

News Release Guidelines

Purpose, Audience and Media

A news release is a document that conveys newsworthy information about your organization to the news media. Journalists and bloggers generally agree that a newsworthy story has at least one (and probably more) of the following elements.

- **Timeliness.** The story contains new information.
- **Impact.** The story affects media readers, viewers or listeners.
- **Uniqueness.** The story is different from similar stories.
- **Conflict.** The story involves a clash of people and/or forces, such as nature.
- **Proximity.** The story describes events geographically close to the targeted readers, viewers or listeners.
- **Celebrity.** The story involves a famous person, such as a politician, business leader or entertainer.

Traditional news releases are written as ready-to-publish news stories; social media news releases (pages 58–61) are an exception to this guideline. You write a news release in the hope that journalists and/or bloggers will take its information and publish or broadcast it in their news media, thus sending your news to hundreds or thousands—perhaps even millions—of people.

Don't be hurt if your news release isn't published or broadcast verbatim. Most are not. Journalists and bloggers often use news releases as story tips, and they rewrite your work, sometimes with additional information. If their stories and posts include your main points and don't introduce any negatives, your news release succeeded.

The news release is often called the press release, a term that is outdated and inappropriate. Most of us get our news not only from print news media (which use a printing press) but also from the Web, television and radio. The term *news release* seems more appropriate.

Still, traditional news releases generally are written as if they were for newspapers. Other news media, such as television stations, then edit news releases for their particular needs.

In general, three styles of traditional news releases exist, each of which is described in following sections:

1. Announcement (the straight news story)
2. Feature story (a combination of information and entertainment)
3. Hybrid story (a combination of the feature and the announcement)

Three other documents are similar to traditional news releases. Unlike news releases, they are not created in ready-to-publish formats. Each of these is described in upcoming segments:

1. Social media news releases (Web-based multimedia documents)
2. Media advisories (quick facts on breaking news stories)
3. Pitches (exclusive offers of stories to particular journalists)

The audience of a traditional news release is a journalist. To be a successful news release writer, you must focus intensely on what journalists like (and avoid what they dislike) in news stories. They like conciseness; they dislike wordiness. They like specifics; they dislike generalities. They like reputable sources; they dislike unattributed opinions. They like objective facts; they dislike promotional writing. They like honesty and candor; they dislike dishonesty and evasion. Too often, news releases get written to the wrong audience: They become promotional documents designed to please bosses and clients. Journalists have a time-honored place for such news releases: the wastebasket.

News releases exist in a variety of media: Surveys show that journalists prefer e-mail delivery, but some news releases are still written on paper and sent through the mail or distributed at trade shows. Others are placed in digital newsrooms on organizational websites. Still others are burned onto CDs or DVDs and mailed. You can deliver radio and video news releases via tape, disks and satellite signals. News releases have even been written on the labels of champagne bottles and sent to journalists (attached to a full bottle, of course).

■ **Key to Success:** A news release should contain only newsworthy information. It should not be a thinly disguised advertisement for your organization. A good news release has a local angle; that is, journalists and bloggers read it and quickly see that the information it contains is relevant to their readers, listeners or viewers.

Format/Design

E-mail: As technology changes, format preferences for e-mail news releases also change. Surveys show that journalists currently dislike attachments. They prefer e-mails in which the news release is the onscreen message. Such messages can link to relevant photographs, videos and websites. Journalists also appreciate instructive images that appear in the text of news releases rather than as attached files.

Many e-mail news releases have e-mail templates that look like paper stationery with organizational letterhead. Such templates can help reporters immediately identify the source of the news release.

Paper: As a paper document, a news release should be on your organization's stationery. Use letterhead stationery (with your organization's logo, for example) only for the first page. If the news release extends to a second page, however, don't switch to a different color or quality of paper. Use a blank sheet that matches

the paper stock of the first page. In mass mailings, it's all right to use photocopies of letterhead stationery, but if the budget permits, use originals. Some organizations use special news release stationery that clearly labels the document as a news release.

Headings (Format)

E-mail: In e-mail news releases, the all-important subject line precedes the headings. Type the key fact of your news release in the subject line. A good subject line is newsworthy, specific and concise; it shows journalists that the related e-mail contains news of interest to their audiences. Subject lines usually are more concise even than headlines.

The e-mail news release itself has fewer headings than a paper news release. Before the headline, type only "For Immediate Release" (writing in capital letters is rare in e-mails). Below that, type the date on which you send the release. Unlike paper news releases, e-mail news releases include the "For More Information" data below the story. At that point, include the person's name, title, phone number and an e-mail address/link.

