

Handout 1: How to write a press release

Writing Tips:

- Write in a clear, interesting way. Avoid buzzwords and always expand acronyms.
- Facts presented clearly are the key.
- Remember to highlight an angle appropriate to the newspaper you're sending your release to. If it's a local newspaper, highlight the local angle.
- Keep your sentences relatively short, with the occasional longer sentence.
- Write in a way that's appropriate to the subject matter.
- Speak the press' language. In most cases, newspapers use Associated Press style, or AP style. By writing in AP style you will gain the respect of the editor or reporter reading your release and also make their lives easier. Look up AP style-- capitalizations, some grammatical rules and other details are different.

Elements of a press release

Some of these common structural elements include:

- **Headline** – used to grab the attention of journalists and briefly summarize the news.

Ensure your headline is clear. This is an example of a headline that works:

“Local Politician joined ABC opposition party”

It is clear, concise, and tells the reader enough that they will want to read on. You can write your headline in bold if you want. Make sure it is large enough to grab attention, but not huge. Still, as long as it can be seen, the way it's presented is not as important as what it says.

- At the top left, under the organization's contact info (if you had to add it) write **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**. It should be in all caps, and you can bold it if you really want. *This is an industry standard, and still necessary to let the media outlet know that you are formally releasing the information.*
- Press releases should be written on **organization letterhead**, if you have it, with contact information and the logo already printed on it.
- **Dateline** – contains the release date and usually the originating city of the press release.
- **Boilerplate** – generally a short "about" section, providing independent background on the issuing organization, or individual.

- **Introduction** – first paragraph in a press release, that generally gives basic answers to the questions of who, what, when, where and why. Often the first paragraph is all that gets read, so it should summarize the nature of your event or news item with the specifics of Who, What, Where, When, and Why -- the why being why it's important. If you write it correctly, we'll read on and find out more.
- **Body** – further explanation, statistics, background, or other details relevant to the news. Make sure you double space your press release, and keep your margins wide. It's easier on the eyes. Remember that your release should be no longer than it absolutely needs to be. Usually, there is never a reason for a press release to be longer than two pages. One page should generally be enough. If it leaks onto a second page, at the bottom of the first page, put this, centered:

-more-

Beyond the first paragraph, expand as much as necessary while still keeping it brief. Flesh out the details, but only the absolutely pertinent ones.

Your last paragraph should mirror the first one - a recap of the important details, but this time with an added call to action, and the contact information necessary for someone to take that action.

- **Close** – A more modern close sign has been the "###" symbol. In different countries, different means of indicating the end of the release may be used, such as the text "ends".
- **Media contact information** – name, phone number, email address, mailing address, or other contact information for the PR or other media relations contact person.

Handout 2: How to hold a press conference

Before the press conference:

As we've discussed, you may have to schedule a press conference on short notice.

If you do have time, however, you and your group or organization will want to start planning at least a week or two before the press conference is to take place. The following steps should help you plan for your press conference:

DEFINE THE MESSAGE.

Define the key message(s) that you and your group are trying to get out to the community. Your goal may be to introduce or shed more light on your issue, to announce a new program or event, to react to a news story or to a criticism of or attack on your effort, or to draw attention to an honor or award your effort has earned. **Whatever the message, it should be summarized in clear 3-5 key points to the press.** If a date, a time, an address or phone number, or other specific information is part of the message – if the purpose of the press conference is to announce an upcoming event, for example – make sure to give it more than once, and to have it displayed prominently. Double- or triple-check any such information to make sure you have it right, both in speech and in print.

SCHEDULE THE DATE AND TIME

You and your group will need to determine a date and time for the press conference, and make sure it doesn't conflict with other press events or media deadlines. One way to find this out is to check with the local media and the wire services, who will know if your press conference conflicts with another. Here are some other tips for scheduling your press conference:

- Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays are the best days for press conferences, as they are considered slower news days. Try to have your press conference on one of these days if at all possible.
- The best time to schedule your press conference is between 10:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m, to ensure maximum coverage by the media. If you schedule it later, you risk missing the afternoon paper or evening news.
- Remember, you are competing with all the other news of the day; so don't be too worried if everyone doesn't show up.

