
11 GUIDELINES ON PREPARING THE PRESS RELEASE

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Introduction

The press release, as non-technical medium in science communication, has among other advantages the potential of creating public awareness of and stimulating interest in new advances in the scientific field. Operators, for example, would like to know how certain operational problems are being tackled; what increased productivity methods have been successful; and what events, exhibitions or demonstrations, are being staged to illustrate such successes. Among laymen, too, there is an urge to know about 'what's going on' in research, science and technology.

As with other communication techniques, the good press release is based on a studied decision of what you want to say and a working knowledge of the audience or readership for whom the message is intended.

The Basic Shape of a Press Release

Against that background, when you, as scientists and science communicators, have information you want to get into the newspapers, it is your responsibility to ensure that it is in a form the news editors will use. It is a mistake to say that you have given the editor the facts and he must put them into some shape.

There is a certain basic shape of the Press Release (common to most newspapers) which editors are happy to see you follow:

1. A heading at the top should attract attention and be explanatory. For example: "Demerara Bridge will push Development" rather than "Bridge Across Demerara River";
2. The main point of the news should be given in as few words as possible in the first sentence; and
3. The main or key point of the news should be followed by explanatory and background information in descending order of importance.

This approach will follow the 'inverted pyramid' method with your main idea standing boldly on the upturned base of the imaginary pyramid'. This is a good guide-line to follow as it is quite possible that because of limited newspaper space, the later paragraphs of your release may get cut out before the story goes into print. In extreme cases, the first paragraph of your release might be the only paragraph left to tell your story.

The Style of the Press Release

The Press Release should be written in a simple and streamlined style, practical for the purpose it is to serve. Avoid a formal pompous style.

Each sentence should be short, definitely not more than twenty (20) words. Paragraphs should also be brief and not exceed forty (40) words at a time.

Words should be chosen for their brevity and directness. For example, avoid writing 'request' when for brevity 'ask' would do. Avoid such cliches as 'disclosed' when 'announced' is so direct.

Always write in plain and simple language and watch the length of your press release which should normally be not more than three hundred (300) words at a time.

Wherever possible, it is helpful to include in your press release a simple quote from a well-known scientist concerned with the topic. Do this, however, only when the quote adds facts to the story and not some platitude.

If your press release is intended for overseas publication, you should remember that certain terms and words used in one country may be unfamiliar in another area. This consideration may also apply to regional dissimilarities within one country. For the same reason, the indiscriminate use of abbreviations should be avoided. In any case, when you use words and terms that may be new, explain them.

Emphasising Local Angles

Look for the local interest in the news item; note for example, how a certain scientific innovation can affect people's lives and write your releases in that context in the first place.

Notes to Editors

It is accepted that the Press Release should contain the immediate relevant details and background explanation. However, 'Notes to Editor' at the end of the release (and not as part of the story) can be a useful device to give to editors additional information which they may wish to follow up on their own.

Dealing with Trade Items and Names of Firms

Whenever you are preparing a Press Release on trade items, watch how you use brand names of products or the names of firms. Wherever the names of firms are included in the body of your press release, editors sometimes suspect that this has been done for free advertising, and they may reject your story on those grounds.

Accordingly, it is normal practice to avoid mentioning the names of firms in the body of your release. Instead, the name and address of the firm concerned with the particular product are mentioned at the bottom of the release away from the text of the release proper.

Editors are then free to print it if it is their policy to do so. On the other hand, it may be used as reference information for follow-up enquiries.

Photographs or Other Illustrations

Editors tend to accept your news releases more readily when, in addition to following the basic shape of the press release, you include photographs or other illustrations such as diagrams and graphs. (Please note that some communities are happier with bar graphs than with line graphs)

Wherever photographic prints are not ready, a separate note on their future availability will still be helpful to the appropriate department whose staff can follow up the matter.

Target Audience

Of course, in setting out to write a Press Release, you would have to decide on what you want to say (your message) and why (the purpose of your message).

That elementary consideration apart, you would certainly have to determine the people for whom this release is intended (the target audience). And in that regard, you would have to figure out how you would reach them, that is, through the morning or evening newspaper, at peak radio listening times or through a periodical publication.

Timing of the Release and Distribution

When you are aiming for publicity in the evening paper, then, obviously, the newspaper should receive your Press Release early on the morning of that day's issue. Similarly, if you are thinking in terms of the morning newspaper publicity, then your release should reach the press immediately after noon on the day preceding the proposed publication.

If you want to get your information in the weekly papers, then you will time your release so that it reaches the editor early during the week of publication when he is searching for topical material.

In any case, it would be helpful to your timing and distribution for you to study the printing times, deadlines and printing problems of the newspaper and periodicals in your particular area.

Radio and TV Considerations

You should, at this stage, also assess the specific needs of Radio and T.V. Thus, you would take into account that there are scheduled Radio and T.V. newscasts at peak and other hours which you may wish to catch.

Advance Press Warning (Early Warning)

When there is a press release of special importance, let the press know in good time, if it is at all possible, that an announcement will be issued at a particular time. You may sometimes do this through a central news agency.

This advance warning is most helpful to busy editors, especially if the announcement is to be ready or to be made shortly before press time.

Embargoes

A Press Release is normally intended for immediate use. However, there are times when, for such reasons as simultaneous release in different papers or different countries or early notice to the media, you may issue it under 'embargo'.

When a Press Release is issued under 'embargo', the release time and date should be boldly stated at the top of the headed paper or first sheet. You should, however, use the embargo system very sparingly. If it is overdone, it may not be taken seriously by editors.

Format of the Press Release

The format that is most helpful to the editorial and printing staff requires that:-

1. the release should be typed on quarto or foolscap paper (whichever is locally acceptable);
2. it should be typed on one side only of headed paper (i.e. paper marked "Press Release") with wide margins at top, sides and bottom;
3. the typing must be double-spaced to allow for any additions and changes by the sub-editor; and
4. the headed paper should carry, at the top or bottom, the name and address of the issuing office, a reference number and date

of the release and the telephone number of the person able to answer questions connected with the release.

Follow-Up Work

Follow-up work may fall into two categories.

In the first place, although you may have provided good background information in your press release, there is always the news editor (from newspaper or radio) who will call up for some extra fact or further detail in his search for more interest and variety.

In such a case, you and your staff should be up-to-date on the facts so that you can answer any likely enquiries. And so you should have the relevant reference file on your desk if you are not in a position to memorise all the facts.

Then again, you should also be aware of the opportunities to follow up your initial press release with further items, especially when you are dealing with a situation which does not remain the same all the time.

Remember that readership itself tends to fluctuate; and so in subsequent press releases, you do not only give additional facts, but you also briefly recapitulate the background information before moving on to new ground or exploring new communication fields in science and technology.

Summary

In the meantime, always remember that the basic shape of the press release requires that:-

1. a heading at the top should attract attention and be explanatory;
2. the main points of the news should be given in as few words as possible in the first sentence; and
3. the main points of the news should be followed by explanatory and background information in descending order of importance.