KISS—Keep It Short and Simple: Writing for the Media

The News Release

Purpose. A news release is a brief (500 words maximum) news story that can be printed or broadcast as is or used by a journalist as a starting point to gather more information for a news article or program. Normally, it is released simultaneously to a number of journalists. First and foremost, it must contain some real news.

A research organization generally distributes a news release to the media when a newsworthy event takes place (“the news peg”). The news peg can be an external event related to an organization’s area of expertise. For example, when a dead whale washed up on the beach at Waikiki a few years ago, the University of Hawaii’s Marine Biology Department might have issued a news release with findings from its whale research program. This would have been a good opportunity to get the Department in the news. Alternatively, a research institute might distribute a news release on the occasion of an internal news event, such as the publication of new research findings, an important scientific meeting, or a statement by an important person.

Content. A news release is written like a short newspaper article or radio or television news item. It should:

- Tell a story that the audience will want to read or hear. Is it about people? Does it affect people? Is it new and dramatic? Is it controversial? Does it talk about or quote a well-known person?
- Start with a short, active title that contains the essence of the story.
- Follow the title with a short first paragraph that states the facts and why they are important. This format is called the “inverted pyramid,” which means that the most important information comes first. Details and less important information follow.
- Alternatively, the first paragraph can “hook” the readers in—Posing the problem? Highlighting an individual?—and the second paragraph can state the news and its importance.

Requirements. When you write a news release, you must:

- Identify the sender (organization) at the top of the page. At minimum, provide name, email address, and telephone numbers of the person who can be reached for further information. Postal address and fax number may also be included. If one person is sending out the release and another person is quoted, give contact information for both.
- Specify a release date at the top of the page.
- Double-check facts, names, degrees, and dates to ensure that the release is accurate. Be sure to spell out all acronyms.
• Be clear and concise (the KISS rule). A news release should be only one or two pages long, double spaced (maximum 500 words).
• Stick with the facts. Don’t editorialize.
• Don't use too many numbers. Many journalists hate math.
• Add interest with a direct quotation from a well-known or prestigious person.
• Note that a contact person is available for an interview and give full contact information.
• End the release with a standard short description of your program.

The Media Advisory
Purpose. A media advisory is a brief announcement inviting radio, television, and newspaper journalists to interview an expert or to attend an event such as a press conference, scientific meeting, or special lecture.

Content. In general, follow the same format as a news release:
• Begin with a short first paragraph that “hooks” the readers in—Posing the problem? Highlighting an individual?. The second paragraph states the news and its significance. This could be a biographical sketch of the person available for interview, establishing his/her area of expertise, or a description of the topic to be covered at an event.
• Give full (home and office) contact information for the “interviewee” and/or your organization’s media liaison officer. For an event, give the exact date, time, and place.
• Again, keep it short and simple: one or two pages, double spaced (maximum 500 words).
• Attach useful background material such as a biographical sketch of the interviewee, a relevant publication, or an agenda for a meeting.
• Make the text of a lecture or a written summary of points available to journalists at the event.

The Opinion Piece—Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor
Purpose. If you feel strongly about an issue in the news and/or have information that the journalists appear to have overlooked, you may send out an opinion or commentary piece, which could be published as an “op-ed” or letter to the editor. These are printed opposite the editorial page, hence their name. Often research lends itself better to an opinion piece than to a news story.

Content. The Communications Consortium Media Center has compiled a list of tips for writing a successful op-ed and letter to the editor:
1. Reduce your point to a single sentence. For example: “Every child deserves a family,” “The United Nations needs more funding,” or “Women have achieved great strides.”
2. Any point worth making will have to be defended. Muster your best three or four supporting arguments and state each one in a single paragraph. Be specific. Use the active voice.
3. Raise your opponents’ best arguments and challenge them.
4. Ask yourself: What is the minimum background information a reader absolutely has to have in order to grasp this point? Write two paragraphs that summarize this information.
5. Imagine your target reader browsing through the newspaper on a workday morning, rushing to find something interesting. What kind of statement might catch this person's attention? Try to raise questions, surprise, intrigue, or baffle your reader into reading beyond the first paragraph.

