

# **Communicating with the Press Release: Teaching Undergraduates the Basics**

**Janet Mizrahi**

**University of California, Santa Barbara**

## **Abstract**

Communicating with stakeholders is a concern for every organization. The press release allows firms to convey a message to the public without exorbitant advertising fees and has greater impact than a paid ad because it appears less one-sided. As undergraduates leave academia for the workplace, they become more valuable to employers if they have had practice composing clearly written press releases that achieve the goals of an organization. Teaching the press release allows business communication instructors to reinforce key writing skills such as audience awareness, purpose, clarity, and conciseness. It can be integrated into the syllabus as part of a unit on persuasive writing or taught as a separate genre. Instructors who teach the press release will need to address its core elements: the concept of newsworthiness; conveying the company's main message in the headline and first paragraph; composing in the "inverted pyramid" style typical to journalism; creating compelling quotes for attribution; and designing the document. Classroom activities and assignment ideas are provided.

## **Introduction and Rationale**

Communicating with stakeholders is a concern for every organization. The press release (also called a news release) allows firms to convey their message to the public without exorbitant advertising fees and has greater impact than a paid ad because it appears less one-sided. Even when the company has a separate, in-house public relations department or outsources the public relations function, employees are often called upon to write or rewrite press releases. In today's marketplace where employees are often asked to multitask, the worker with the ability to compose a press release has become increasingly valuable. No matter the size of the company, getting the word out about its news—i.e. publicity—can be relegated to the closest body with a computer who can write a sentence. Therefore it makes sense for business communication instructors to teach students about writing a press release, the backbone of all publicity and public relations.

The importance of writing skills for public relations practitioners is well established. The Commission of Public Relations Education published a report that concluded public relations writing to be "essential to a strong undergraduate education" and further found that public relations specialists and PR instructors rank writing skills as critical to hiring for entry-level

positions (King 2001). PR practitioners themselves consider writing skills highly valuable. In one study, 93.5 percent of public relations experts felt written communication skills were important to success (Napoli 1999). Because PR depends heavily on the needs of the media, practicing professionals also believe students should be well trained in writing for public relations with special attention paid to journalistic technique (Hardin & Pompper 2004). Indeed, well written press releases can help a business diffuse difficult situations (Sklarewitz 1991), but only if they are written clearly (Markin 1994). Employers and recruiters agree that for those in the field of marketing in particular, both written and oral communication skills are integral to success (Young & Murphy 2003). According to Pride and Ferrell, nearly one in three jobs is related to sales and marketing (2003). Public Relations, often the department responsible for issuing news releases, falls within this category, making good writing skills especially important to future employees in these fields.

This paper will provide instructors with classroom-tested information to confidently teach the press release in an undergraduate business communication course.

### **Genre Definition and Classroom Application**

Simply stated, a press release is an organization's message written in a style to appeal to news media outlets in hopes that those outlets will disseminate the message. That message can take many forms. It may be news about a recent hire, an employee's promotion, a product, or an event the company is sponsoring. Press releases are often used to put a company's "spin" on bad news about earnings, product problems, or other events that reflect negatively on the business. They contain information that may be overlooked by the media but that the company wants to publicize, or "release." Both non-profit and for-profit businesses routinely use this form of public relations communication.

Press releases are designed for both broadcast and print media. Whether sent in digital or print form, they are intended to be published or "picked up" by a news outlet such as a newspaper, radio station, magazine, or television news broadcast. Therefore it is imperative that any press release contains an element of *newsworthiness*. Yet there is a difference between the content in a press release and actual news. Press releases contain carefully crafted messages that promote a company's point of view, whereas news, in theory, must be more objective. The press release must catch the eye of the editor with its newsworthiness and objectivity while it also promotes the company's perspective.

Teaching the press release can fit into an introductory business communication course as part of a unit on routine or persuasive news messages, or it can be taught separately. If teaching an informational interview, students can use the information they gather to write a release announcing that individual's promotion or that the person has accepted a new position in XYZ Company. The press release as an assignment also works well as reinforcement of basic good business writing that stresses audience awareness, clear purpose, conciseness, accuracy, adherence to format, clarity, and grammatical correctness. And finally, the press release assignment can be attached to any research project in which students delve into an organization's structure.

