

Strategic Writing in Public Relations

INTRODUCTION

You're now in hands-on territory. Lessons 2–5 offer you practical guidelines that you'll apply to required writing projects.

From here on, your text descriptions, explanations, and illustrations follow a specific pattern that consists of three parts:

1. **Purpose, audience, and media.** What's the purpose or goal of your message? For whom are you writing your message? What medium or media mix is appropriate for conveying your message?
2. **Format and design.** What's the right or preferred format or design for your message?
3. **Content and organization.** What should the content be and how should it be organized?

From here on, you should consult actual illustrations of different kinds of media. Read through newspapers and other hard copy media. Spend some extra time online checking out news sites, blogs, and social-media content.

ASSIGNMENT 3: WRITING NEWS RELEASES

Read the following assignment. Then read pages 41–75 in your textbook, *Strategic Writing: Multimedia Writing for Public Relations, Advertising and More*.

Objectives

When you complete this assignment, you'll be able to describe and draft

- A traditional news release aimed at journalists
- An announcement news release



- A feature news release
- A hybrid news release
- A social media news release
- A media advisory
- A pitch
- A video news release

News Release Guidelines

This section discusses the many guidelines you should follow when writing news releases.

Purpose, audience, and media. A *news release* provides information about your organization to the media. News releases worth sending should have one or more of the following characteristics:

- The story is *timely* and provides new information.
- The story has *impact* (punch). The news will affect media users' interests. The news should pertain to topics that matter to the target audience.
- The story is *unique*. It's different from other stories. Consider how the headline "Man Bites Dog" would grab readers' attention.
- The story features *conflict*. The story involves clashes of interests or values, such as those of environmentalists and coal companies.
- The story is of *local interest* (proximity). For example, such a story would share that a new widget factory will be built in the target audience's hometown.
- The story deals with a *celebrity*. It feeds on people's apparently insatiable interest in the latest scoop on well-known individuals.

Traditional news releases include announcements, feature stories, and *hybrid stories*, a combination of announcement and feature components. (You'll learn more about hybrid

stories later in this assignment.) From the public-relations perspective, news releases are aimed at journalists and bloggers. Sometimes they're accepted—often to be revised and edited by the recipient—and sometimes they end up in the circular file, along with Twinkie wrappers and cigar butts.

Note: The term *press release* is outdated. *News release* is preferred because it's for all media, not only the print press.

Format and design. Today, the most common medium for submitting news releases is by e-mail. However, if you submit a hard copy of a news release, make sure it's on the organization's letterhead so that the recipient knows from where the release is coming. In addition to the textbook, your keys to this section are Figure 2.1 (e-mail) and Figure 2.2 (letterhead/paper). Note the placement of "For Immediate Release" and "For More Information" in each format.

When an e-mail is formatted for a news release, the subject line is written like a traditional *news headline*. Headlines in the subject line should be explicit and to the point. An example is "Little League Playoff Game Scheduled." E-mail releases should be single-spaced; hard copy releases should be double-spaced to allow editors space for editing.

At the end of the text in an e-mail release, but before the contact information, include a blank line and then type the traditional "-30-" or "###" to signal the end of the story. The same goes for letterhead hard copy, except that the contact information is located at the top of the page.

Note: For various reasons, and especially because of cybersecurity issues, editors, producers, and others who receive news releases don't like opening attachments to e-mails. Therefore, be sure to present your news release in the body text of your e-mail.

Content and organization. A news release headline is written in *newspaper style*. It should act as a "grabber" that both sparks local interests and summarizes the main point. A *dateline*, with the locale written in capital letters, leads a traditional press release. For example, a typical dateline would be written as "TORONTO, Jan. 8—" or simply as "TORONTO—" if the release locale is the main point of interest.

The copy should honor journalistic standards. A classic first line of a news release should include the “4 Ws”—*who, what, where, when*, and, if feasible, *why* and *how*.

Use the *inverted-pyramid technique*, in which the most important point leads the story. Lesser points are added in order of their significance to the story.

Distribution and Follow-Up

Target your release. Networking with media contacts is a good strategy. Online research to check out likely recipients can help. You could also use a distribution service, such as PR Newswire.

Send only one copy of your release to a specific person representing the media mix you’ve selected. For example, you would send one copy each to a selected person at WRIC Radio, TV 4, *The Daily Mirror*, Pants-on-Fire blog, and so on. Follow-up calls may be a good idea—or not. Opinions differ at least as much as specific situations.

Study hint: Be sure to spend extra time reviewing the “Tips” section on pages 49–50 of your text.

Announcement News Releases

Here are the guidelines for writing announcement news releases:

Purpose, audience, and media. A large majority of news releases are *announcements* meant to frame hard news. An example of an announcement is the opening of a new plant division or the unveiling of a new product or service. Announcements are aimed at the same audience as other news releases and are mostly conveyed by the same electronic medium—e-mail.

