



Good morning everyone. Thanks for joining us.

Today, we'll be discussing how to write a good press release.

Before I begin, let me tell you a little about myself.

I come from a background in writing and graphic design with an M.A. from the University of Baltimore in Communications

Last year, I started a web design business catering to musicians, performers and artisans.

As time went on, more and more of my clients were asking if I could do administrative tasks for them in addition to web design.

So, I am in the process of transitioning my business to a traditional VA practice.

Today, we'll discuss everything from choosing newsworthy content to using proper structure for your press release.

We'll also talk a little bit about where and how to send your press release once it's ready. Finally, we'll talk about some common mistakes and how to avoid them.

First, let's talk about choosing a topic for your press release.

The most important thing about writing a press release is to remember that it is not an advertisement.

While a successful press release can help your company acquire new customers, its primary purpose is as a news story.

Following are some examples of newsworthy events you might choose to write about:

- Your company is organizing an event open to the public
- You've received an award or other recognition in your field
- You've released a book or CD; have an upcoming art exhibit, etc.
- You've performed an important community service
- Your company is offering a new product or service
- Your company is offering internships, training programs, classes, or opportunities to volunteer
- You're teaching a course or giving a lecture

These are genuine news stories, which may even result in a request for an interview with a reporter.

However, there are more common events that may result in your business receiving a mention in the business or community section of your newspaper:

- You've opened a new office
- You've completed a degree or training related to your field
- You're hosting an open house
- You have an informational brochure or other publication available for the public

Once you've chosen a topic for your release, you're ready to begin writing.

All right. Let's talk about Journalism 101

In order to write a successful release, there are two important rules of journalism you need to know.

1. All news stories should always tell: Who, What, Where, When and Why.
2. All news stories should be written in the structure of an inverted pyramid. That is, the most important information should come first, followed by items of lesser importance.

This is because many editors cut stories for length beginning at the bottom and working up.

Additionally, your release is going to be read by professional reporters and editors. That means you need to use good sentence structure, proper spelling and proper punctuation. The less work an editor has to do preparing your release for print, the more likely it is to get published.

Two good ways of checking for these things are to read your release out loud and to have a friend or family member proofread it for you. If you read the newspapers on a regular basis (and you should!) you will notice that the writing is concise and to the point. So, You should avoid complicated sentence structure and flowery language. You also need to check all your facts and make sure you have permission to quote other people.

Now, we'll talk about how to put these rules into practice.

Your press release should have four distinct parts: the headline, the lead paragraph (or hook), and the body and resource information.

The headline

This is the number one thing that will grab the attention of the editor (and your prospective readers). Using as few words as possible, explain what the press release is about in a snappy, interesting way. For example, instead of writing, "Local woman publishes brochure on becoming a virtual assistant," try something like this: "Becoming Virtual Assistant Brings Flexibility, Independence."

The opening paragraph (or lead)

This one paragraph should contain all of the five Ws and summarize the information that is to follow. This paragraph should also contain a "hook."

A hook is a quote or fact that will encourage readers to keep reading. Following is an example of a lead paragraph with the key information in brackets.

[HOOK] Mary Smith [WHO] works in her pyjamas and now you can, too. Smith, a professional virtual assistant, has written a book [WHAT] to assist budding entrepreneurs in starting their own virtual assistant businesses. [WHY] "Commuting Down the Hall: A Guide to Becoming a Virtual Assistant," will be available at local bookstores [WHERE] starting on Monday [WHEN].

The body

Here you can expand on the information contained in the first paragraph. Using the above example, you could give more history behind the business, how it changed your life, add quotes, etc. Be sure to structure the information with the most important things first.

The closing paragraph

Here's where you put the appropriate contact and biographical information. You will often see a closing paragraph that reads something like this: "Mary Smith is the owner of Virtual Assistant Company. She can be contacted at..."

The very best way to get experience with the tone of newspaper writing is to read the business section of the newspaper every day from cover to cover

That's because much of what is printed there is press releases sent out by businesses

You will probably see a section called "Up and Coming" which talks about promotions and "Events" as well as short blurbs about local businesses

OK. Here's a list of some very common mistakes and how to avoid them.

- Being long winded – Be brief and to the point. Use short, easy to read sentences. Most press releases should not exceed 600 words.
- Using the wrong format- Always use the proper press release format. Start with your headline, do not type in all caps and end the release with your full contact information
- Writing a boring headline – As I said before, your headline is often the deciding factor in whether the editor reads the press release or not.
- Grammar/spelling errors - Most editors will toss your release in the trash rather than correct your spelling and grammar. It is professional courtesy to have someone proofread your release before you submit it.
- Pestering the editor – Don't call the editor to ask if they have received or will print your release. It's considered unprofessional. It is always up to the editor's discretion what to print.