## **Types of Press Releases**

Although all press releases contain the same elements, they are used to promote varying objectives. Below are commonly used press releases that would make appropriate teaching scenarios.

*Publicity Release.* This type of release announces information about a business or organization that has news value to local or national media. A publicity release may announce internal promotions, upcoming or past events, new hires or appointments, awards, honors, and mergers or acquisitions.

*Product Release.* These releases contain information that is generally targeted to trade publications and relate news about the introduction of a product, an addition to a line, or a modification to an existing product.

*Bad News Release.* When an organization must tell the truth about a negative situation, it issues a bad news release. This document must always be straightforward about negative news, providing facts in an honest, forthright fashion to establish credibility with the media.

*Financial Release.* The financial release disseminates information about a company's earnings or other information of interest to shareholders. While national media such as *The Wall Street Journal* or *ABC Nightly News* may be interested in reporting news about large, publicly held organizations, local media tend to report on firms headquartered in their distribution area.

Press releases can be written in either a hard or soft news style. Hard news is timely and has immediacy. A university would issue a hard news release to announce that it has hired a new chancellor. Soft news focuses on people or issues that affect people's lives. A soft news release, for example, might take the form of a feature about a child whose life was saved by a new drug, with the issuing company being the drug manufacturer.

The publicity release is the most common type used in a real-world scenario, but any of the types of press releases can provide excellent learning opportunities.

## **Press Release Learning Objectives**

Teaching the press release reinforces many of the objectives stressed in an introductory business communications course in addition to some that are specific to the genre.

1. Create audience centered documents targeted to a specific trade or consumer news media outlet (digital, print, or broadcast.)
2. Define a company's purpose, or main message, for the press release and reflect that purpose in both the headline and the lead.
3. Write a lead (first paragraph) that contains several news values.
4. Compose documents in the "inverted pyramid" used by journalists.

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5. Design documents in standard press release format that contains all the required elements.
6. Practice using quotations and attributions in the body of an article.
7. Create a company “boilerplate” paragraph that reflects the business’s mission and basic identifying information.
8. Reinforce the principles of good business writing practices.

### **Elements of Teaching the Press Release**

Teaching the press release can be broken down into the elements below.

#### *Audience/Purpose*

Teaching a press release is a perfect way to reinforce the concept of audience centered writing that has a clear purpose. It is helpful to supplement any classroom discussion with textbook readings such as those found in *Business Communication: Process and Product* by Dr. Mary Ellen Guffey.

To drive home the concept of audience and purpose, the following hypothetical situation may be used. Ask students which college has a reputation as a “party school.” Then ask them to assume they are employed by the city the campus is in. (For example, UCSB is a known “party school.” If using this example, students would be “working” for the city of Santa Barbara.) Their assignment is to compose a press release to all high school newspapers in their state with the purpose of encouraging students to apply for admittance to the college or university. Ask the class what kind of content will encourage 17- and 18-year-olds to make the desired decision. (In the UCSB example, students offer responses such as good weather, proximity to the ocean, financial aid, easy transfer from the local junior college, many majors, Nobel laureates on staff, and so forth until someone offers the party-school reputation.) Of all the reasons students bring up, the party atmosphere is the clincher for the would-be freshmen. Discuss how audience needs and a firm’s purpose dictate content.

Next tell the students that they have another press release to compose. This one will be aimed toward parents, who the city hopes will urge their children to apply for college admission in their city. Ask what kind of information should be included in this document. Of course there will be some crossover; both parents and future students like the idea of financial aid, many majors, easy transfers, etc. But parents may be interested to know about factors that are not of great interest to the future student. (In the UCSB example, parents will want to know about the city’s low crime rate.) If the press release is to accomplish its goal, all agree that discussing the party atmosphere so attractive to students is contraindicated in the release aimed at parents.

