

# Writing and Using Press Releases

A press release, also known as a news or media release, is simply a written statement distributed to the media. They can announce a range of news items: scheduled events, personnel promotions, awards, new products and services, etc. They can also be used in generating a feature story. Reporters are more likely to consider a story idea if they first receive a release. It is a fundamental tool of PR work.

## Elements:

**The Details:** At the top of the press release, include the following important information:

- If the press release is for immediate release, you may write "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE." If the release is embargoed, put "EMBARGOED UNTIL..." with the date you want the story released. A release with no release date is presumed to be for immediate release.
- The date of the press release
- Who to contact for more information, and a phone number

**The Headline:** In about ten words or less you need to grab the attention of the editor. The headline should summarize the information in the press release, but in a way that is exciting and dynamic. Think of it as a billboard along a highway - you have just a few words to make your release stand out among the many others editors receive on any given day.

- Do not waste time writing the headline until the release is done. The simplest method to arrive at the press release headline is to extract the most important keywords from your press release. Now from these keywords, try to frame a logical and attention-getting statement.
- Headlines are written in bold and are typically larger than the press release text. Conventional press release headlines are present-tense.

**Opening Paragraph:** This begins with the originating city of the press release. Sometimes called a summary lead, your first paragraph is critical. This paragraph must explain "the five Ws and one H" of the story – the who, what, when, where, why, and how. This paragraph must summarize the press release, with the following paragraphs providing the detail.

- The opening paragraph must also contain the hook: the one thing that gets your audience interested in reading more. A hook is not a hard sell or a devious promotion -- it's just a factual statement.

**The Body:** The press release should be written as you want it to appear in a news story. Using a strategy called the inverted pyramid, the body of the press release should be written with the most important information and quotes first. This inverted pyramid technique is used so that if editors need to cut the story to fit space constraints, they can cut from the end without losing critical information.

- The body copy should be compact. Avoid using very long sentences and paragraphs. Avoid repetition and over use of fancy language and jargon.
- Provide references to any statistics, facts, and figures raised in the press release. Refrain from expressing personal opinions unless they are done in quotes. Draw conclusions from facts and statistics only - not general opinion.

## Additional Background Information:

- Provide one paragraph of information about your organization, keeping it to about five or six lines. The paragraph should describe your organization, its purpose, and other key information.
- At the end of this section, point to your Web site if you have one. The link should be the exact and complete URL. For example: <http://www.mh.alabama.gov>.

**Signal the End:** End the press release with three # symbols, centered directly underneath the last line of the release. This is a journalistic standard.

## **Additional Tips for Writing Effective Press Releases:**

- Write the press release on company letterhead to add more credibility.
- The length of a press release should be no more than one to two pages.
- Tie it together. Provide some extra information links that support your press release. These should be listed after the #### symbols indicating the end of the release.
- The timing of the press release is very important. It must be relevant and recent news.
- Avoid jargon or specialized technical terms. If accuracy requires the use of an industry-specific term, define it.
- Writing in Third-Person Voice. A press release must be presented objectively from a third person point of view. Remove "you", "I", "we" and "us."
- Provide "Quotes" From the Newsmakers. Put the most important message down into a quote. Journalists always use quotes from the newsmakers to add an authoritative voice to their reports. If the press release contains quotes that are important and relevant to the story, chances are high that they will be replicated in full in the published article.
- Always remember that editors are overworked and understaffed. If you can make life easier for them, you're more likely to get coverage. If you write a press release that's close to the way the editor will actually publish it, it may see publication with minimal editing.
- Tips for Submitting Press Releases:
  - When e-mailing a press release, do not make the subject line of your e-mail "press release." You will only blend into the crowd. Get the editor's attention by making the subject line your "grabber" headline.
  - A follow-up call can help develop a press release into a full story.