I would add here that as time goes by, you may develop a personal relationship with an editor at your local paper. At that time, it's certainly okay to call and float an idea or ask what kind of stories they're looking for.

That leads me to my next point, which is figuring out where to send your releases.

Different publications have different preferences for receiving press releases. It has become very common to email or fax releases, but you should confirm this before sending out your information.

You can get a list of local media and their contact information from a search engine, by looking at the editorial page of the publication, or by purchasing a list from a directory service.

I use easymedialist.com, which allows you to compile a customized list of contacts for a very reasonable price. Once you have the contact information, a quick call will ensure you send your information in the proper format. Remember, you're calling to get basic information. This is not the time to discuss how great your release is or why they should print it.

There are services that will "blast" your press release to many different publications for a fee. I have never used one of these services. If anyone has, I'd be interested in hearing about your experience. So, those are the basics of how to write a good press release.

While you're thinking about your questions, let me mention that your local community college is a great resource for inexpensive courses on journalism and writing

Q. Are these rules the same all over the world? I'm in the UK and wondered if these rules will apply here?

A. The etiquette rules might be slightly different, but the journalistic principles are the same
If you read "The London Times" I'm sure you'll get a sense for how style might differ

Q. Would it be possible to show us a "before and after" of a PR so we can see how it works?

A. If you look in the forums, there is an edit that I did of a press release for a young lady there. It was about two weeks ago. Just do a search for press release and it should come up pretty quickly.
One thing to keep in mind is that journalistic style is pretty formal.

Q. In one of our chats we were discussing different places to send press releases. It seems everybody is doing them so we need to get original. What do you think about sending press releases to companies in our respective areas?

A. The nice thing about press releases is that if your information is newsworthy, you don't need to get overly creative. As long as what you're putting out there has value to a paper's readers, they will most likely print it. As far as sending a release to a local company, I would follow the same rules as if you were submitting to a newspaper.

Q. Would it hurt us though to send it to an actual company in case the paper doesn't publish it or delays the publishing for a future date to fit more with an upcoming topic?

A. Not at all. I typically don't send releases to companies, preferring to send a personal letter to a contact instead. I find it gets better results. People (even business people) love receiving hand-written notes on real paper addressed directly to them.

Q. If I were to send a press release to my local media myself and also use a company to do some releasing for me also mainly for web would it hurt me if the release went to my local media twice

A. It might. That's why I use my own contact list rather than use a company to do my releases. As I take on more non-local clients, that may change, though. Luckily, most media outlets opt to receive releases via email so it's a relatively simple thing to send a release to lots of people at once

Q. I find individuals and companies alike are completely naive when it comes to what a virtual assistant is. As such, I wonder if it isn't a good idea to write press releases to companies with that in mind. Do you think the "mystery" of what a VA is and does is an issue?

A. Sure. I think it's still a new enough concept that an explanatory press release could get you a lot of attention. In that case, you might want to write from a more personal angle about how being a VA works with your life and direct it to the lifestyle editor. Work-life balance is a hot topic on the lifestyle pages these days

PRWEB

[alon68] How has that worked for you, Yvonne?

[yvonnemcco] It certainly widely distributes your news release
Nice thing is you get a place to profile your company
you can post testimonials and stuff

I had a call from someone who had found me on prweb

Unfortunately he didn't know the difference between copy writing and copyright, he wanted me to copyright something for him

[alon68] Do the releases get printed?

I find that the personal touch is very important in getting your releases printed. Editors receive hundreds of releases each week and if they know who you are, I think they're more like to print your releases. That can be as simple as a note about how much you liked a recent story, or a thank you note for printing your release. Reporters and editors like to get tips as well, so if you come across something interesting you think would make a good story, share it with them via email. It seems like a lot of work, but good PR is a bargain that can't be beat because it's free! You will get more return on your investment of time in PR than you will spending money on print advertising

If anyone would like me to edit a press release for them, please let me know. It's a service I'll gladly provide free of charge for chat participants

Thank you Adrienne for your time and sharing this valuable information.

This has been fun. Please feel free to PM me if you think of a question later on.

Would you mind if we shared this information with the other forum members that may not have been able to participate today.

Please do. I was going to ask if there was a place to post the transcript or the document I prepared.

I think the press release forum would be a fine place for ongoing discussions. That way it will be available to everyone

Well thank you everyone for joining us and we managed to stay pretty well in the time frame so thank you. We did hit our records of 10 participants a day with 9 at once.

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