



Anatomy of a News Release

What a news release is and how to write a good one

Here are some steps to follow each and every time you have a news release to draft. Begin by asking yourself these questions:

- What's the purpose? Why are you doing a news release? In many cases, it's because the boss thought it was a good idea or the suits in the front office cooked up some new sales promotion, and they're hoping a news release will get them results without the expense of buying ads. If your reasons fit into those categories, that's not good enough. Sure, a news release can legitimately and credibly announce a new sales promotion but it can never drive sales. You need to establish a clear and focused purpose for the news release.
- Is your news "newsworthy"? The purpose of a news release is to inform a public audience through the news media of your news item. Do not use your news release to try and make a sale. A good news release answers all of the "W" questions (who, what, where, when and why), providing the media with useful information about your organization, product, service or event. If you read your news release and it reads like an advertisement, rewrite it.
- Who is it designed to reach and why should they care? A news release is not a place to dance around getting to the point. Your message goes hand-in-hand with the purpose, and you must get to the point right away. Vaguely defined news releases, lacking purpose, are one of the biggest irritants to journalists who receive them. There might be actual news hidden in there somewhere but it takes too long to find. Remember that most news releases are reviewed for nanoseconds in a newsroom due to the volume received every day.
- What is in it for this particular audience? What are the potential values or the benefits or rewards to a public audience? Again, consider these factors from an outsider's perspective.
- What the goal of your organization in issuing a news release? Is there a call-to-action? A timely event that you want people to attend? A new product hitting the market that will make life easier?



Some other points to remember:

- Be timely. One of the best ways to get the media to pay attention to your news release is to make it timely. You can get a reporter's attention by providing the scoop on a news story that's about to happen. You can enhance the appeal, if possible, by explaining how your news release is relevant to other timely and important news. For example, if you are announcing a "healthy lifestyles" fair at a local shopping mall in a news release and you notice that there have been a number of stories on television and in the newspapers about obesity, look for a way to position your event as a solution to a problem.
- Write for the news media. Journalists will commonly use a news release as a springboard for a larger feature story. Try to develop a story as you would like to have it told. Even if your news is not reprinted verbatim, it may provide an acceptable amount of exposure.
- Stick to the facts. Tell the truth. Avoid fluff, embellishments and exaggerations. If you feel that your news release contains embellishments perhaps it would be a good idea to set it aside until you have more exciting news to share. If you get outside the facts, remember you might be risking your organization's credibility, reputation and brand. It never hurts to tone it down a bit.
- Use active voice. Passive voice is bland. Verbs in the active voice bring your news release to life.
- Use the present tense. Avoid writing that "4-H announced." Instead, say that "4-H has announced" or "is announcing."
- Beware of jargon. While a limited amount of jargon will be required if your goal is to optimize your news release for online search engines, the best way to communicate your news is to speak plainly, using ordinary language. Jargon is language specific to certain professions or groups and is not appropriate for general readership. Avoid such terms as "capacity planning techniques," "extrapolate" and "prioritized evaluative procedures."
- Avoid hype. The exclamation point (!) will kill your credibility with the media.

A release should follow a style that makes it *look* like a story within a format that the media recognizes. Remember, a news release is like telling a story but you are getting to the point of the story in the first sentence.



Here are some formatting rules for news releases:

- Double space your text.
- Use a standard serif font, such as Times New Roman or Palatino Linotype, in 10 or 12 point type.
- Don't indent paragraphs and double-space between paragraphs.
- Number the pages.
- Write "more" at the end of each page if the release continues.
- Use the old journalistic symbol "###" at the end of your release.

Here is a summary of the elements of a news release, based on the Associated Press style for news releases preferred by most newspapers:

For Immediate Release. Underline it. Bold it, if you wish, and left justify it at the top of your page. That signals the media that you have something to say right now. Never ever use the phrase "Advance for Release." That was in style a decade or so ago and perceived by the media as manipulative. There's nothing to be gained by saying "Here's something so hot that you cannot use it now but I wanted to let you in on it early"

Date. That's the day and date of your release. For example "Tuesday, March 2, 2005." The day and date go right under For Immediate Release. Using both day and date is a good practice because despite all our best intentions, we sometimes make mistakes on dates alone. And there's an old jinx that says when you put just the date with no day, two times out of four, it'll be wrong. Go figure.

Headline. Write a headline for your news release that looks like one right out of *USA Today*. Make it catchy and seductive. For example, AARP created a promotion under the banner: "Gray & Glamorous: AARP's Golden Girls" about seven actresses, age 56 to over 70, who are considered among "Hollywood's hottest." It got them coverage everywhere, including *USA Today*.

Location. This is a city or place, for example:

(Columbus, OH) The lead sentence starts here ...

The lead paragraph. The lead is the most important part of any news release. This is your best chance at capturing a journalist's attention. In just a couple of sentences, you must give the reader basic yet compelling details of the story. So,



get right to the point of why anyone should care about your news or announcement. Keep the lead paragraph short – two to three short sentences maximum and no more than about four or five lines.

Body of text. This forms the apex of the journalistic “inverted pyramid” style of writing. What this means is that the first paragraph summarizes the most important part of the story. It gets to the “bottom lines.” The body of text contains several paragraphs that provide the details, including facts, supporting information and relevant quotes.

And by the way, use your organization’s letterhead. There’s no real benefit in having a special “News Release” letterhead.

While it is nearly impossible and certainly not particularly smart to suggest a hard and fast set of rules for a news release, there are four basic paragraphs or components of an effective release. These components comprise the elements of the “inverted pyramid” approach to writing a news release:

Paragraph One – Most important facts of the release. This is the attention grabber.

Paragraph Two – Essential background material and the names of key characters or sources.

Paragraph Three – Elaboration on material contained in the first paragraph plus additional background information.

Paragraph Four – Concise summary of the news in the release.

Contact. At the end of the news release, include the contact person’s full name, office and cell phone numbers and e-mail address. Here is an example:

Contact: Beth Jones
 Office: (703) 555-1212
 Cell: (202) 555-2323
 E-mail: bjones63@msn.com

Ultimately, though, all the structure and format in the world won’t save you without good content – what you have to say. Use the news release format to tell



a timely and relevant story. A story that is compelling, interesting, informs, motivates and excites the news media to immediately form a good opinion of your organization. Use it as a door-opener, an entrée to journalists, to develop good coverage.

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