However the instructor approaches the concept of audience and purpose, this idea forms the basis of a module on the press release. Next students need to understand the distinct needs of the media as the audience for a release. Ask students to define the media. Some will have taken communication courses and will volunteer examples. Introduce the various players in the media: broadcasters, digital media, and newspaper and magazine publishers (both trade and consumer).

Discuss how news is obtained. Reporters go to a scene of an incident (city hall, an accident scene, a sporting event, etc.) uncover facts, and report the event as objectively as possible in written or oral format.

Explain that the editor chooses which stories run and where they are placed in the news vehicle (front page, buried in the middle of the business section, etc.) Often times, however, editors need to fill a hole in their publication or broadcast; this is where the press release comes in. The press release provides editors with story ideas they may otherwise overlook. Editors are busy and do not want to give a business free publicity, so the savvy press release writer will give the editor a well written, factual, and accurate piece of news that will be of interest to the editor's readers or viewers.

From the perspective of an organization, the purpose of the press release is simply to convey a message to the masses without paying excessive advertising fees. A press release may originate from a university that wishes to publicize winning a large grant; a non-profit that is organizing a fund-raising event it hopes to publicize; or a business that is informing the public of a staff promotion, a new product, earnings, or a problem. In any case, the press release must cross the delicate line between serving the purpose of the issuer and the needs of the media.

### *Newsworthiness*

Newsworthiness is the next concept students must understand before writing a press release. To those who routinely read newspapers or watch the nightly news, an item's newsworthiness is obvious. But few students regularly read a newspaper, and they consequently have a poor understanding of what constitutes news. Expect to dedicate time to this concept. It may be useful to complement discussion with classroom activities such as those described later in this article.

### **Writing the Press Release**

Press releases are written in a distinct format and contain the following elements:

- Headline and sometimes a subheadline
- Lead or first paragraph that includes a dateline (a dateline is the city and state where the news originated)
- Body written in the inverted pyramid style
- Quotations with attributions
- "Boilerplate" paragraph that ends the release with information about the issuing organization

Depending on how much time is devoted to this module, the instructor can combine these elements into one, two, or more classroom sessions. Combining a lecture with some classroom activities and then "workshopping" with students in the computer lab provides practice for the techniques discussed in class.

### *The Headline (“Head,”) Subhead, and Lead*

The purpose of the headline is to concisely capture the main idea of the release. Headlines are written with present tense verbs and omit the articles “a,” “an,” and “the.” The headline in a press release is crucial, because if it does not clearly appeal to the editor and get across the message that an item is newsworthy, the release will be ignored. The headline is essentially the “sales pitch.” It should use clear, concrete language and avoid vague, unspecific words. The headline should not mimic the lead paragraph; it should use different wording to get across the main idea of the release.

The “secondary head” or “subhead” is often a complete sentence that uses a full verb and the articles that are frequently omitted from headlines. The subhead assumes the presence of the headline and gives additional information to the story that provides another layer of detail. It should not repeat the first headline and is not mandatory.

The lead, or first paragraph, is the most important part of the release. Although many lead styles exist, the most common is the *summary lead*. These leads focus on *news values* or the *five Ws and one H*—who, what, where, when, why, how—which are familiar to most students. The lead often has a focus or an “angle” to make it newsworthy. The following are the main factors writers consider to emphasize newsworthiness:

**Timeliness.** For an event to be considered news, a small window of opportunity exists; an event is only newsworthy just before or directly after it happens.

**Prominence.** Prominent figures and celebrities help publicize anything.

**Proximity.** The local angle is a great “hook.” (Editors say that if it happens to *our* community, it’s news.)

**Significance.** The number and type of people who will be affected can make an item newsworthy.

**Unusualness.** Any bizarre or odd event will capture an editor’s eye.

**Human Interest.** People like to read about other people, so this angle is frequently used.

**Newness.** “Free” and “New” are key words that help generate interest in a news item.

The order of information related in a lead should reflect the company’s goal in writing the release, but it must also keep in mind the needs of news organizations. Leads do not need to include all the news values.

