

Tips for Writing Press Releases

How to Become a “Go To” Organization for the Media

Think of a press release as a story you are writing for a newspaper. The best way to learn how to write a press release is to read *Associated Press* stories and copy that format and style. All news releases answer the five “W” questions: who, what, when, where and why; and one “H” question: how. The answers to these questions must pass the “so what?” test. Your information must be new, interesting and useful to the reporter’s readers. Here are the core elements:

1. Basic formatting appears at the top:

For immediate release: February 25, 2005

Contact: Staff member at 202-xxx-xxxx and email address. (Note: The person who fields calls must be able to answer any question a reporter has or be able to get the answer right away. If you can’t answer the question or provide a quote, a reporter working on deadline will call down his list of other advocacy groups.)

2. The Headline: The headline should create a “wow” moment. It summarizes what’s happening in a line or two and grabs the reporter’s attention. Your organization’s name will probably appear in the headline so that the reporter knows immediately where the release is coming from and what your position is.

3. The Dateline: (Washington, DC) Tell them where the release came from.

4. The Format: News releases are written in the same inverted pyramid style used by print journalists. The most important information goes first; the remaining paragraphs add detail but could be cut off without losing your main point. Do not save your best points for the conclusion – there isn’t one in a press release and your reader may have moved on by then.

5. The Lead: The most important element of your press release is the first paragraph or lead. Its function is to summarize the story and grab the reader’s interest. It should incorporate as many of the 5 “Ws” of journalism (who, what, where, when and why) as possible.

6. The Quote: In plain English, what is making you mad or glad? How would you explain it to your grandmother or 16 year-old brother – someone who is not immersed in your issue?

Reporters are reading your quote to determine whether their audiences are affected by your news, and how many people are affected. Remember that reporters can use this quote without ever actually talking to you. Do not spend too much time being clever such as: “This is a u-turn on the information superhighway.” Instead, just have a clear and succinct position. For example:

“The wage gap does not exist because of choices women make. Women do not choose to be overlooked for pay raises or to make less money for doing the same job as their male counterparts,” said Jocelyn Samuels, NWLC Vice President for Education and Employment.

“There is no defense for using taxpayer dollars to pay journalists for ‘fake news’ and favorable coverage of a federal program. It’s a scandalous waste, it’s unethical and it’s wrong,” said Ralph Neas, PFAW President. “Armstrong Williams received \$240,000 of our tax money – yours and mine – to create propaganda for a government program. If that’s not illegal, it ought to be.”

7. The body: If you can say it in one page, that’s best. Here are some examples of paragraphs for the body of your release to provide further information:

- a. What are you against?** Will the reporter need more background on the outrage you are drawing attention to? You may need to include a quick explanation of what the problem is. For example: “In fiscal year 2005, the federal government will spend \$170 million on abstinence-only education, including programs that teach stereotypes that undermine girls’ achievement, characterize girls as weak and in need of protection, and present males as sexually aggressive.” That being said, do not spend too much space summarizing what’s been reported already or making the other side’s case for them.
- b. What are you for?** Do you support legislation or a program to solve the problem? Show leadership by offering specific and concrete proposals that you support and the reasons why your approach has been successful.
- c. Statistics and research:** Become a “go to” organization by providing the reporter with EVERYTHING he needs to write the story. This includes background facts and the latest research and statistics from credible sources. It is essential that you cite your authority so that the reporter can rely on your information and not lose valuable time looking up data. For example: “A 2003 study by U.S. Government Accounting Office found that, even after controlling for all the key factors that influence earnings – such as marital status, race, number and age of children, years and hours worked, and job tenure – women still earned, on average, only 80% of what men earned in 2000.”
- d. Show your expertise:** Does your organization have a program to address the problem? If so, describe the program and how it applies. Always be alert to the ways that you can establish your expertise and credibility. Give the reporter a reason to call you for follow-up information or a quote. (Note: While it may be appropriate to talk about what your organization is doing about a problem, your tone is factual, not proud -- as you might be in a fundraising letter or annual report.)

8. Additional Information: Always tell a reporter where she can get more information. Give her a link to your website where the full report is posted or where she can read the open letter for herself. Always include a person’s name and number so the reporter can find someone quickly for more information (this should be at the top after “Contact:”). Become a “go to” organization by giving out your cell phone number and offering 24-hour availability. Run down every fact they need – you’ll become known as a fast, reliable source for news.

9. The end: If you go over one page, put –more- at the bottom of the first page. At the end, put ### or –30-. This lets the reporter know you are finished.

10. Your Mission. After the ###, every release should include a short description of your organization.