PICK THE SITE

Make sure you pick a location for the press conference that has adequate parking and is not too far away for reporters to travel. Also, pick a site that provides visual interest and a relationship to topic if possible. Other considerations include picking a location relatively free from high levels of background noise (e.g., traffic, telephones, aircraft), and one which has adequate electrical outlets and extension cords for lighting, etc. You will also want to consider the space available at a location, the extent to which the power supply is reliable, and security.

SELECT YOUR PARTICIPANTS

You will want your participants to be knowledgeable and articulate about the issue. They should be able to handle press questioning and scrutiny as well. People with high credibility, such as local politicians, or the director of a local organization may make effective spokespeople. Firsthand testimony from people from the community affected by the issue can be extremely powerful and convincing.

Here are a few tips for participants:

- Be clear and concise – avoid using jargon, acronyms, rhetoric, or inflammatory language, and stifle "ums" and "ahs." You want to draw attention to the issue, not distract the audience with your words.
- Assume the audience is intelligent – avoid sounding patronizing.
- Don't fiddle with or clutch anything -- it's distracting and makes you appear nervous.
- Appearance counts – participants should be dressed neatly and appropriately for the occasion.
- Always tell the truth. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Don't exaggerate or give figures that aren't backed up by evidence, and don't state opinions as fact, or make charges that can't be proven.

In addition to the press conference participants, **you will need to find a moderator who is experienced with the press and the issue.** He or she will be in charge of convening the press conference by introducing the issue and participants. The moderator also answers questions or directs them to the appropriate participants.

If you and your group are new at this, you may want to attend at least one other press conference to get a feeling for what they are like. Even if you are very experienced in this area, it may be a good idea to conduct a dress rehearsal. **Speakers should have scripts to memorize the 3-5 key points, and to make sure to speak no longer than 3-5 minutes each.**

CONTACT THE MEDIA

The first step in contacting the media is to create a comprehensive mailing list of assignment editors at television stations, news directors at radio stations, and at major newspapers, and editors at weekly newspapers. Others you'll want to be sure to include on your list are reporters you have worked with before, contacts in the media you may have, and reporters who may have covered the issue in recent months.

Build relationships with reporters. If you make their job easier—they may help you out one day, too.

You will also want to have a press advisory prepared and mailed about one week ahead of time to inform the media about the press conference. A press advisory is similar to a press release, with the difference being that press advisories can be used for background information to your media contacts. The format is basically the same as that of a press release.

FOLLOW UP WITH THE MEDIA.

After you and your group have mailed the press advisories to the media, you will want to follow up your press advisory with phone contact to the major media outlets. Give your press advisory three days to arrive, then begin your telephone follow-ups with the people you sent your press advisory to. Also, follow up a second time the morning of the press conference.

Handout 3: Press Conference checklist

Before the press conference, you have:

- ___ Started planning at least a week or two before the press conference is to take place.
- ___ Planning steps -- you have:
 - ___ Defined the issue and key messages that you and your group are trying to get out to the community.
 - ___ Determined a date and time for the press conference, and made sure it doesn't conflict with other press events or media deadlines.
 - ___ Followed other tips for press conferences, such as scheduling the conference for a slower news day, scheduled your press conference is between 10:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.
 - ___ Picked a location for the press conference that is not too far away for reporters to travel.
 - ___ Selected and trained participants who will be knowledgeable and articulate about the issue, who have high credibility, and, if possible, people from the community affected by the issue.
 - ___ Found a moderator who is experienced with the press and the issue. He or she will be in charge of convening the press conference by introducing the issue and participants. The moderator also answers questions or directs them to the appropriate participants.
 - ___ Attended at least one other press conference to get a feeling for what they are like.
 - ___ Conducted a dress rehearsal.
 - ___ Created a comprehensive mailing list of assignment editors at television stations, news directors at radio stations, and at major newspapers, and editors at weekly newspapers.
 - ___ Had a press advisory prepared and mailed about one week ahead of time to inform the media about the press conference.
 - ___ Followed up your press advisory after three days with phone contact to the major media outlets.
 - ___ Followed up a second time the morning of the press conference.
 - ___ Developed a press kit, if your group can afford it; or, if a press kit is beyond your budget, a press advisory.
 - ___ Checked the location of electrical outlets for microphones and lights in the room where the press conference will be held.
 - ___ Set up a table long enough to seat all your spokespeople, with name cards.
 - ___ Provided enough seating in the room for reporters and their supporting equipment.
 - ___ Displayed visuals as a backdrop to your speaker's table: charts, posters, etc.
 - ___ Set up a sign-in pad for attendance.
 - ___ Provided a podium for the moderator.
 - ___ Had tea and water set up for the press conference.

