



MESSAGEHQ FIELD GUIDE

THE FIELD GUIDE TO PITCHING

Structure, Story, and the Discipline to Not Wing It

A pitch is not a personality test, but it is performative, and to be effective you need to embrace that concept. A pitch is a structure you can learn, wrapped around a story only you can tell. Many founders get this backwards — they improvise the structure and memorize the story.

Yes, rules are there to be broken and there is no hard and fast perfect format, but there are expectations in the business world, especially in investment circles. Recognized structure is there for a reason as it communicates simple clinical information that most investors need in order to consider whether or not to invite you to that all-important second meeting.

This guide is here to establish a protocol that can be effective across a number of different meeting formats and lock the structure down cold, so the only thing left to improvise is the part that's actually yours.

This isn't a template to fill in blindly.

It's the reasoning behind the structure, so you can make good calls when your situation doesn't match the example.

SECTION ONE

Why Most Decks Fail

Most decks don't fail because of bad slides. They fail because there is no control of narrative.

Slides don't persuade. Sequence, repetition, and performance do. A deck is a delivery mechanism for a decision you're asking someone else to make — fund this, buy this, join this, carry this to someone who can. If the structure underneath doesn't build toward that decision, the design on top of it doesn't matter. Beautiful slides in the wrong order are still the wrong order.

Everything in this guide is in service of one idea: know exactly what job this specific pitch has to do, before you open a blank slide and start designing.

SECTION TWO

The Four Decks You Actually Need

Most founders try to make one deck do four jobs. That's why none of them work perfectly. There are four distinct pitch artifacts, built for four different rooms — and conflating them is the single most common structural mistake founders make.

A The Public Pitch Deck

Used in the room, live, with you narrating it. Designed for performance, not comprehension — it should be light on detail and built for attention and flow. If this deck needs reading, it's already lost. Every slide should be doing less work than you are.

THE ROOM · Live, you narrating it
BUILT FOR · Performance, not comprehension

B The Asynchronous Investor Deck

Sent when you're not there to carry it. Heavier on detail by necessity — it has to stand alone and answer questions before they're asked. This is where clarity replaces charisma. Many founders send version A when they should be sending version B and then wonder why a warm conversation went cold over email.

THE ROOM · Inbox — you're not there to carry it
BUILT FOR · Clarity that stands alone

C The Product / Sales Deck

Used with customers, not investors. The focus shifts to product, value, function and outcomes — less about vision, more about utility. Investors buy belief. Customers buy results. A deck that pitches vision to a customer, or ROI to an early-stage investor, is solving the wrong problem for the room it's in.

THE ROOM · Customers, not investors
BUILT FOR · Product, value, function, outcomes

D The Evangelism Deck

Used for partners, stakeholders, and prospective co-founders. The focus is vision and movement — this deck is designed to enroll people, to build teams and force-multiply their capacity not just inform them. It should feel like an invitation to an elite gathering, not a report.

THE ROOM · Partners, stakeholders, co-founders
BUILT FOR · Vision and movement — enrolling people

Before you open a laptop, know which of these four rooms you're actually walking into.

SECTION THREE

Choosing Your Narrative Entry Point

A lot of pitch advice will tell you to force your story into a fixed shape. Don't. Pick the entry point that reflects what's actually true and strongest about your business right now — not the one that sounds best on a slide. Structure does not mean you have to be rigid about your entry point. Just like in a movie there is a beginning, middle and end, but you don't always tell the story in that order.

Problem → Solution

CLARITY-DRIVEN

This problem must be solved.

Use this when you have real evidence of customer pain — quotes, data, behavior — not a hunch about a problem you'd like to exist.

Vision → Opportunity

BELIEF-DRIVEN

This future is inevitable.

Use this when the market doesn't fully exist yet, or when timing itself is the story — something just changed that makes 'now' different from two years ago.

Team-Led

CREDIBILITY-DRIVEN

These are the people to do it.

