

Democracy Hubs

So you're frustrated by politics and you want to do something?

Here's how...

A step-by-step guide to making a difference in five parts



Part 5 – Writing that press release

The purpose of a press release isn't propaganda, and if you write it as propaganda, it will be ineffective. It's supposed to provide the basis on which the journalist will write a story, so what he or she wants first is facts. Opinions are invaluable and should be included, but preferably as a direct quote so the story can easily differentiate between what is factual and what is subjective.

Most local newspapers try to be (or at least try to appear to be) non-political. They can't afford to upset their readers. So if you present a

reporter with something which is obviously biased, then he or she will doubt whatever facts you include and quite likely lose patience with it.

As always, be disciplined. The aim is to provide the journalist with whatever is wanted, and the more you can make your press release fit into the format and the language which he would use then the more likely he is to use it and the less likely to make changes.

There are few rules about the actual format of the release, though there are some useful guidelines which may make it easier.

Format

Head it 'Press release' in noticeable lettering and leave plenty of space around the date and the headline. The reporter needs to be able to take it in at a glance. Write it in one and a half or double spacing, with wide guttering either side. Keep paragraphs short, perhaps one sentence, and keep sentences short too with no complicated clauses, otherwise they will be rewritten.

Length

Aim at about one side of A4. Remember, you want to own the narrative and keep control, so less is more. Suppose that the newspaper might publish six crisp paragraphs. If you give them 12, then they're going to edit out six of them. So, you lose control because you can't tell them which ones to keep in. Keep it the length they would prefer and, in the style, they would prefer, and they are more likely both to publish it and use your own words.

In any case, if the reporter is going to use your story they will call you about it, and you can provide any further information then.

Pictures

Pictures are increasingly crucial. Every newspaper is a tabloid at heart these days and demands pictures to keep the punters interested. Accompanying the story with a choice of two or three interesting pictures will probably be the difference between publication and the bin. But be imaginative with the photos. No blokes sitting at a desk with a phone stuck to their ear. No two blokes standing morosely in the corner of a field looking as though they are waiting for a bus. (Unless of course your story concerns the scandalous lack of buses.) Children and animals are always popular, even if irrelevant.

Date

The date you're publishing the release is there somewhere, usually somewhere at the top.

Embargo

An embargo is a way of making sure that your story isn't published before a certain date, and that can be important. (For example, if the outcome of a court case is published before the court officially releases the judgment it could amount to contempt of court.) Journalists will respect an embargo and not usually question it, though they don't like them much so it's best not to use them too promiscuously. Normally there is no need for an embargo, but it might be convenient if you're trying to co-ordinate stages in your project or media deadlines, for example. (See below.)

The embargo should be quite prominent and simply say something like: 'This story is embargoed until 0001 hours on 22 March'. You would of course have briefed the hacks at least a day or two beforehand, so that means they can go through the process of preparing the story and conducting interviews before the embargo, ready to go for the date you specify.

Headline

Though this is the first thing the hack will read and the essence of the story, it's usually the last thing you write. Because by that time you've drafted the story, you'll have a clearer idea of its shape and you can take up a phrase or two to use from the copy. So the first paragraph sums up the rest of the story, and the headline sums up the first paragraph.

First paragraph

This may be the second last thing you write, since it's a summation of everything that follows. It should be a single brief sentence, summing up the 'what'. (Your headline is only there to flag down the reporter and is likely soon to get lost. So the first para has to do its job too.)

Second paragraph

This is where you write the 'who' and 'where', and then the 'why' and the rest of the narrative follows. You may find it easier to sketch out the first paragraph – to get rid of it for the moment, then write the rest of the story.

Introducing your name

Nobody knows who you are and at this stage nobody cares, so your name has no place in the opening paragraph. There you may describe yourselves as 'a new local climate pressure group' or 'concerned neighbours' or somebody. Only BT or Nigel Farage get their name mentioned, because they are considered news. In the second paragraph therefore you open with something like:

The move is led by Beechcombe Defenders, a new pressure group set up to combat the council's plans to raze the spinney and allow the site to be used for housing.

Quotes

Quotes will be from the most relevant people and appear probably two thirds of the way down the story. First you set out the facts and any counter-facts. Then you provide the opinion. Here's your chance to give colour to the story. How many times have you read a spokesperson for some corporation announcing: 'I'm delighted that...' Nobody ever says that; it's been written by a particularly unimaginative PR person. So, make the quotes you use snappy and sexy, let them bring life to the story. They are also very handy to pick out and use in the headline, so make sure you don't waffle. Only use a couple, unless there is good (and relevant) reason to use more. Otherwise, it just gets confusing and boring.

Last paragraph

This may be where you put the 'when', unless there has been a good reason why it should be included earlier. Be specific: in the final paragraph you are providing instructions on how to find this event, in the kind of detail which would slow down the story if you added it earlier:

The inquest will take place at Happisburgh Magistrates Court in Smart Street at 10.30 on 4th June and is expected to last for two days.

Ends

When you've finished the copy, you just use this word to show that what follows isn't part of the story.

Contacts

You will need to include your contact phone number, and perhaps that of a colleague as an alternative.

Publication

It isn't critical to add 'Published by...' unless it's an election and your press release relates to a candidate, but it's perhaps professional to do so anyway.

Notes to editor

This is where you add stuff which may be relevant to the story in providing context, but which would be far too lengthy and not focused enough to include as part of it. You may want to provide a sentence on who you and your group are, or brief background to the planning

permission you're challenging, or to point the reporter in a direction you would particularly like them to explore.

You can also use the notes to maintain control. If the story involves family upset, weeping mothers, somebody linked with lots of money, then those are the people the reporter will want to interview. They may however and for whatever reason be the people you don't want interviewed. Otherwise, the reporter is off on another story of his or her own and you've lost control.

So you can include something like: *'Journalists are requested not to approach Mr Frobisher for interview. (Your name) will be happy to help in reporting this story.'*