

How to write a press release

The press release is the most basic and cheapest tool for getting your organisation to the attention of the media. It is a page of newsworthy information you prepare and send to the newspapers. Press releases are usually sent out to let the papers know of a story that will be happening in the near future - for example the opening of a new building, or the first night of a performance - so the paper can cover the story. You can also use a press release to send in a story that happened recently (ie in the last couple of days).

A press release gives the editor of the paper all the information they need to publish the story, or follow it up with a reporter. It answers the questions who, what, when, where and why in the opening paragraph and gives a contact name and telephone number for further information. It is usually short - about 250 words – and made up of short paragraphs of short sentences. It finishes with information on who to contact for more information.

Don't be daunted by the prospect of writing a press release; simply convey the essential information in a clear and well presented way, following the guidelines offered below.

It is important to bear in mind that whilst coverage from a press release is free of charge, unlike 'paid' advertising, you can't guarantee your story will be used, and you won't have editorial control over how the media will use your story.

Structure and Content

- **Impact matters** - you need to make your release stand out from all the others that land on the reporter's desk. The first 30% of the page is the most important. It is vital that you use this space to catch the journalist's attention.
- **Headline:** Think of a clear, catchy title, no more than six words long, that is punchy, to the point and tells the reader what your story is about.
- **The first paragraph** should grab the reader's interest and summarise the whole story. Ask yourself if it would stand alone if nothing else were published.
- **The five W's:** the introduction should cover the important facts: Who What Where When Why? Re-read what you have written and ask yourself these questions. Can you answer them?
- **The facts** should be in descending order of interest because newspapers cut stories from the bottom up, to make them fit the space available. If they do this then you might find that the most interesting or newsworthy fact about your story may be removed! (This is called the 'Inverted Pyramid' style of writing.)
- **Include a quotation.** These can be used as the verbal form of photographs and can add interest and reality – but make sure that they extend the information in some way and not just give a bland blessing. Ensure that you cite whoever said it and always put quotation marks around quotes.

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- **Always date your press release.**
- **Always include a contact name and number** and make sure the contact person is easy to get hold of and is fully briefed about the story. Include a home telephone number.

Presentation and Layout

This is also important – you want to make your press release as easy on the eye as possible to make sure that it gets read.

- **Always type it up:** there is no such thing as a hand written press release
- **Double-space your text** and keep it **left aligned** not centred - so it is easier to read and easier for the newspaper to edit.
- **Use wide margins** - to allow for editing and for the reporter to write notes and instructions for the subeditor.
- **Use a readable font** – something plain and simple like Times New Roman or Arial, never use anything fancy like French Script or too informal like Comic Sans
- Don't make the text any smaller than **12 point**.
- **Number** your pages at the bottom
- Always write **ENDS** at the end
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- Most press releases are sent by e-mail; if you are sending out a press release this way, it is worth putting the text in the body of the email (not as an attachment), as this increases its chances of being read.
- Never type on both sides of a sheet of paper - a press release should always be **single sided**
- Use your **headed notepaper** for the top sheet, but plain white paper for any additional pages
- **Never split** a sentence over two pages, and preferably never split a paragraph over two pages.
- **Staple** the pages of your release together: paperclips can come undone.
- Finish by putting the **contact and a contact number** at the end, and the name of the person/organisation who issued the release at the top.

Language and Tone

- **Keep it clear and simple** - use language that is plain, economical and confident.
- Use **short sentences** and keep the whole press release to **250 words** or less if you possibly can.

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- **‘Write for your neighbour rather than a colleague’** – ie someone who knows nothing about your organisation and doesn’t use your jargon. Ask yourself if the ordinary reader understand what you mean, or get someone else to read it. Change or simplify anything they don’t understand.
- **Avoid jargon.**
- **Don’t use acronyms** unless you explain them in full first.
- **Avoid clichés.**
- **Write from the reader’s perspective, not your own.** For example, don’t start your story with a longwinded explanation about how hard you worked to get funding from a particular charitable trust for an activity – start with telling the public about the activity that they can take part in!
- Any story you send to a paper will only be used if the editor feels it will be of **interest to their readers.**
- **Be truthful and accurate** – it wins you credibility. Beware false claims such as the first, the only and the biggest. Incorrect press releases could get you a bad name and come back to haunt you.
- add **‘with picture’** under the headline of the release;
- include a ‘photocaption’ at the end, giving the **names of people** in the picture so they can be easily identified (write down who they are when you take the picture, otherwise you may get confused);
- give the **ages of any children** included in the picture;
- credit the name of the **photographer**;
- attach a **label** to the back of the photo identifying exactly what the picture is of, in case it gets lost.
- use a **good, clear image with a strong, simple subject**
- check with the journalist what **size and format** they will require (eg jpeg, tiff, eps) if you are sending **digital images**. Many papers now prefer to receive images via email or on disc, but these must be of a high standard and resolution;
- say if you want the photo or disc back, and include a **stamped addressed envelope** and a protective card for photographs.

[See Sample Press Release]

Images

Use images – a good picture can be the difference between your story being published or ignored. If you send an image with your press release be sure to:

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Further Information

Acknowledgements

Help was also gratefully received from Peter Thomas Media Training (email: peter@ptconsultants.co.uk)

Other Related Information Sheets

Planning a Marketing Campaign

Publicity explained

Developed with thanks to
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