Both the "For Immediate Release" at the top and the "For More Information" at the bottom are aligned on the left margin.

Leave a blank line between the headings and the headline. The headings of an e-mail news release should look something like Figure 2.1.

Paper: If the stationery doesn't label the document as a news release, type "News Release" in big, bold letters—usually 24-point type. Below that, begin the actual news release with headings that specify "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE," the composition date and "FOR MORE INFORMATION" data: a contact person, the person's title, a phone number and an e-mail address.

The headings should be single-spaced.

Leave about two inches between the headings and the headline. All together, the headings of a paper news release should look something like Figure 2.2.

To:	JaneQReporter@newspaper.com
Subject:	Circle City Blood Drive Scheduled
For Immediate Release Nov. 20, 2012 Circle City Red Cross schedules downtown blood drive	

FIGURE 2.1

Organization Letterhead

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Nov. 20, 2012

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Catherine Jones
Public Relations Director
(555) 123-4567
cjones@xyz.org

Circle City Red Cross schedules downtown blood drive

FIGURE 2.2

The Headline (Format)

Paper and E-mail: Your headline should be a newspaper-style headline (see page 47).

Boldface the headline. Capitalize the first word and any names (of people, buildings, organizations and so on). Lowercase all other words, just as most newspapers do.

The Text (Format)

E-mail: Single-space the text of e-mail news releases. Do not indent paragraphs; instead, include a blank line between paragraphs. Be concise: An e-mail news release should be long enough to tell the story—and no longer.

Paper: Double-space the text of paper news releases. Double-spacing provides room for journalists to edit the release.

The text of a news release should be long enough to tell the story concisely—and no longer. The entire release rarely should be more than two pages—one front and one back or two separate pages. Make it shorter, if possible. Many news releases are one page.

Page Numbers, Slugs and Similar Items

E-mail: After the text of an e-mail news release—but before the contact information—type “-30-” or “###.” Include a blank line between the end of the text and that symbol.

Paper: If the news release is more than one page, type “-more-” or “-over-” at the bottom of each appropriate page. Beginning with the second page, place a condensed version of the release’s headline (called a “slug”) and the page number in the upper-right corner. After the last line of the news release, space down one more line and type “-30-” or “###.”

Staple the pages of the news release together. Never trust a paper clip.

Content and Organization

In all news releases—e-mail, paper and otherwise—focus on your audience: journalists and bloggers who seek newsworthy information for their audiences. What kind of information is newsworthy?

- Timely information that affects members of a news medium’s audience
Such information is said to have “local interest”—an important quality to journalists
- Timely information that is unusual or exceptional
- Timely information about a well-known individual or organization

For additional qualities of newsworthiness, see page 43.

The Headline

News release headlines are written in newspaper style. Most newspaper headlines are, roughly, complete sentences.

Most newspaper headlines are written in present tense, which, in headline grammar, means recent past tense. For example, “Palmquist University celebrates anniversary” means that the university celebrated recently—probably yesterday. Some headlines, however, require future tense. If the university is planning an anniversary celebration and you are writing a news release to gain support and publicity, the headline would be “Palmquist University to celebrate anniversary.”

A good headline includes local interest and summarizes the story’s main point. Whenever gracefully and logically possible, mention your organization’s name or product in the headline.

The Dateline

The text of a traditional news release begins with a dateline in capital letters and a dash (for example, “DALLAS—”). Datelines give the location of the story. They help establish local interest and answer the reporter’s question *where?* Datelines also can include dates (for example, “DALLAS, Jan. 24—”). Feature and hybrid news releases often lack datelines.

The Text

With or without a dateline, the first sentence of a traditional news release should establish local interest and move right to the news. A good newsworthy first sentence often concisely covers *who*, *what*, *when* and *where*. In a traditional news story, the first paragraph, also called the lead, includes the most important information about the story. It never relies on the headline to supply information. Instead, the headline summarizes information included in the lead.

A traditional news release is structured as an inverted pyramid, which means that the most important information is at the top of the story (the widest part of the upside-down pyramid). As the story continues and the pyramid becomes narrower, the information becomes less and less important.

Include a pertinent, attention-grabbing quotation from a representative of your organization in the second or third paragraph. Such quotations can enliven news releases, making them more attractive to journalists and news audiences alike. Good quotations provide color, emotion or opinion—or all three. Avoid quotations that recite sterile facts or statistics or that do nothing but cheerlead.