6. Now, write the piece. Draft about 1,000 words (four double-spaced pages) maximum. Restate your key points in the final paragraph.

7. Cut out half a page. Eliminate repetition. Check every word and see what you can eliminate. Convert passive-voice sentences to active ones. Give the piece to someone else and ask him/her to review it.

8. Your piece should be about 750 words. Don't forget to include your name, title, and affiliation. Or let your institute’s director be the author—an opinion piece has a better chance of being published if it is signed by a senior, well-known person.

Unlike a news release or media advisory, which go out to all the journalists or a selection of journalists on your list, you should send an opinion piece to one newspaper or other outlet only. Contact the editor responsible for the op-ed page, or the op-ed section of a news show, by telephone. Give a very brief description of what you have to say, ask if the editor is interested, and—if you get a positive response—send your piece, normally by email, fax, or hand delivery. Include a short cover letter with your name and phone number.

You will be notified if your op-ed is considered for publication. Calling and badgering the staff of the op-ed page may not help and could hurt you. Be patient—it can take weeks for a piece to appear. Stay ready to update and revise if requested in the hours before publication. And remember, if they don’t want to publish it, you can try someone else.

The Press Kit: What Goes Out with your News Release

News releases on technical subjects are more likely to be used if you provide journalists with supplementary materials, such as:

- Illustrations—photographs, computer graphics, charts, or drawings—that describe and clarify the subject. Ask the journalists what format, resolution, and file size they want.

- The actual research papers or reports on which the story is based.

- Background information on the work being reported, such as other articles in the field, reference material, and/or a bibliography to which the journalist may refer.

- Biographies and recent photographs of the principal researcher(s) in the story.

- Information on your organization, such as a brochure or factsheet.

Sending Out Your Release

The key to successful media coverage is good personal relationships with individual journalists and their editors. The best news release in the world is useless unless it reaches the right journalist at the right time and gets picked up in the media.

- Don't just mail out a news release. Chances are it will end up in the trash. And don’t just telephone your list of journalists and try to convey all your information on the phone. Chances are they are working under a deadline and can’t really listen to you. Rather, telephone the journalists, ask if they are interested in your story, and then email, fax, or hand deliver your release (ask them which they prefer).
• Your findings may be more appropriate for a “feature,” which is more like a magazine article, rather than a news story. Offer a good feature idea to one particular journalist only. A feature may start with a news release, or you may phone a journalist you know and suggest a story idea. A feature needs more material, including interviews, than a simple news story. You will work with the journalist closely throughout the process.

• Find out the best time to telephone journalists—not when they have a deadline or are just getting ready to go on the air. Be prepared for them to be very rude if you telephone them at a bad time. Ask them when would be a better time and telephone later.

• Target your distribution for each release to individual journalists according to their particular interests, for example a story on child health to a journalist who likes to write about children. You can find out their interests by chatting with them and by reading their articles or watching/listening to them on the air. Journalists will be more likely to use your releases if they only receive material that really interests them. Your media list should be categorized to make sure that your reach just the right journalists and don’t burden others with material they are unlikely to use.

• Journalists tend to change jobs more often than many other professionals. Keep your media list up-to-date by following which releases result in coverage and keeping in personal contact with key journalists.

• When you establish contact with journalists, offer to provide them with a list of your staff including their areas of expertise and full contact information. Your goal is to get yourself and your colleagues into the journalists’ “little black book.”

• A news release that is related to a specific event should reach journalists well before the event takes place. Mail or fax your release well in advance or, better yet, have it delivered personally.

• If you miss the event (“news peg”), don’t send a release at all except possibly to magazines or other less-frequent publications that may still be interested.

After Your Release Goes Out

• If your news release or opinion piece is rejected, do not despair. You may want to make revisions and submit an opinion piece to another publication. Or try sending out another news release in a few weeks or months on another topic. Your piece may have arrived during a very busy week with lots of competition. Often it is just a matter of your news release or opinion piece being in the right place at the right time.

• If your piece is printed, make copies and send them to colleagues, elected officials, donors, reporters, and others key individuals whom you wish to reach. This is an excellent way to get your message to your target audience.