Format and design. Use the same formatting principles you would use for news releases.

Content and organization. As with other news releases, keep it factual, objective, and to-the-point.

Study hint: The keys for this section are the examples on pages 52–53 of your text. The first is an announcement sent by e-mail. The second is the same announcement presented in a letterhead format.

Feature News Releases

Here are the guidelines for feature news releases:

Purpose, audience, and media. *Feature news releases* are largely human-interest pieces. Presenting the “softer side” of the news, they’re sent out much less often than announcements, and are far fewer in number than journalistic news releases. Therefore, they’re less often picked up by the media. Since the general guidelines for press releases are also used for feature news releases, be sure to review the material.

Format and design. Use the same formatting principles you would use for press releases.

Content and organization. An example provided in your text will help you get the essence of this section. Hallmark Cards sends out feature news releases recounting, for example, the origin of Mother’s Day. In public-relations terms, the research-based Hallmark features enhance the dignity and competence of the Hallmark Company. Feature news releases—like news releases in general—must be objective and unbiased, putting a human face on an organization or, perhaps, on individual employee accomplishments and projects. Feature news releases enhance an organization’s reputation for good corporate citizenship.

Study hint: Be sure to review the sample e-mail-style feature news release on page 55 of your text.

Hybrid News Releases

Purpose, audience, and media, and content and organization. A *hybrid release* combines the characteristics of feature and announcement news releases in one document. The general idea is using a compelling attention-grabber as a lead. That’s the feature component. Next, with a smooth transition, the inverted-pyramid style is used to create the

announcement component of the message. Hybrid news releases tend to be short, and work best when a hard-news story involves a novel human-interest angle.

Format and design. Use the same formatting principles you would use for news releases.

Study hint: Review the sample e-mail hybrid release on page 57 of your text.

Social Media News Releases

Here are the guidelines for writing social media news releases:

Purpose, audience, and media. The primary public-relations “clients” of social media are *bloggers*, who cherry-pick facts and audiovisual content to present what are essentially online essays. So, while an organization’s social media releases are meant to be factual and objective, including opinions only as quotations from specified sources, blog essays tend to offer opinions.

In general, social media news releases differ from traditional press releases in the following ways:

- Social media news releases exist only online, generally on a PR organization’s website.
- Social media news releases don’t use the inverted-pyramid technique; they’re more like fact sheets.
- Social media news releases are usually multimedia, including links to still photos, videos, sound clips, and supporting sites.

Format and design, and content and organization. In the context of public relations, a social media news release is a Web page. The lead is some sort of bold headline, followed by bulleted items under *subheadlines (subheads)*. The subheadlines are also formatted in bold face, except in smaller type.

Study hint: The best way to grasp what one finds on a social media news release Web page is to carefully study the sample on page 61 of your text.

Note that, in a social media news release, viewers are invited to subscribe to an *RSS (Really Simple Syndication)* feed. RSS feeds automatically send press releases and other kinds of online information to anyone who subscribes to the service. If, as is expected, the use of RSS feeds increases, the distribution of an organization’s social media releases will be facilitated.

Study hint: Be sure to study the four “Tips” on page 60 of your text.

Media Advisories

Use these guidelines for media advisories:

Purpose, audience, and media. From a public-relations perspective, the purpose of a *media advisory* is distributing “breaking news” to journalists—typically as a follow-up to a previously submitted press release. They can be e-mailed, faxed, delivered in person, or posted on websites—whatever works best. The essence of any media advisory is to convey a sense of urgency.

Format and design, and content and organization. Once again, the best way to learn what’s in a typical media advisory is to carefully study the sample on page 64 of your text. Notice how the message is organized around the four W’s: *what, who, when, and where.*

Your text has “Tips” on page 63, which offer some useful suggestions. First, *never* send out a not-all-that-urgent release posing as a media advisory. Second, when the media advisory is truly urgent, you can call to confirm that the message got to the selected recipient and offer any additional information.

Pitches

Follow these guidelines when writing pitches:

Purpose, audience, and media. Aimed at a particular journalist or blogger, a *pitch* is a proposal for a project, product, story, upcoming event, film, and just about anything else that requires a PR message to reach people in selected audiences by way of media. In some cases, a face-to-face meeting is the most effective way to pitch a proposed project, product,

or service. In other cases, phone-call pitches aren't a bad idea. But, according to a recent survey by PR Newswire, 90 percent of journalists and bloggers prefer to receive pitches as e-mails.

Format and design. When writing e-mail pitches, follow the guidelines on pages 44–47 of your text.

Content and organization. Your text suggests a four-part pitch technique.