Optional Notes to the Editor

If some information, such as the spelling of a name, is unusual, include a single-spaced “Note to the Editor” after the “-30-” or “###” to inform editors that your information is correct. This is not necessary for routine information.

Distribution and Follow-Up

Send news releases to specific journalists and bloggers. Books such as *Bacon's Media Directories* can help you identify specific individuals, as can online databases such as CisionPoint and Vocus Media Database. Some local chambers of commerce also can supply local media lists to organizations.

If the news release announces an event, be sure that newspapers, radio and television stations and news websites receive it about 10 days before the event. Magazines generally need more advance notice than that; six months isn't too early for some monthly or quarterly magazines.

Consider paying a distribution service, such as PR Newswire or PRWeb, to distribute your news release. Such services can electronically transmit your news release directly to appropriate media throughout the world. These services also can archive your news releases and enhance them with search engine optimization (SEO) technology, which digitally highlights keywords, increasing the odds that journalists doing Web searches will find the news release. News releases archived on your organization's website also should be enhanced with SEO technology. However, some news releases, especially those that are part of media kits (pages 76–86) still are printed on paper and sent through the mail. Whenever possible, ask specific reporters how they prefer to receive news releases from your organization.

Send only one copy of your news release to each appropriate news medium. Don't send your news release to several reporters at the same news medium, hoping

it will interest one of them. Send it to the most appropriate reporter or editor at each news outlet.

A continuing debate in public relations concerns follow-up calls—that is, telephoning journalists to ensure that they received the news release and to offer assistance. Most journalists resent such calls unless you’ve offered an exclusive story (see pages 65–69). If your news release presents a story of interest to a journalist’s audience, the journalist will call you if he needs more information. Journalists are too busy and receive far too many news releases each day to answer questions from eager news release writers. However, some situations do justify a follow-up call. For example, if you send a media advisory (see pages 62–64) on a fast-breaking news story that you know journalists will want to cover, they probably will appreciate a quick follow-up call to ensure they received the information.

If you must call regarding a news release of crucial importance, be polite. Remember: Journalists and bloggers are under no obligation to use your story. If you are unable to reach the journalist or blogger, don’t leave more than two messages. Don’t earn a label as a nuisance.

Never ask journalists or bloggers if they used your news releases. That tells them that you’re not reading, listening to or watching their work.

TIPS

1. Ensure that the phone number in the For More Information heading provides 24-hour/seven-day-a-week access to the contact person.
2. Avoid using the words *today*, *yesterday* and *tomorrow* in your news release. Journalists and bloggers almost always will have to change those words. For example, your *today* probably will be incorrect by the time your news release is published or broadcast. Using an actual date—for example, Jan. 23—can solve this problem. Daily news media, such as newspapers and radio or TV stations, often use days of the week, as in “XYZ Partners will build two factories in Puerto Rico in 2012, the corporation announced Wednesday.” The present-perfect verb tense can be used to denote the immediate past, as in “XYZ Partners has announced third-quarter profits of \$50 million.”
3. Use past-tense verbs to attribute quotes. Use *said* instead of *says* in print-oriented news releases.
4. Be precise and concise. Every word that journalists print or broadcast costs money.
5. Remember the importance of local interest. Ask yourself why your news will appeal to the audience of each medium that will receive your news release. Use the news release’s headline and first sentence to spotlight local interest. (The word *local* doesn’t have to mean hometown. For example, a news release about an important new product that will be used by consumers throughout the world has “local” interest to readers on all continents. Finding individual hometown angles, however, can strengthen a news release.)
6. Avoid promotional writing. You, as the writer, should be objective. Don’t include

unattributed opinions (your opinions) about your organization's excellence.

7. Be sure that your manager and/or your client reviews the news release before it is distributed. After you review their comments or suggested revisions, you may need to remind them that a news release should be an objective, unbiased news story.
8. Avoid so-called embargoed news releases—that is, news releases that aren't for immediate publication. With an embargoed news release, you ask the editor to hold

the information until a specified release date. Don't make a practice of asking media outlets to delay the publication or broadcast of newsworthy stories. Embargoes generally work only when journalists and strategic writers agree in advance that a situation merits special treatment.

9. Some news releases conclude with a "boilerplate" paragraph or passage—a standard brief biography of the organization. The final sentence of the news release on page 52 is a boilerplate.