At the press conference:

- ___ Welcome members of the press as they arrive.
- ___ Have members of the press sign in, with their affiliation, and give each of them a press kit or copy of the press release.
- ___ Seat the press conference participants behind the table facing the seated reporters.

- ___ Check the sign in pad to see which media outlets are represented. You may also want to make personal contact with major media representatives before or after the press conference.
- ___ Start approximately on time
- ___ Record the event, for your own records, and for possible media use.
- ___ Have the moderator welcome the press, and introduce the issue and participants.
- ___ Each participant should present for no more than 3-5 minutes, making his/her 3-5 key points.
- ___ After all the presentations, the moderator should entertain any questions from the press, and direct questions to the appropriate participants.
- ___ After about 45 minutes, bring the formal conference to an end. Thank the participants for presenting, and the media for attending.

After the press conference:

- ___ Hand deliver a press release and press packet to media representatives that could not attend.

Handout 4: General principles for interviews

These general principles apply to all communications but are particularly worth bearing in mind when conducting a media interview.

- **Prepare well but don't over prepare** - preparation is vital in communications. Think about your arguments, your language and your presentation. Have key statistics and evidence to hand. Try not to over prepare otherwise there is a danger your response will sound automated. Try to make your answers sound as natural as possible.
- **Be clear - aim for clarity.** Language must always be relevant to its audience, concise and accurate. Don't over-elaborate, deal with facts of which you are unsure, or get lost in the detail.
- **Banish jargon** – jargon (for instance, acronyms) is the enemy of good communications. It is an exclusive language that turns people off and makes you look detached. Think about the words you use – and make an effort to explain things in language that everyone understands.
- **Be proactive** - being on the front foot gives you more control. Try to tackle potentially difficult issues early on to avoid a difficult situation later.
- **Tackle negatives firmly** - inaccuracies must be challenged as they can become accepted truths. Where things are not working it is important to show determination to tackle them.
- **Remember your key messages** - think about where and how you can use your key messages. Find examples to articulate your messages and press them home.
- **Answer the question** - you should try to get your key messages across when you can but not at the expense of answering the question directly. If you ignore the question, you will irritate the interviewer and more importantly the audience.
- **Be people focused** - put people's concerns at the centre of what you say, and how you say it.

Remember the following five points before the tape recorders roll:

- Relax
- Prepare
- Be open
- Answer questions directly
- Engage the interviewer (eye contact).

Handout 5: Reactive interviews

Questions to ask the journalist

- Where are you from?
- What is the story?
- Where did you get the story?
- Who else have you spoken to?
- Who else will you be speaking to?
- What is your deadline?

Questions to ask yourself

- What will my organization get from this?
- Am I the right person to be doing this?
- Do I know enough?
- Do I have the seniority to promote policy?
- What is my message?
- What does the journalist want out of it?

