

Writing Press Releases

So, you have to write a press release. What is a press release anyway? What is expected? What do the newspapers want to know? What is newsworthy about what your organization is doing?

A press release is a one page (usually) statement about some aspect of your organization that is interesting, exciting, or noteworthy. The news can be good or bad. The press, as you know if you have ever picked up a newspaper, is interested in both. The purpose of a press release is to get the attention of a reporter who is looking for a story to write for a newspaper, television or radio program. So, your audience or reader is a hungry, busy reporter who has a deadline and is searching for a piece to write. Think of this hungry reporter as you write your press release.

The press release should have a few key components. First, it should be short. Next, it needs a headline, a body and contact information. You should pay particular attention to the headline and the first paragraph. The headline can determine whether or not your press release is read or deleted. The first paragraph can determine whether the reporter decides to continue reading.

Headlines

Headlines are short and telling.

Examples:

- 1. ARMED CAREER CRIMINAL SENTENCED ON FEDERAL GUN AND DRUG CHARGES**
- 2. TWO SPRINGFIELD AREA RESIDENTS CHARGED WITH LOANSHARKING**
- 3. GUANTANAMO BAY LINGUIST SENTENCED**
- 4. COURT REVOKES U.S. CITIZENSHIP OF MASSACHUSETTS MAN WHO SERVED THE NAZIS DURING 1943 LIQUIDATION OF THE WARSAW JEWISH GHETTO**

Let's analyze these titles:

1. What verbs are used?
2. What nouns are selected?
3. What do you think of long titles vs. short titles?

The headline should:

- Be no more than one line (some programs reject headlines that are too long)
- Provide a snapshot of the news you are delivering
- Avoid stacks of nouns

Dateline

This is the city where the press release is issued. The dateline locates the story for the potential reporter.

Boston, MA...

Valance, France...

Rome, Italy

Opening Sentence/Paragraph

Next, assuming you want the press to pick up the story, the first sentence should grab or hook the reporter. Don't go overboard with flowery language and loads of adverbs (extremely, wonderfully, exceedingly, etc.). Instead, try to pick a sentence that presents an intriguing fact, teaches something interesting, points to the extraordinary within the ordinary.

Let's look at some examples from recent press releases:

Example 1:

Boston, MA... A Massachusetts man was indicted today on wire and mail fraud charges for a scheme in which he advertised Superbowl tickets over the internet, collected approximately \$255,000 from customers, and then never provided either the tickets nor refunds.

Can you find the answers to these five questions in the example above?

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

Why?

Example 2:

Boston, MA... A Boston police Sergeant and a police officer were sentenced today in federal court on charges of obstruction of justice in connection with a criminal investigation and a civil law suit related to the assault of a civilian by the Sergeant.

Example 3:

The Philatelic and Numismatic Office of the Governorate of Vatican City on April 5 will issue 300,000 sets of four stamps, each stamp featuring a detail from the painting “Resurrection of Christ” by Perugino, and 120,000 copies of a leaflet featuring the Risen Christ, the central part of the painting.

Does this grab you? Are you interested in this topic? Have you seen the story anywhere in the newspapers? Neither have I.

How could this first sentence be better done?

Example 4:

SLEEP HEALTHCENTERS[®] LLC AND BETH ISRAEL DEACONESS MEDICAL CENTER TEAM UP FOR COMPREHENSIVE SLEEP DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT PROGRAMS

BOSTON – Sleep HealthCenters[®] LLC (SHC) and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) have announced an agreement to further develop and manage comprehensive sleep diagnosis and treatment programs at BIDMC.

What is the purpose of this press release?
Does this press release work?

The Rest of the Paragraph: The Hook

The rest of the paragraph, which is short, provides a hook; something that makes the reader want to read the rest of the press release.

Example:

Study Suggests Obesity Has Lesser Financial Impact On African-Americans

Date: 12/29/2004

Contact: Jerry Berger

Phone: 617-667-7308

Email: jberger@bidmc.harvard.edu

BOSTON – Obesity may impose a smaller healthcare cost on African-Americans than

other demographic groups, according to a study led by researchers at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) that found spending on obesity-related problems becomes progressively higher as adults grow older.

What is the hook?

The Rest of the Story: The Body

The body of a press release is direct and to the point and is designed to back up what was said in the first paragraph. Here you expand on and flesh out the claims made in the first paragraph. Focus on the five questions: Who? What? Where? When? and How? when writing the body. Ask yourself: What information will this reporter want to include in the story? Here you weave an interesting story for the reporter.

The body of the press release is written in the third person as if the person writing is a reporter and not an employee of the organization. Never use “I” or “we” unless you are quoting someone you have interviewed about the situation. You are an observer looking in on the situation (you are your reader).

The facts are presented here and should be verifiable: include statistics to ground what you say in facts that can be substantiated.

The press release usually starts with the main message in the first paragraph/sentence (discussed above). Then, the press release moves on to an inverted pyramid structure from general to specific.

Each paragraph develops an idea. If you have a new piece of information to write about, create a new paragraph.

Include quotes from individuals in the organization that are directly related to the issue discussed and attribute quotes to people. Quotes should reveal opinions, observations about the subject matter.

Organization Boilerplate

The last paragraph of your press release should contain general information about your organization. This is a block of standard text that could and is tacked onto the end of all press releases that your organization sends out.

Contact Information

Press releases generally include a statement about who to contact for more information about this subject at the end of the piece, although some organizations include this information at the top of the press release.

Example:

If you would like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview with Joan Smith, please call Pat Brown at 555.444.3333 or e-mail pat at: pb@bidc.org.

After the contact information it is standard practice to include the following symbols to signal to the reader that the press release is over.

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Final Thoughts

- Read your press release out loud.
- Check for typos.
- Check contact information.
- Check urls provided.
- Ask yourself whether you can cut it down.
- Read lots and lots of examples of press releases (good and bad) to get a feel for what works/doesn't work.
- Put your work aside for a few hours, a day in order to make sure it reads well.
- Ask someone to review what you have written.