



Euroscience working group "Science Communication"

How to write a successful press release

Press releases are a very established way to get in contact with journalists and to engage an editor's attention. One of their advantages is that a single press release can reach thousands of journalists at once. One disadvantage is that thousands of other scientists and press information officers have this same idea! Each day editors receive hundreds of press releases - and hundreds go straight in their bin. A well-written press release could, however, open doors for you. It is your business card to the editorial offices.

This tip sheet is about how to write a successful release so that your research has a better chance to be covered by the mass media.

What is your aim when writing a press release?

Although this may sound a bit like a needless question it is worth thinking about it for a few seconds: It is *not* your aim to overwhelm the journalist with countless scientific terms, with complex sentences and with the many details collected during long-time research. Even if this may impress some colleagues at scientific conferences, many journalists will ignore such releases as it is too much effort for them to transform your content into what their public will understand. Rather, your aim is to arouse the journalist's interest in the few seconds he spends scanning your release. It is also your aim to provide journalists with content in such a way that they can use it immediately.

When should you write a press release?

Journalists want a current aspect in what your release is about because they are writing on news. But what they regard as "new" can differ from your perception: The publication of research findings in a professional journal has news value, even if it has long been discussed in specialist circles. Did you win a prize and the ceremony is in the next couple of days? This is news to the media even if you knew of it long before. On the other hand, it is no longer "new" for journalists when a release about an expedition comes two weeks after it has finished.

Think also about writing a release when things happen that don't seem to have too much in common with your own research at first sight. For example, a motion picture on young Queen Victoria that is going to start in the near future is an excellent peg if you are an expert on this era who could add interesting aspects to a topic that is already covered by media everywhere.

How should a press release be structured?

Lack of proper structure in a press release frequently leads it to be misunderstood or rejected by editorial offices. A press release is not a simplified version of a scholarly article with an introduction at first, followed by methods, discussion, results and finally a conclusion. Press releases conform to different, established rules:

First come the **formalities**: Use a paper with your normal letterhead and prefix the words "Media Release" or "Press Release" to the release's title. Don't forget the dateline. Your release should be no longer than one side of A4 paper, containing everything that journalists might find important.

The **title** of your press release is highly important to its success, as it is what makes the journalist decide within a few seconds whether to read the release or not. Therefore you should avoid enigmatic headlines like "Lost into space" as this could mean anything. Even if it is your institution's annual event, titles like "Invitation to our press conference" are trivial.

The title should attract interest, contain the key words and tell at a glance what the story is about: “Stonehenge road re-think threatens recovery of rarest bird“.

The **text** starts with your conclusion, with the most important, useful or innovative features for the reader: “Plans to build a road tunnel to ease congestion near Stonehenge could soon be scrapped, threatening the government-backed recovery of one of Britain’s rarest birds.” This is meant to draw the reader into the story, and he knows the most important facts soon. Then conclusions and results are ranked in the order of decreasing importance. The background of the story comes at the end.

The five so-called “W questions” have to be answered quite early in the text: Who has researched or said something? What is new? Where did the research take place? When did this happen? Why is it important? Highlight what is new in your press release and tell the recipient why he is getting it at this particular moment: “Two over-ground alternatives to the tunnel – set to be detailed in consultation documents due today – would destroy nesting and roosting sites of the secretive stone curlew.”

It is important not to pack too much technical detail into the text. There’s no room for passive constructions and nominal style in press releases as this makes your text very formal. For example, instead of “It was found that ...” or “The finding of scientists is ...” you could write “Miller and her team showed that ...”. Try to write as clearly as possible – you don’t want to impress your colleagues but instead aim to convince a journalist that you have something interesting to tell (and that you are able to do so).

What kind of information could be attached to your release?

Of course, one page is a very limited space. But you have the possibility to offer separately additional material that you should indicate briefly on your press release: Statistics, background texts of any kind, biographical information etc. If possible you should offer good photos, graphics or film footage (by the way: the media expects this to be for free to them). Don't forget to indicate a picture's captions and source, and make sure that your institution really has the right to forward this material to the media. You should also indicate whether more information can be found on your institution’s website. A contact address is important in a press release, because editors usually have further questions. The contact should be available for at least one week after publication of the press release.

Journalism - Media Training - Archaeology
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