- **Part 1: The hook**—Grab the undivided attention of the journalist or blogger with your first paragraph. Try to do what a talented fiction writer does to hook the reader. In other words, start by showing that the pitch contains an irresistible story. At this point, don't mention your organization. You want the recipient to focus on the story, not your PR firm.
- **Part 2: The fit**—Convince the recipient that your story or idea is relevant. You could write, for example, "It's a perfect fit for *Railway Hobbyist Magazine*." When you can, praise a story written by journalist A or blogger B.
- **Part 3: Yours alone**—Assure the recipient that he or she or will have exclusive access to your story or idea.
- **Part 4: The close**—Declare a deadline for the recipient's response; that is, request a decision. Doing so implies the value of your story. If the recipient is sufficiently enthralled by your pitch, you may get a phone call well before the deadline.

Research has determined that recipients are open to phone-call follow-ups if they liked a well-pitched story. Check out the guidelines for follow-up calls on pages 67–68 of your text. There are at least two outstanding points that may not have occurred to you. First, know your recipient's schedule well enough to call at a convenient time for him or her, not you. Second, do your homework. Be familiar with the recipient's needs and interests.

Study hint: Study the sample e-mail pitch on page 69 of your text.

Video News Releases

Let's now discuss the guidelines of video news releases.

Purpose, audience, and media. Video news releases often look and sound like news broadcasts, but they aren't. A *video news release (VNR)* is a tool used by public-relations organizations and advertisers to promote an organization, a product, or a service. If you watch college football games, for example, you'll see VNRs that publicize a college or university. The sample script included in this section is for a promotional and informational presentation under the auspices of the American Heart Association. Because VNRs have been characterized as “fake news,” the VNRs you may see on network television are now likely to follow ethical guidelines crafted by the Public Relations Society of America and the Radio and Television Digital News Association. Above all, the accepted standards require VNR content to clearly identify its sponsor(s).

Due to the digital revolution, VNRs are increasingly going around media gatekeepers to produce VNRs aimed at specific cable audiences within defined localities. Furthermore, VNRs are also appearing on Facebook and other social media.

Format and design. VNR writers must prepare a two-column script.

Study hint: To make sense of this section, spend plenty of time studying the sample video news production script on pages 73–75 of your text. Recall that a *chyron* (also called a *super*) is writing displayed on a video screen. A *CU* is a *close-up* shot, usually a head shot.

Content and organization. Journalist-targeted VNRs have five parts. They're meant to provide the journalist with editing flexibility and all needed background information. Here are the components of video news releases:

1. **Opening billboard.** The first part of the script is a series of screens that introduce the VNR's content, sponsorship, and intended audience.
2. **Video news release.** Following the billboard, the news story spans 60 to 90 seconds. The release will generally contain *sounds-on-tape (SOT)* and announcer voiceovers.

However, the tape will be *rough cut* without titles and graphics, which allows a local stations to add its own titles and graphics that fit its audience and station policies.

3. **Video news release without announcer voiceover.**

The only sounds are the natural sounds of SOT and the *sound bites* (often quotes or explanations). The announcer's voiceover isn't included, thus allowing the local station to provide its own on-air talent.

4. **Sound bites.** The original script may already contain sound bites, or the sound bites may be inserted for various purposes at the production end. A *lead-in*, which reflects another aspect of local journalists' production choices, may precede a sound bite.

5. **B-roll.** A *b-roll* accompanies the VNR. It's extra footage journalists may use to tailor their version of the VNR.

Study hint: Be sure to spend some time studying the "Tips" on page 72 of your textbook.

Before proceeding to the next assignment, take a moment to complete *Self-Check 3*. *Remember:* You can check your answers by turning to the back of this study guide.



Self-Check 3

1. The second part of a written _____ states its purpose.
2. Because a social media news release is found only online, it's a/an _____, most often linked to the organization's digital news room.
3. Timeliness, conflict, and proximity are among the qualities that journalists expect to see if a story is deemed to be _____.
4. The most common type of news release by far is the _____.

(Continued)



Self-Check 3

5. A media _____ provides information about breaking news.
6. When using e-mail for a news release, type the key fact of your story in the _____ line.
7. In a VNR, the _____ provides background information about the news story to follow.
8. In a traditional news release, the first paragraph is generally called the _____.

Check your answers with those on page 125.

ASSIGNMENT 4: MEDIA KITS

Read the following assignment. Then read pages 76–94 in your textbook, *Strategic Writing: Multimedia Writing for Public Relations, Advertising and More*.

Objectives

When you complete this assignment, you'll be able to describe and prepare a

- Media kit
- Backgrounder
- Fact sheet
- Photo opportunity advisory
- Newsletter
- Magazine article