Handout 6: Dos & Don'ts of Interviewing

- **DO** keep answers short. You may do a television interview for 30 minutes, but the average sound bite is 10 to 20 seconds long, so be clear and concise.
- **DO** communicate your messages. Answer questions, but don't be distracted from communicating your messages.
- **DO** use first hand examples and descriptive language. Communicating personal experiences can be dramatic and powerful. Use them as often as possible. Describe an experience relating your civil society work, or explain what influenced your position on an issue. Put statistics in meaningful terms, such as "two thirds" instead of "more than 60 percent".
- **DO** use plain Language. Keep the audience in mind, and speak in terms familiar to them. Avoid jargons. Don't use questionable humor (self-effacing humor is best), profanity, or any kind of derogatory language.
- **DO** pause before answering. Take a brief moment to consider your response. Even for radio and television, this pause will seem thoughtful and natural.
- **DO** answer the questions. It's best to answer even tough questions, or your credibility with the audience may be damaged. But remember, you're not obligated to agree to the interviewer's statements, and your mission is to deliver your messages.
- **DO** take the high ground. Always respond in a positive way, and turn negative questions or comments into positive statements. Reporters often will ask a negative question or plant a buzzword in a question to get you to repeat it, if only in denial. This makes for colorful quotes. Always respond by answering with positive statements and replacing objectionable words with more acceptable terms.
- **DO** question facts, if necessary. If confronted with findings or statistics you're not familiar with or you believe may be incorrect, say, "I'm not familiar with those statistics so I really can't comment on that matter" or "based on [cite other statistics], the most important thing to remember is [statement that communicates your message]".
- **DO** use body language effectively. Studies show that voice inflection and body language are even more important than the words themselves when it comes to how messages are received.

To help people focus more on your messages, keep your arms loose, and gesture naturally. This will help you appear calm and confident. Don't clasp your hands together, cross your arms or legs, put your hands in your pockets, or adopt any posture that prevents you from moving naturally. Strive for a relaxed, animated face. Avoid sympathetic nodding, which could be interpreted as agreement. Smile, raise your eyebrows, and use natural expressions.

- **DON'T** ramble. Reporters often wait before asking their next question to encourage you to keep talking. Deliver your message concisely then stop talking and wait for the next question.
- **DON'T** discuss hypothetical situations or unfamiliar matters. If asked about a situation or case of which you have incomplete information, or about a hypothetical situation, respond by discussing the issue instead. Say, "I can't respond to hypothetical situations, but if you're asking about the issue of [state the issue], it's clear that [state your message]".

- **DON'T** argue or interrupt. You don't have to agree, but don't argue either. And don't interrupt. Other guests are another matter. You may need to jump in when another guest is talking to correct misinformation or to comment.
- **DON'T** lose your temper. You can tell a reporter you prefer not to comment (explain why), but never get angry. In taped interviews especially, viewers may see only your angry response and not hear the question that prompted it.
- **DON'T** lie or bluff. If you don't know an answer, say so. You can damage your credibility by speculating incorrectly. If you should know the answer but don't, offer to research the answer, and then be sure to follow up.

Handout 7: TV interviews checklist:

- **Do** keep eye contact with your interviewer and do not move your eyes around as this makes you look shifty.
- **Do** not worry about using your hands. Much of it will almost always be out of shot and anyway it looks natural. However, don't cross your arms. It makes you look on the defensive. Always maintain an open posture.
- **Do** not refer to notes. You have to look up and down which makes you look uncertain about your facts.
- **Smile if appropriate.** It takes an effort, but turns a boring looking person into a warm human being. If, however, you are talking about redundancies, illnesses or other personal tragedies, then a smile is quite wrong.

Television News Interview Tips

Use the same tips as those for print interviews, but add the following:

- **Tip 1:** Talk in sound bites. Although the camera may film you for 15 minutes, you will only be on the air for about 10 to 20 seconds (unless it's a documentary), so use brief, concise statements.
- **Tip 2:** Use memorable words. State your message clearly and powerfully.
- **Tip 3:** Look your best. Don't wear multiple patterns (e.g., stripes or checkers) or colors because it causes vibrating lines on the camera. Jewel-tone colors work well. Avoid large earrings or jewelry that could be distracting.
- **Tip 4:** Concentrate on the interviewer, not the camera. Maintain eye contact with the interviewer and smile.
- **Tip 5:** Talk to the floor manager and camera crew prior to the show. One of their responsibilities is to help you do a great job by making you comfortable. Don't be afraid to ask questions or for assistance (e.g., water).
- **Tip 6:** Watch your body language. Stand or sit straight. Don't fold your arms, and appear open and in control. Don't let your shoulder blades touch the back of your chair.
- **Tip 7:** Television talk shows. Don't be afraid to engage in discussions when there are other people on the show with you. This is essential to communicating your message.
- **Tip 8:** Stand-up interviews. Take command of your space by standing with one foot slightly ahead of the other, toward the interviewer.