Use this when your team's domain expertise is unusually strong — strong enough that it should color how an investor reads everything that follows it.

Traction-Led

MOMENTUM-DRIVEN

This is already happening.

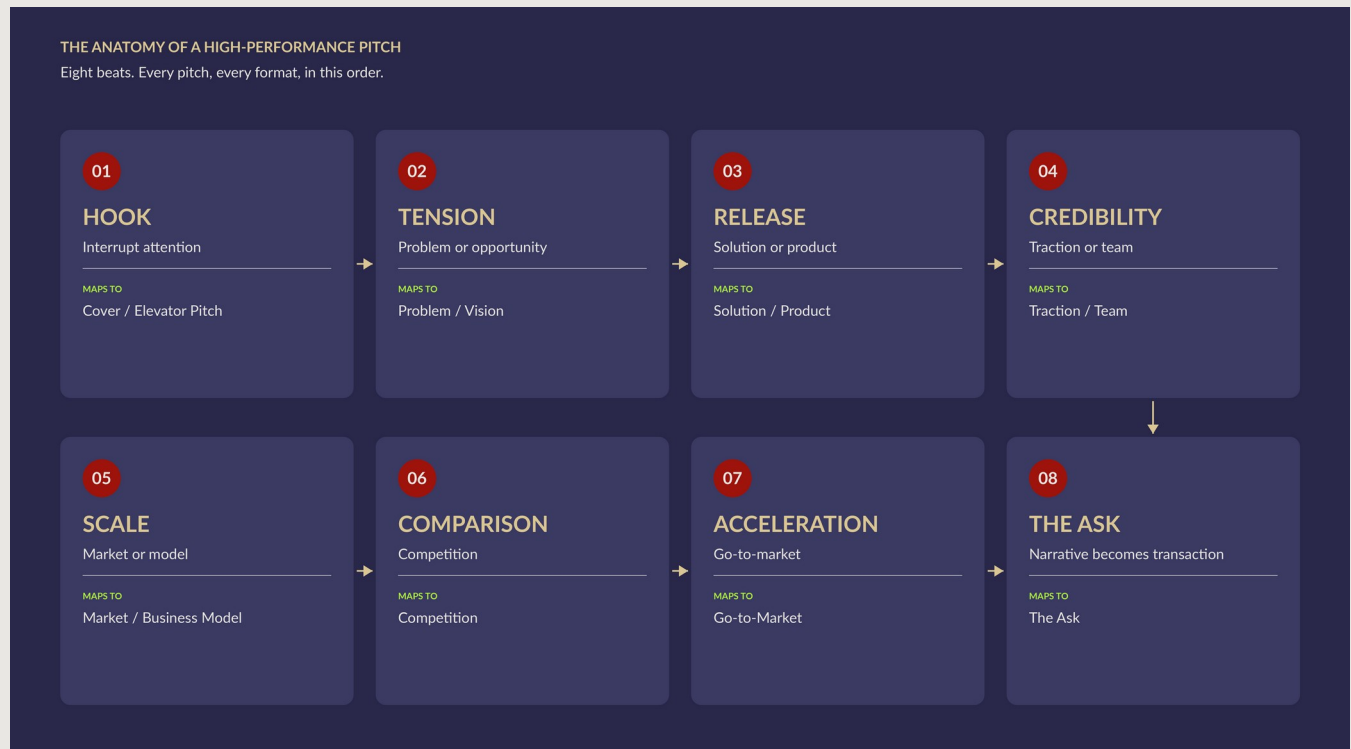
Use this when your growth curve is the most convincing thing in the room. Let the numbers open the door, then explain them.

Most founders don't pick the wrong entry point. They misjudge what's actually strong in their business. Get an outside read before you decide — you're too close to see it clearly.