After this lesson, instructors may want to reinforce this complex idea with a classroom activity (some are suggested later in this article) before moving on to the next component of teaching the press release.

### *The Body: Inverted Pyramid Style, Integrating Quotes, and the Boilerplate Paragraph*

The body of most press releases is one to two pages (occasionally up to three.) The body features relatively short paragraphs, although too many short, choppy paragraphs are discouraged. Like any good writing, the body of the document should be concise, clear, and accurate. Sentences

should be varied and have good rhythm. However, press releases also possess the qualities of good journalism and use journalism's "inverted pyramid" style of writing. This means that the body is organized in descending order of importance; the most important elements are placed at the top, and the least important are placed toward the bottom. Editors use this style because when deciding how much space or time to devote to an item, they cut from the bottom. By writing in the inverted pyramid style, writers are helping the editor.

After the lead paragraph summarizes the release's main element of newsworthiness, the second paragraph contains the next most important part of the news. What follows in subsequent paragraphs is less important, and so on. After all the points of the release have been covered, many releases add a paragraph that contains background information the reader may need to fully understand the significance of some aspect of the preceding story.

Most press releases contain a quotation from someone in the company. For example, if the release is about a new hire or a promotion, the division manager may be quoted. If the release is about a new product, some other company official will make a statement that is quoted in the press release. Oftentimes these quotes are created by the public relations professional (in which case the quote is always approved by a superior.) The purpose of using a quote is to combine information the organization wants to impart but to add a personal perspective to that information. Quotations add life to a story that a disembodied statement does not and can be direct or paraphrased.

When quoting, the following should be taken into consideration:

- Use the exact spelling and title of the person being quoted.
- Use the first and last name the first time a person is named. Use only the last name thereafter.
- Put commas and periods inside quotes.
- Put other punctuation marks within the quotation marks if they are part of the quote (Example: The Chancellor asked, "Do all students binge drink?")
- Attribute each quote.
- Introduce each person quoted (Example: Mark Elliot, a junior and recipient of this year's award, said, "I am grateful for the opportunity to serve my campus.")
- Use "said" rather than "laughed," "snorted", etc. in hard news press releases.
- Use "according to" when referring to a study or a group, not a person.
- Use an indirect quote only when the person making the statement has not used smooth wording.

The final paragraph of most press releases is the "boilerplate," a 50-or 100-word summary (often including company mission) that provides background information about an organization. It may include what the company produces, the number of employees or outlets it has, its stock trading information, or its corporate philosophy.

It's easy to download copies of current press releases to use in the classroom. The first two Web sites listed below contain hundreds of releases from issuing companies. The third is a clearinghouse for college press releases. Most colleges or universities have a publicity office that routinely issues press releases, and most business Web sites contain current and past press releases.

1. <http://www.prnewsire.com>
2. <http://www.businesswire.com>
3. <http://www.cpwire.com>

### *Document Design*

Press releases follow a specific format. Print releases are issued on company letterhead, should be typed in 12-point Times New Roman, and must include the following information and stylistic elements:

**Company Address:** Name, street, city, zip code, phone number, fax, Web site.

**Contact Name:** Name of person to whom questions about the release may be directed with phone number, e-mail address, and fax.

**Release Date:** If the release is meant to be distributed upon receipt, write "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE." If the release is to be embargoed, write, "EMBARGOED UNTIL 1-1-20XX."

Releases are embargoed only when the issuer does not want that news to precede an announcement or, in the case of a scientific study, that study's publication in a peer-edited journal. Use caps and boldface for both immediate and embargoed release dates.

**Date of Distribution:** The date the release is prepared. The date of distribution appears either under the release date or as part of the dateline.

**Headline:** Uppercase, underlined, boldface preferred.

**Dateline:** City and state of event's location followed by a dash that goes directly into the lead paragraph.

**Double Space.** Body copy is double-spaced; all paragraphs except the lead are indented.

**Bullets.** Use plain bullets rather than numbers for lists or to itemize facts.

**Page Numbering.** The word "more" must appear at the bottom of each page unless the release is only one page. A page slug (page 2 of 2) should appear at the top of the subsequent page, flush left.