Follow the same tips for telephone interviews

- **Tip 1:** Make sure you can hear questions clearly. If you are even slightly uncomfortable with the volume or connection, say so.
- **Tip 2:** Be sure you can pronounce the interviewer's name correctly.
- **Tip 3:** Have facts readily available. Consider using note cards.
- **Tip 4:** Use descriptive language to illustrate your points to help the audience visualize what you're talking about.

- **Tip 5:** If the interviewer's voice seems distant, resist speaking louder.
- **Tip 6:** Don't talk over the interviewer's question.
- **Tip 7:** Be careful about what you're saying when you're on the air live.
- **Tip 8:** If you're taping the interview, and you didn't make your points clearly, ask to be taped again.

Handout 8: Preparing for the Radio interview

If a radio station calls, it is helpful to have a checklist of questions to ask them.

- Where and when will you be interviewed?
- Will you be in the studio or down-the-line (on the telephone)? What is the address of the studio? How long will it take you to get there? Will the radio station send a car to pick you up? Does the timing make a difference to what your audience will expect you to say?
- Is the interview live or recorded?
- If the interview is pre-recorded it means that you can fluff your lines and ask to repeat what you've said. This reassures a lot of people but remember that pre-records can be edited later so, your carefully considered comments may be shortened or even cut.
- How long is the interview?

Most interviews are two or three minutes long at maximum. This is why it is vital to think about what you want to say in advance. In the pressure of the interview and with limited time it is easy to overlook a key message.

- Who will be conducting the interview?
- What do you know about the interviewer? Do they know your organization? What is their attitude to you likely to be? If the journalists at the radio station have never heard of your organization or know little about the issue you are being asked to talk about you may want to think about how you will give some context in a succinct and non-jargon way.
- Who is listening?
- What age are the people listening to the radio show? What are their interests? What are they likely to know or think about the issue you are talking about? What information will they expect from you?
- Who else is participating in the show?
- Is it someone who will criticize you or disagree with your views? What is their line likely to be? Have you thought about what your response will be?
- What will the line of questioning be?
- What questions are you likely to be asked? Do you have all the information you need at your fingertips e.g. facts and figures. Is there a press release you should be familiar with?

Top tips for radio interviews

- **Do** maintain eye contact with the interviewer. It will give you many more clues as to how the interview is going – such as whether you are being boring or whether the interview is about to end. It also helps you sound as though you are talking to a real person.
- **Do not** worry about 'humming and erring'. It just sounds like a real person talking and in fact, few listeners ever notice it.
- **Do not** take notes into the interview with you. They rustle and often make you sound stilted.

Handout 9: Face-To-Face Interviewing Tips

Print reporters are looking for quotes, so be sure your messages are quotable. One of the dangers of a face-to-face interview is that you may relax too much. Be careful not to become too "chatty" because you could accidentally mention something that plants a seed for a story you don't want printed.

- **Tip 1:** Be prepared. Find out exactly what the reporter wants to discuss. Identify two or three key messages you want published. Be aware that a preliminary question, can lead to another story.
- **Tip 2:** Relax and be personable. Keep a good sense of humor.
- **Tip 3:** Support your facts with written materials, if possible. Provide charts, news articles, and data from reputable sources.
- **Tip 4:** Be honest; avoid even the appearance of deception. Dishonesty, or the appearance of it, can severely damage your reputation.
- **Tip 5:** Use body language and facial expressions to help convey your message, even though you're not on camera. This will help persuade your interviewer, who in turn may persuade the readers.
- **Tip 6:** If you want to speak "off the record" or "for background only," make sure the reporter agrees. If you feel the reporter needs further clarification, and you want to be sure you won't be quoted, say this is "off the record" or for "deep background and not to be attributed to me or quoted," and "is that okay?" If the reporter agrees, then continue. Be aware, a reporter does not have to honor this request.

Telephone Interviewing Tips

Use all the tips for face-to-face interviews and add the following:

- **Tip 1:** Don't use a speaker phone. The reporter may not be able to hear you clearly, which increases your chance of being misquoted.
- **Tip 2:** Stand up. Doing this not only will help you be more energized, it also will help you speak more succinctly during the interview.
- **Tip 3:** Use a convincing voice tone. Vary your inflection and pause to emphasize points and to make them more persuasive and interesting.