

WRITING, FORMATTING, AND DISTRIBUTING A PRESS RELEASE

How-to and some things to do or not do....a quick primer

A press release, or news release, is a written statement submitted to the media for publication. It can announce a range of news items such as special events, awards, new programs and services, etc. A release can also be a springboard toward generating a feature story. Editors and reporters are more likely to consider generating a story of their own if they first receive a press release. It is a fundamental tool of public relations, and follows a proper format. Make sure that your news is news before deciding to prepare and distribute a press release. Share information that the public would want to know or needs to know.

Remember that you are writing the release for an audience—not yourself—to inform and engage the media outlets' readers, viewers, and/or listeners. Since most media staffs are short-handed, the closer your release reads to a finished, journalistically sound news story, the better the chance it will appear. It's likely that the media staff will not have the time to do additional research or much editing. From the dozens they receive, it's easiest for them to use the releases that are the most newsworthy and require little or no editing.

Writing the press release

1. Write a genuine headline without hype. It should be brief, clear, and to the point—an abbreviated, compact version of the release's central point.
2. Write the main copy. The press release should be written as you want it to appear in a published news story.
3. Communicate the five Ws and the one H clearly. Who, what, when, where, why, and how should tell the readers all they should know about your news item. Provide basic facts early on.
4. Make the writing clear, concise, and geared to the audience. If you want your release to be chosen from among dozens of others, it has to be as close to "ready for print" as possible. Read similar articles in the publication to get a feel for doing this. Examples abound.
5. When applicable, tie it together by providing some extra information and/or links that support your press release. Is there additional information that readers might find useful?
6. Include a "call to action" in your release. Do you want readers to visit your website to register for a program? Buy tickets to attend an event? Provide the information they will need to know, answering questions before they are asked.
7. Add a final paragraph (called a "boilerplate") that briefly describes your organization.

Avoid jargon. Use plain language that everyone can understand. Avoid tech-speak, industry buzz phrases, and insider abbreviations that no one but you and your immediate peers will understand. Confuse an editor and he/she will hit the "delete" key.

Be concise. Your release might not be read if it is longer than two pages. *Stick to two pages or less.* That will force you to write concisely.

Don't advertise. You're sharing a news story or announcement for the community. Stick with the facts. When you have newsworthy information to share, do so without hyperbole or flowery language.

Formatting the press release

Press releases have standardized formats (see sample). While slight variations exist from organization to organization, some essential components must be included. The main copy of press releases should be double-spaced for easier reading by an editor or reporter.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE should go at the top of the page on the left margin.

CONTACT INFORMATION should go at the top of the page on the right margin. This is the information of the release's writer in case a media recipient wants to follow up and learn more. Include name, telephone number, and e-mail address.

The *headline*, usually in bold caps, should be centered below the Contact Information.

Optional is a *subhead* in upper and lower case italics that adds information below the headline.

The *dateline* tells the release's issue date (not your event's date) and the city/town of origin.

The *first, or lead, paragraph* should cover the most important information. This will be news-like in that it starts with an event's title, the event's date, location, etc.

The *copy* in the second and subsequent paragraphs should include secondary facts and information in descending order of importance. A quote from an organization spokesperson is appropriate here if it expands the release's primary topic. Punctuate properly. Avoid hyperbole. Always be factually accurate; do not exaggerate.

The *conclusion* is usually one paragraph (the boilerplate) that succinctly summarizes your organization or program. What's the mission? The history? The accomplishments? The context? See the example. You might also include any multimedia links at the very end of the final paragraph such as a website address, Facebook link, or Twitter handle.

The *end of the press release* is indicated by three # hash/pound symbols. Center these underneath the last line of the release. This is a journalistic standard.

Distribution

Be certain that your media list of print and online publications and contacts is up-to-date. A properly directed release stands a better chance of publication. Be aware of the media outlet's deadlines and its scope of coverage. Target the media outlets that would have interest in your news. *Deadlines are important with weekly and daily newspapers.* Be timely so they can use it.

Use e-mail to deliver your release. Attach the release as a Word doc, **or** cut and paste it into the body of the e-mail. Do include a brief cover message. Be straightforward and to the point, resisting the inclusion of any hype while letting the release's facts make the case for publication. If what you have to share is newsworthy to their audience and journalistically well-written, then

it's probable they will publish it. Let the merits of your news make the case. Let your clear, concise writing seal the deal.

Remember that local newspapers and relevant websites carry plentiful examples of such news items. Read some to get a feel for the content, language, tone, structure, and general presentation of the information. Many will have originated from a submitted press release.