SECTION FOUR

The Anatomy of a High-Performance Pitch

Whichever deck, whichever entry point, the underlying anatomy doesn't change. Eight beats, in this order:



A strong pitch doesn't just move forward. It reinforces what matters as it goes — the traction you showed in Credibility should make the ask land harder four slides later. Nothing in a good pitch is there just once. Remind and reinforce throughout.

SECTION FIVE

Field Notes, Beat by Beat

This is the tactical layer — what each beat needs to actually contain, and the gut-check for knowing when it's working. Don't confuse beats with number of pages. They are not the same. Some beats need more space than others to land.

01 HOOK



Cover slide or elevator pitch. You have about two slides to earn the third.

- Company name, one clean sentence of what you do, the ask in miniature, and how to reach you — nothing else.
- Number every slide in the deck, from this one on. You want to say “flip to page six” on a call without losing your place.
- Gut check: if someone has to clarify what you just explained after this slide, you've already stepped in it, and you will spend your next three slides rebuilding attention you shouldn't have lost.
- Don't get clever before you get clear. Clever is something you can add after you've earned it with clarity — never substitute clarity with fancy.

02 TENSION



Problem or Vision — whichever entry point you chose.

- If Problem: one sentence, real customer evidence behind it, three bullets at most — and every bullet needs a receipt: a number, a quote, something you didn't invent in the shower or hope is true.
- If Vision or Opportunity: same one-sentence discipline, but the “receipt” is a shift — technology, regulation, behavior — that makes now different from two years ago. If you can't name what changed, this isn't a vision slide. It's a hope slide.
- Gut check: could a stranger read this and feel the problem, not just understand it as a category?
- Don't pitch five problems softly. Pitch one problem like you mean it.

03 RELEASE



Solution or Product — the relief after the tension.

- Mirror the tension slide's structure back, one for one. If the problem had three bullets, the solution should resolve each of them by name — not generally, specifically.
- The strongest solutions resolve tension on more than one level: practically (it does the job) and personally (it changes how someone feels, or how they're seen, doing it). Most founders only ever pitch the practical layer and wonder why the room nods but doesn't lean in.
- Show the actual product — a real screenshot, not a description of one. This is the one place in the deck where more than one slide is earned, if the product needs it.
- Don't hide behind jargon here. If a smart outsider can't picture what they'd personally see on their own screen, this slide isn't finished.

04 CREDIBILITY



Traction or Team – proof that this isn't theoretical.

- Traction: show a line moving over time, not a snapshot. Lead with one headline number — the single thing you want remembered walking out of the room. No revenue yet? A key hire, a closed partnership, a shipped milestone all count.
- Team: real backgrounds, not job titles. What did this specific group of people do before that makes them dangerous at this specific problem. Leave advisors off unless one name alone changes how the room reads everything else.
- Don't dress up a vanity metric as traction. Anyone who has sat through a hundred of these can smell it instantly, and it costs you more trust than the number gains you.

05 SCALE



Market or Business Model – how big this could actually get.

- Size the market from the bottom up: start from a realistic number of real, reachable customers, and build outward. Only then check that number against a top-down figure as a sanity check, not the headline.
- A market slide that opens with a \$600B category and no visible path to any of it reads as filler, not ambition — investors have seen that slide a thousand times.
- If this beat is your Business Model instead: show how you actually make money, in one or two ways maximum. This is not the slide for your pricing tiers.
- Don't define your market so broadly that it stops being credible. Specific and reachable beats big and vague, every time.

06 COMPARISON



Competition – who else is solving this, and why you win.

- Name real competitors. Not “market forces,” not “we have no competition” — you always have one, even if it's just the status quo someone is currently settling for.
- A simple two-by-two or comparison table beats a paragraph every time. Let the shape of the chart make your point before anyone reads a word of it.
- Don't handpick competitors who make you look good. Anyone sophisticated enough to write a check already knows who you're actually up against — and will notice if your list is too convenient.

07 ACCELERATION



Go-to-Market – how this grows on purpose, not by accident.

