

Writing an effective press release

Prepared by the SBS Press Gang & the University Press Office, March 2013

Considerations before writing the press release

1. Your audience: the general public (not the scientific audience you might be more used to)
2. Your story: You will need to have a new or topical angle on your research which will catch a journalist's eye and be of interest to non-scientists in the general public.
3. Your message: What do you want the public to understand and take away from the press release?

Overall tone of the press release

News style is very direct and to the point, in simple language. It is very different from scientific journal style. Here are some top tips:

Avoid jargon:

1. Use plain language that everyone can understand, but be accurate.
2. If the use of technical terms or abbreviations is unavoidable, explain them simply.

Be concise:

The media do not need an abundance of information. Instead, they are after the key points, facts and figures. You need to attract their interest and encourage them to cover the story. If they want to know more, they will contact you to ask.

1. Avoid long sentences and paragraphs.
2. Don't waste words: avoid repetition, fancy language and jargon.
3. Journalists and search engines won't read long releases.
4. Be concise, but provide enough content.

Find a 'hook' about your story:

1. You need to grab a reporter's attention in the headline and initial sentences.
2. Journalists prefer a human interest angle to ensure the story will appeal to their audience.

Be objective:

1. Present the facts; try not to sensationalise or oversell the story.
2. Refrain from over hyped quotes, as these will be edited out.

Grammar:

1. Write in the third person, with exception of the quote.
2. Carry out a spell check, but also use your common sense.
3. Use proper punctuation.

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Structure of the press release

Follow the 'inverted pyramid' structure: Present the information in order of declining importance, ensuring journalists receive the most important information first. Depending on space restrictions, stories can be cut short and therefore it is important that vital information is still included.

1. The most important and interesting stuff comes first (the 'hook')
2. Use subsequent paragraphs to elaborate.

So your basic structure might include a headline, a lead paragraph, subsequent paragraphs with more detail, a quote and then contact information. Here are things to keep in mind for each:

Headline: *This is the first thing a journalist will see, so make sure it's interesting, concise, and accurate. The headline acts as a teaser to the release, to encourage people to read on. It should be written last, after the main text of the release has been written.*

1. Headlines are in the active tense and must include a verb; something must be happening.
2. It should be brief, clear and to the point
3. A simple method to create a headline is to extract keywords from your press release. From these keywords, try to frame an attention-grabbing phrase.

Lead paragraph: *If the reporter were only to read the first paragraph of a good press release, he'd have everything he needed to get started. Whatever you want them to say, this is where you put it. This is your elevator pitch.*

Encapsulate the essence of the story, such as what is happening, to whom, when, where, why and how.

Then, in the following paragraphs:

1. Tell the rest of the story, with details in descending order of importance.
2. Flesh out whatever claims were made in the lead and headline.
3. Include a **quote**, ideally from the main scientist involved.

For the quote, consider:

1. Journalists like sound-bites in the form of a quotation from an expert. These give the story credibility.
2. Quotes are unlikely to be heavily edited by journalists, so make the most of them by incorporating key messages.
3. Don't repeat what has already been said elsewhere in the text.
4. Quotes can be used if journalists lack the resources to follow-up the release with an additional interview.
5. Get approval from the scientist for the release in general, but especially for a named quote.

End with contact information: *This enables journalists to request further information and interviews.*