



A Freelance Writer's Guide to the *Texas Observer*

Background

The *Texas Observer* is an Austin-based nonprofit news organization known for fearless investigative reporting, narrative storytelling and sophisticated cultural criticism about all things Texan.

Since 1954, the *Observer* has covered issues that are often ignored or underreported by other media. We strive to expose injustice and to produce the kind of impact journalism that changes people's lives for the better. Our thoughtful arts and culture coverage recognizes the diversity and talent of Texas' creative community.

Frequency: Bimonthly (six print issues per year) and daily (online)

Lead time: 2-3 months for print stories; typically much faster for online stories

How and what to pitch

Send your pitch to editors@texasobserver.org, where it'll be seen by editor-in-chief Forrest Wilder, digital editor Kolten Parker and managing editor Rose Cahalan.

We do our best to respond to pitches in a timely manner and to provide useful feedback, but don't hesitate to follow up if it's been more than a week.

The best pitches are thoroughly researched, timely and tailored to the *Observer*. Before you hit send, ask:

- Have I done a news search to see how the *Observer* and other publications have covered this topic and similar topics in the past?
- Have I explained why now is the right time to do this story?
- Have I shown why I'm the right writer for this story?
- Have I explained who key characters/sources will be and what as-yet-unanswered questions the story will ask?

- Have I suggested a headline and subhead? Editors love this, as it shows you can quickly distill the essence of the story.
- Have I proofed my pitch for clarity, spelling and grammar?

What not to pitch

- Stories that are outside the *Observer's* scope of coverage, such as poppy fare or business writing (for example, we don't do restaurant reviews or tech reporting)
- Stories that overlap with previous coverage
- Stories that are too Austin-centric. Though we're based in Austin, we strive to cover the entire state. Stories and writers from less-covered parts of Texas tend to get a bit of an edge. If you're in, say, El Paso, Brownsville or Nacogdoches, we want to hear from you!

Types of stories

- Short news stories: 500 - 1,000 words, these can be a good way to get your foot in the door. See Sasha von Oldershausen on [Election Day in Presidio](#), Patrick Michels on [Texas' textbook wars](#), Gus Bova on a [post-election protest](#).
- Political commentary and opinion: 500 - 1,000 words on a timely political topic. See Andrea Grimes on [resisting Trump](#), Chris Hooks on [Child Protective Services](#).
- Features: 1,500 - 4,000 words, on a wide range of subjects, from profiles to criminal justice to education to the environment. See Jake Whitney on [moral injury](#), Eric Benson on Texas Supreme Court Justice [Don Willett](#) and Dick Reavis on the [elderly in prison](#).
- Culture features: 2,000 - 3,500 words on a timely, substantive topic within the realm of Texas arts and culture. See Brad Tyer on [Pecos River pictographs](#) and Robyn Ross on [public art in San Antonio](#).
- Essays: 1,000 - 1,500 words, combining a first-person experience with one of our beats, grounded in a specific time and place in Texas. See Sarah Smarsh [on the working class and her father](#), James McWilliams on how the [1 percent gardens in Houston](#).
- Postcards: 2,000 - 3,500 words, these are feature-length arts or culture stories in which place plays a prominent role. They need not always be tied to a timely hook, although that's a bonus. See Leah Caldwell on [mushroom-hunting in East Texas](#), Sasha von Oldershausen on life on [the border in Candelaria](#) and Ian Dille on [biking in Houston](#).
- The Book Report: 1,000 - 1,300-word reviews of new or upcoming books by Texas authors, on Texas subjects, or on *Observer* subjects (such as politics, social justice,

race, class and environment). See Asher Elbein [on Texas environmental history](#), Alejandra Martinez on [Good as Gone](#).

After your pitch is accepted...

- Check in to let your editor know how it's going. If the story changes significantly, we need to know. We also just appreciate updates on interviews, events, etc. Err on the side of over-communicating!
- Suggest photo ideas and subjects
- Respond to edits and editor questions quickly. In general, be communicative and responsive. Once the story is finalized, email your completed [W-9 form](#) and invoice to your editor. Turning in your invoice triggers quick payment. However, you will not get paid without your invoice.
- Your invoice should include the headline, length and date of the story, as well as all your contact information: name, mailing address, email address and phone number. Please also add the number **#7201** somewhere on the invoice (this makes life easier for our bookkeepers).
- Please save your invoice with a filename that includes the date and month of when your story was published and your last name.