organize sections—she wrote more about each of the things she mentioned in her War Horse graf.
2. Gulf War Illness Treatments Discovered. Will Veterans Affairs Officials Listen Now? by Kelly Kennedy

https://thewarhorse.org/gulf-war-illness-healthcare-treatments-discovered-veterans-affairs-officials/

This is a long, complicated story, but the set up is essentially the same.

**Nut graf(s):** The stress of battle, wonky immune system response after exposure to smoke and dust, and high heat levels may have increased the problems for some people, but ultimately, those factors did not matter: The research shows exposure to AChE inhibitors causes the series of symptoms experienced by Gulf War veterans, Sullivan said.

When the researchers realized those acetylcholine messages were not getting through for veterans who had served in Desert Storm, Sullivan said they coined a term more recent veterans may be familiar with: toxic wounds.

**War Horse graf(s):** But even though the researchers say they suspected early on what caused Gulf War illness, three decades’ worth of frustrations followed, reading like conspiracy theories from a crime novel: misleading claims from Veterans Affairs that the veterans' issues were psychological rather than physical; VA officials’ refusals to look at animal research or research that didn’t include a defined dose of toxins—a requirement researchers classify as impossible; the government releasing the information five years after the fact that a cloud of sarin gas had made its way to the troops; and, to this day, an acrimonious relationship between advocates for the sick veterans and VA that includes battles over even the name of the series of ailments that struck the veterans: Gulf War illness.
3. Mystery Seizures Haunt Marine Units a Decade after Deployment by Amanda Miller


**Nut graf(s):** “I woke up after in the hospital,” he said, “and I knew my career was done for.”

By this time, he’d heard about two more Marines from his unit of 29 people with “something going on strange that looked like a seizure-related event.” They had deployed with him and Bengtson both times.

None of the four interviewed knows why the seizures started, when the next one will occur, or whether they’ll ever stop.

**War Horse graf(s):** Though military neurologists expected a wave of seizures after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they couldn’t have known that this generation’s injuries would differ from those of previous generations. And there does appear to be a surge in seizures—but they’re not what experts originally expected. Both mild traumatic brain injuries caused by blasts, rather than blunt force, and post-traumatic stress emerged as the silent, signature injuries of these wars, and the seizures associated with each can differ significantly from those associated with injuries of past wars, and, possibly, with each other. Add to the mix seizures potentially caused by toxins from burn pits and other hazards, and easy answers can be difficult to find.

Understanding the seizures provides the key to diagnosing them—and to treating them.
4. Senior Marine Corps Counsel Ridicules Sexual Assault Survivor at Court-Martial Hearing by Thomas Brennan


Nut graf: The major’s perceived mockery was among many apparent failures during the hearing, showcasing a lack of professionalism and respect among Marine leaders that has transformed Cpl. Ohu from a Marine—innocent until proven guilty—to a courthouse laughingstock. Her defense attorneys argued in court and during interviews with The War Horse that Marine leaders have repeatedly disregarded not only Ohu’s physical and mental well-being, but her right to a fair trial. Capt. Samuel M. Stephenson, a Marine spokesman who witnessed the event alongside two other subordinate service members, described the behavior as “inappropriate,” especially for a senior commissioned officer, yet stood idly by and did not correct the behaviors. Both Marine officers declined multiple requests for comment.

War Horse graf: Since Ohu’s court-martial hearings began, the Corps has tried to deny media access to Ohu’s case—an issue that came up in the courtroom when reporters did not have clear access to part of the hearing as a result of a poor video feed in the auxiliary room. Naval investigators didn’t perform a full investigation of her sexual assault. The Corps denied the mental health treatment Ohu needed and halted her medical retirement. The brig has denied Ohu sufficient access to her lawyers and basic legal accommodations like privacy and the recording devices they say are necessary to prepare their case. During Ohu’s latest hearing, the judge denied her lawyer’s request to bring on a private investigator. And now, Ohu’s defense team says the Corps is unnecessarily working to move Ohu’s trial more than 300 miles away from her attorneys in Washington and the journalists covering her court-martial.