**Boilerplate.** Should appear after the news.

**End Marks.** Use end marks "# # #" or "-30-" to indicate the end of the release.

Electronic press releases are shorter than print releases so that they fit on one or two screens, but they adhere to the same rules as print releases except for the following:

- The subject line of the e-mail should contain the main idea of the release.
- The release should not be an attachment; it should be contained in the body of the e-mail.
- Company name (because it does not appear on letterhead) and contact information appears at the top of the electronic release and again at the end of the message.



- One space is added above and below the headline. Body copy is single-spaced with double spacing between paragraphs, flush left.

## **Professionalism**

Perhaps the most valuable teaching lesson the press release offers is that of professionalism in business communication. The press release must appeal to a very skeptical audience, most of whom are writers reading dozens of these documents each day. Audience awareness demands that those composing the press release keep good writing practices foremost in mind, making this a perfect assignment to enforce a zero tolerance for typos and misspellings at the very least.

The degree to which the instructor grades down for adherence to format and mechanics in this assignment depends on each class and the instructor's objectives. Certainly in the "real world," a writer who sent out a press release full of errors wouldn't hold on to a job for long!

To learn more about the profession, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) maintains an excellent Web site at <http://www.prsa.org> as does the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) at <http://www.ipra.org/>.

## **Classroom Activities and Assignments**

Below are a few classroom activities and assignments that can help reinforce the concepts behind writing a press release in an undergraduate business communication classroom.

Reinforce the Concept of Newsworthiness. Break students into groups. Provide them with articles from the student newspaper, your local newspaper, a national news source, or a press release. Using a handout on which you leave blanks to answer your prepared questions, have the students isolate the newsworthiness angle and news values to see how the news is reflected in the headline and the lead. Use specific questions such as, "Which news values are used in the lead?" and "How many words does the lead contain?" Discuss the findings with the entire class.

Practice Headlines and Leads. Create your own list of facts or break down an actual article or press release to obtain facts. Have students practice composing leads and headlines from these points. This is an excellent workshop exercise to do in a computer lab.

Analyzing Press Releases. Take a press release issued by your campus, a local organization, or a firm's Web site that has been picked up by the local newspaper. Ask students to isolate the various elements of the press release including the lead and news values, how the facts are written in descending order of importance, where background information appears, how the release ends, and the boilerplate. Compare the release to the article your local newspaper has written from information contained in the release. Discuss how the journalist used the information the release provided, and ask how the journalist may have obtained any additional quotes or information.

Press Release Assignment. There are two ways to approach this assignment. In the less demanding method, the instructor provides all the information in bulleted format. The student is told to write the release using the given information and/or to do some supplemental research for background. An open-ended approach is a more demanding assignment because it requires students to create information rather than simply arrange and format points that are provided. In this method, one approach is to have students assume they work for the campus information office. Their task is to write a release announcing a new study that a campus professor has published, a promotion, a new building, or any other newsworthy event having to do with the campus. An even more advanced approach is to allow students to choose from any of the release styles discussed earlier. In this scenario, students may opt to write about financial earnings from a local or national organization, to publicize a charity event, to explain an organization's bad news, or to introduce a new or improved product.

More sample assignments and rubrics are available by downloading the "News Release Teaching Module" from the site for instructor at <<http://www.meguffey.com>>.

## Conclusion

As the professional world continues to demand more of employees, providing students with instruction in the basics of the press release will enhance their marketability. In fact, students who have learned the genre have made the following comments: "The skills I learned in class have proved very useful. Today I explained the difference between a product and feature press release to the VP!" and, "I have written press releases for my summer internship. Having the experience in class made it so much easier for me to succeed with these real-world projects." Teaching this vital business genre will give students an edge that is likely to elicit similar responses.

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Biography

JANET MIZRAHI is a Continuing Lecturer at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A former journalist and marketing communications writer, she teaches upper-division writing courses in business communication, journalism, and marketing/public relations.