How to Write a Press Release

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Publishing

Part 1: Determining the newsworthiness of an article

Before you begin writing a press release, you must make sure what you're pitching is newsworthy. If you cannot find a newsworthy angle to guide your writing, then a press release is not an option worth pursuing.

What should you be looking for?

A story! News, in essence, is something that is understandable and relatable to a wide audience. But ultimately, news is an interesting story that people will want to read. **Note: the more newsworthy characteristics your story has, the better.**

News should…

Be timely (or topical)

Is the research new or does it provide a "new" way of thinking about an old issue? Is it happening now? Or can it be tied to something that's currently in the news/on the public agenda (i.e. topical)?

Be relevant to its audience

Will the research strike a chord with the public? Reporters are interested in findings that will affect the lives of many people (and a small group of researchers does not count). They are also interested when research will only affect a few, but does so in a startling way.

Have an unusual or even unique angle

News that is surprising or unexpected is always of interest, like items that are a first, ground-breaking, a new discovery or an anomaly.

Have an element of trouble or controversy*

For journalists, bad news is good news. Caution must be exercised here, as ultimately the long-term effects of negative coverage must be evaluated before a press release is delivered and you should not misrepresent findings or exaggerate.

Have a human interest

Will the general population be impacted directly? Will the research affect their bank accounts, cure their illnesses, or radically alter their behavior? As with relevance, research that can be seen to significantly affect the general public is always more likely to obtain coverage.

Or in other words, news is TRUTH

- **T**opical
- **R**elevant
- **U**nusual
- **T**rouble
- **H**uman interest

A press-worthy paper should…

- Have at least two elements of **TRUTH**
- Present new research or add new information to previous research
- Appeal to a specialist AND a general audience – make sure the audience you send the release to correlates to that specific audience
- Have a message that can be explained in lay terms

And should not be…

- Too obscure
- Too technical
- Not new enough
- Only conducted to build theory
- Too early in its development
- Too small a study

Why use this selection process?

Journalists receive much more material than they can reasonably read and digest—certainly more than they can use. They pay attention to materials from sources that make a special effort to send out only what is significant news. For this reason we ask you to consider the following:

- Is this a good quality study? Was the peer review thorough?
- Will this reflect well on the research field and the journal?
- Are the authors 'media-friendly:' able to handle difficult questions and—most important of all—available and responsive?
- Are there too many possible confounding factors or biases that might make it unreliable?
- Is there a newsworthy finding? If relevant, how statistically significant are the findings?
- For scientific research, does the paper spell out absolute risk as well as relative risk?

*Negative coverage

While the media may love a "bad news" story, there may be repercussions from negative publicity that affect the reputations of the author or the journal. It is important to consider the possible outcomes of negative coverage before crafting a press release.

- Could this paper be trivialized?
- Does the conclusion carry a mixed message that could be interpreted in a way you may not like?
- Were animals involved?
- Is there outdated terminology? Is it racist/sexist/homophobic/anti-Semitic etc.?
- Who is going to add a comment or be available for media interviews?
- Will the benefits of publicity outweigh any potential negative coverage?

No coverage?

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that an article will receive coverage. The nature of the news is such that there are quiet days and days where only one topic will dominate the news. If there are a lot of newsworthy stories on a particular day, some stories will be dropped. Although some stories can be delayed until a new slot becomes available, time-sensitive news will often be dropped permanently.

Part 2: Writing the release

While there is no uniform way to write a release, there are best practices to heighten the chances your piece will stand out.

Step 1: Reviewing information for your release

Contrary to common belief, releases are for journalists who likely don't have niche knowledge in the specific field. For this reason, you should approach the release as a journalist by pinpointing what is interesting to the general public, academic world, or larger subsets of academics such as researchers in education or technology/educational technology.

Some questions to consider as you read a research article:

- What are the big numbers, new findings, or interesting changes?
- This may be interesting to you, but why is it interesting to journalists or their audiences?
- What key info is shared in the abstract, introduction and conclusion?

Step 2: "Translating" the article

Again, you are writing this release for an audience that may not know the specifics of the related industry. This means you will have to translate the article from a subject-specific, academic voice to one that can be understood by lay people. It is useful to keep this question in mind when beginning to write the release: "How would you explain it to your friend over coffee?"

You'd want to stay away from using industry-specific jargon, or if incredibly important to the research, providing a clear and concise definition or example early on in the discussion. However, refrain from using this jargon in the press release's title and introductory sentence.

Step 3: Writing the release

Here is where you put the most compelling information to use. A press release is structured similarly to a funnel: the biggest news goes at the top, while the smallest remains at the bottom. You have only a few seconds to capture a journalist's attention; they will not read on past the first few lines if they are not intrigued.

What hooks a journalist and keeps them intrigued?

- A **title** that accurately and clearly depicts the content in as few words as possible (set a goal of five words)
- A release's **first sentence**. If the release focuses on the article level, does the paper make any surprising claims?
- **Who, what, where, when, why and how?** Flesh out the details of the article clearly and concisely.
- A **quote** in the body. There are two ways to obtain a quote: you can either write the quote and then get it approved by the spokesperson, or you can ask them to craft their own quote. Either way, **the quote must be approved** before sending out the release. For an article, the authors or editors, or even something from the article itself, will work.

Step 4: Editing the release

Even if you are a grammar expert, having another pair of eyes read over your release is useful for making sure your language and point come across in the intended way. Make sure the release follows the Associated Press Guidelines, includes definitions for all acronyms and is clear in intent and purpose.

The final step is to add in technical components:

- At the end of your release, center **three hashtags** (###) on the page to indicate to your reader that the news component is finished
- Following the hashtags, include the organization's **boilerplate** and that of any other organization(s) involved.
- Use Arial 12, bold, for the title and Arial 10, normal, for the body to ensure consistency across the release.
- If your release will help find interested advertisers, include contact information for more information.

Step 5: Dissemination of the release

Consult with your organization on how best to distribute your press release and identify which outlets to distribute to.

# Part 3: Tips and tricks for writing a press release
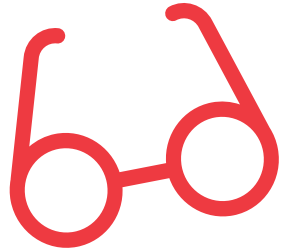
Step 1: Reading the article
- Assume the mind of a journalist
- Read the abstract, key points, introduction, and conclusion
- Make notes of the most compelling and important information
  - This could mean: drastic numbers, a big change, new findings
  - Ask yourself: "This may be interesting to me, but is it interesting to journalists? Why?"

Step 2: "Translating" the article
- How would you explain the findings or outcomes to a friend over coffee?
- Go easy on industry specific jargon
  - Do not include this jargon in title or introduction
  - When/if you do include, provide a brief and comprehensive definition
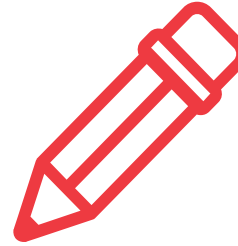
Step 3: Writing the release
- Utilize the most critical and interesting information
- Think of a funnel: biggest news at top, smallest at bottom
- The introductory paragraph, especially the first sentence, should hook the readers
  - Leave the reader wanting more, but not guessing
  - Make the subject immediately clear
- The body should address the basics: who, what, where, when, why, and/or how without going into too much detail.
- Use quotes (i.e. from the author, key industry players, etc.) to make your release more personal and emphasize key points
- Craft a clear, eye-catching title

Step 4: Editing the release
- Have a second pair of eyes read it over
- Add in a boilerplate(s) and hashtags (###) to indicate the release's end

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