

Lesson 3: Writing a Press Release

There are some clear rules when writing a press release – ignore them at your peril. Don't forget that before you write your press release you need to ask yourself one question, as discussed in the last module:

Is there news value in this story?

If you come out with an unbiased, well researched YES, then it is time to get writing.

The first step is drafting your release according to a particular set of rules. These rules are designed to make it very easy for journalists to quickly assimilate the release and decide whether it is something they are interested in. It will take them minutes to come to their conclusion.

What should go into a press release?

If you answer the following questions with your press release you should nail the content requirements. Before you do that though remember that press releases are **written in third person**. So you are writing about yourself and your business as though you are reporting news – you do not know yourself. You cannot slip into first person 'I' or 'We' at all unless you add in quotes.

Now answer the following questions about your news to form a draft:

Who? Who are the key players — your company, anyone else involved with the product?

Who does your news affect/who does it benefit?

- What? What is new?
- Why? Why is this important news — what does it provide that is different?
- Where? Where is this happening/is there a geographical angle/is the location of business relevant?
- When? What is the timing of this? Does this add significance?
- How? How did this come about?

Writing down the answers to these questions will give you a great starting point. The answers then need to be put together in short punch sentences. This part is all about perseverance. Take time out and keep working at it until it starts to make sense and sounds like a strong piece of content. It can take several drafts to get it right.

Ideally your first paragraph will capture the essence of your press release in a powerful and engaging manner. This section should be no more than two sentences (each around 25 words or less). You are aiming to hook your audience's attention immediately. Each subsequent paragraph will provide more information and detail as you build up the layers.

What angle should I focus on in the release?

This is all about your target audience and what they are expecting to read in material produced by this press/media organisation. As we talked about in Module 5 your target audience is your key concern. What will they find interesting, what will make them want to read on? The angle of your piece needs to marry those expectations and match the tone of other publications the media or press organisation has written to date.

What writing style should I use?

There are some basics to follow here. Sentences should be no more than 25 words long so they are punchy and easily digested by the reader. If you write according to the publication's style and get to the core of the subject quickly and eloquently you have a good chance of grabbing your intended audience's attention.

It should have a factual tone, be short and to the point. If there is anything that needs subsequent explanation add a 'Notes to editors' section.

How do I structure and present the release?

- Timing — for immediate release or embargo?

You need to indicate at the top of the release whether it is for immediate release or under embargo and if so, give the relevant date. Generally, immediate release will be sufficient. It can be frustrating for journalists to receive information under embargo that cannot be published straight away. An embargo does not mean that journalists can't contact you about it however. It just means that you are asking them not to use the information before a particular date.

- Give the release a title

Under the immediate release or embargo heading, give your press release a title. The title is vitally important. This is what will grab the attention of the journalist. It needs to be strong. Most journalists will change the title for press so what you are intending to do here is capture the essence of your release in a short and sharp title.

- Use double spacing

It's good form to use double spacing, with wide margins so that journalist can add notes to it with ease. It also looks cleaner and is easier to read.

- How many paragraphs?

Quite simply as few as you need to get your points across. Do not waffle, go off on a tangent or use over lengthy explanations. If you lose their concentration you have reduced your chances of being published. Keep the copy as succinct as possible. If your release runs to three pages plus, this suggests it's an article rather than a press release.

Get all the important information into the first paragraph because many journalists will only read up to here during the decision process. If you sent this one paragraph alone would they understand what your press release was about – because this is the ideal.

- Ending the press release

Make the end of the press release clear with the word 'Ends' in bold. Once the end has been stated you can then put 'For further information, please contact...' and list your details or the appointed person. Make sure you write a mobile down so the journalist can contact you out of hours. It could be that they need to fill a gap in the paper and need to get hold of you urgently. The more accessible you are the better. Any further information needs to be

added to the 'Notes to editors' section which is placed under the contact information. To make it even easier for the journalist to follow you can number the points included in the 'Notes to editor' section like so:

- 1) Background information of the company
- 2) Images of >>> available
- 3) Subsequent quotes from >>>

Should I include photos with the release?

It is always a good idea to include photographs if you have them as a visual element can enhance a Press Release. Just be careful to avoid excessive branding and where you logo is – could it be cut off when making the image fit the release. It will also be in black and white – will this be a problem? Always include a note that images are available on request in the 'Notes to editors' rather than attaching them and risking the whole release being delivered to the spam box!

That is all you need to know about writing a press release.

Your Lesson Task: Write a practise press release and start reaching out to local journalists via LinkedIn and Twitter – start to establish a base for when something newsworthy comes your way.

The Press release checklist:

1. Decide whether the story has news value and if a release is appropriate.
2. Research the target press and media.
3. Identify the key facts – ask who, what, why, where, when, how?
4. Write in third person
5. Create a direct and easy to follow title.
6. Draft a template structure for your story.
7. Decide who should be quoted from your organisation and if third-party quotes would be useful.

8. Check whether a photo can support the release.
9. Put 'End' at the end
10. And any further information to 'Notes to Editors'