- Pick the one or two channels that are already showing early signs of working and go deep on the evidence — rather than listing every tactic or potential second market you've ever considered.
- A long list of channels doesn't read as thoroughness. It reads as “we don't yet know which one actually works.”
- The real question underneath this slide: how do you get a lot of the right customers, fast, without needing a lot of luck to do it.

08 THE ASK



Where narrative becomes transaction.

- State the amount, and the specific milestone it buys — not a use-of-funds pie chart, not your cap table history, not deadline pressure. “We’re raising \$X to reach [a specific, verifiable milestone].”
- Tie that milestone to what unlocks your next round, not just what keeps the lights on for another year. Good investors are underwriting your *next raise* as much as this one.
- Then customize this beat by audience — see the next section. This is the single slide most founders leave identical across every version of the deck, and it’s usually why nothing lands.

SECTION SIX

Do's and Don'ts

DO

- Number every slide, from the first one to the last.
- Say the hard number out loud before someone has to ask you for it.
- Let silence do work after your strongest line. Don't rush past your own best moment.
- Rehearse the transitions, not just the slides — most pitches fall apart in the seams, not the content.
- Build the deck after you know the story. Never the other way around.

DON'T

- Don't make one deck do four jobs. Match the deck to the room.
- Don't force your story into an entry point it doesn't actually fit.
- Don't bury your best piece of traction three slides in because you're embarrassed by how simple it is to say out loud.
- Don't explain your pitch after you deliver it. If it needs explaining, it wasn't a pitch — it was a rehearsal.
- Don't let the deck perform the parts only you can perform. Pitching is partly a document problem. Mostly, it's you, in the room, believing what you're saying.

SECTION SEVEN

Customizing for Your Audience

The structure holds constant. What changes by audience is emphasis, depth, and what the ask is actually asking for.

AUDIENCE	BUYS	LEAD WITH	THE ASK
Investors	Belief, and a return on it.	Trajectory — market size, growth rate, why this is bigger than it looks today. Assume they've seen a hundred decks this week; earn every slide that follows the first one. Keep deal structure optional and light in the room.	An amount and a milestone, not terms.
Customers	Outcomes, not vision.	The problem they already know they have, and the product doing the job in front of them. Market size and fundraising narrative are close to irrelevant here — cut them or bury them at the very back.	A pilot, a trial, a chance to prove it.
Partners & Stakeholders	Access and leverage.	Vision and movement — what the world looks like if this works, and exactly where they fit inside that picture.	Integration, distribution, or scale. Not a check.
Academic, University, or Tech-Transfer	Often earlier-stage than product-market fit, so lean harder on team credibility and the “why now” underneath the research or insight, since traction may not exist yet to lean on. Translate the underlying science generously but simply — assume genuine interest, not fluency.		

SECTION EIGHT

Your Companion Tools

Once you know which deck, which entry point, and which beats matter most for your situation, the words still have to get written — and that's a different skill from structure. Do it on paper before you touch a slide.

THE ELEVATOR PITCH BUILDER

The 4-sentence version you need before anyone will give you sixty seconds, let alone ten minutes.

THE ONE-MINUTE PITCH BUILDER

The fuller version you need the moment you actually get those sixty seconds — market context, differentiation, traction, and an ask built for who's listening.

Build the sentence before you build the slide. If you can't say it in one breath, no amount of design will save the version that takes ten minutes.

CLOSING NOTE

The Deck Isn't the Finish Line

A pitch deck is not the finish line. It's the artifact left behind after the real work — getting clear on what you're building, why you're building it now, and why you should be the one to lead. Make sure you are clear on this before anything else is done.

If the structure in this guide feels like a lot of scaffolding for something that's supposed to feel natural in the room, that's the point. The founders who look most natural on stage are almost always the ones who did the most work before they got there.

Say it out loud before the room makes you say it out loud. Then go again.

Put This to Work

Book a Clarity Session → messagehq.net/contact.html

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