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# What is a Press Release?

This tutorial shows you how to write a press release and get it published. The examples tend to assume you are writing for a newspaper or other printed media, but the same principles apply to any news media.



A press release is a story or announcement written for distribution to news publishers (newspapers, television, radio, websites, etc).

Although press releases can be written and distributed by anyone, they tend to be the domain of publicists. For example, when a large company launches a new product, their public relations officer would compose a press release with the relevant details. They would have a list of media contacts and send the press release to all of them in the hope that at least some would use the story and help promote their product.

A press release can be thought of as a news story with an agenda. Whilst the story itself should be genuinely newsworthy, it may be carefully crafted to promote a particular business, organisation or point of view.

# Format

There is a fairly standard format for creating press releases. It will help your credibility and chances of being published if you present your material this way. Each press release should include the following:

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** These words should appear at the top left of the page, in upper case. If you don't want the story to be made public yet, write "HOLD FOR RELEASE UNTIL ...." instead.

**Headline** Just like a headline in an newspaper. Make sure this describes the content of the story.

**City, State/ Country - Month Day, Year** These details precede the story and orient the reader.

**Body** This is where the actual story goes. There should be more than one paragraph, each paragraph no more than a few sentences. If there is more than one page, write "-more-" at the bottom of the page.

**Company/ organization info** Include any background information about the company or organization featuring in this press release.

**Contact Information** Include contact person, company name, phone/fax, email, physical/ postal address.

**ENDS or ###** This indicates the end of the press release.

**(xxx words)** If you like you could include the total number of words contained in the press release.

## Example

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

#### **Competition is Healthy Says Lemonade Stand Queen**

*Hamilton, New Zealand - November 12, 2012* - Increased competition in the local lemonade stand market should be welcomed, according to the operator of popular lemonade stand "Shelly's Pure Lemonade".

12-year-old Shelly Smith has been selling her home-made brand of lemonade from the footpath in front of her parents' North Street home for 18 months and has seen the highs and lows of the trade.

"Stands come and go," says Ms Smith, "but when there are more stands around the vendors are more serious. They try harder and make a better product. That gives our customers confidence and sales go up."

In recent months the number of lemonade stands in North Street has risen from three to five. Experts believe this trend will continue, with the possibility of two or even three new stands before the end of summer.

Ms Smith feels that a stable supply of lemonade will also benefit the streets' economy.

"People know that if they are thirsty, North Street is the place to come. With plenty of lemonade stands on this street it doesn't matter if some of the vendors take a day off. The customer is never disappointed so they always come back."

Shelly Smith is a sole trader of lemonade and occasional cookies. Her stand at 223 North Street is usually open weekdays after school and weekends, except when she is playing with her friends or watching a movie.

Contact:  
Shelly Smith  
email@example.com  
233 North Street,  
Hamilton,  
New Zealand  
Ph: +64-877-9233

**###**

# How to Write a News Story

Here's something very few people realise: Writing news stories isn't particularly difficult. It does take practice and not everyone will be an expert but if you follow the guidelines below you should be able to create effective news items without too much stress.

## The Five "W"s and the "H"

This is the crux of all news - you need to know five things:

### **Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?**

Any good news story provides answers to each of these questions. You must drill these into your brain and they must become second nature.

For example, if you wish to cover a story about a local sports team entering a competition you will need to answer these questions:

- **Who** is the team? Who is the coach? Who are the prominent players? Who are the supporters?
- **What** sport do they play? What is the competition?
- **Where** is the competition? Where is the team normally based?
- **When** is the competition? How long have they been preparing? Are there any other important time factors?
- **Why** are they entering this particular competition? If it's relevant, why does the team exist at all?
- **How** are they going to enter the competition? Do they need to fundraise? How much training and preparation is required? What will they need to do to win?

## The Inverted Pyramid

This refers to the style of journalism which places the most important facts at the beginning and works "down" from there. Ideally, the first paragraph should contain enough information to give the reader a good overview of the entire story. The rest of the article explains and expands on the beginning.

A good approach is to assume that the story might be cut off at any point due to space limitations. Does the story work if the editor only decides to include the first two paragraphs? If not, re-arrange it so that it does.

The same principle can apply to any type of medium.

## More Tips

- **It's About People**
- News stories are all about how people are affected. In your sports story, you might spend some time focusing on one or more individuals, or on how the team morale is doing, or how the supporters are feeling.
- **Have an Angle**
- Most stories can be presented using a particular angle or "slant". This is a standard technique and isn't necessarily bad - it can help make the purpose of the story clear and give it focus. Examples of angles you could use for your sports story:
  - "Team Tackles National Competition"
  - "Big Ask for First-Year Coach"
  - "Local Team in Need of Funds"
- **Keep it Objective**
- You are completely impartial. If there is more than one side to the story, cover them all. Don't use "I" and "me" unless you are quoting someone. Speaking of quoting...
- **Quote People**
- For example: "We're really excited about this competition," says coach Bob Dabalina, "It's the highest target we've ever set ourselves".
- **Don't Get Flowery**
- Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Don't use lots of heavily descriptive language. When you've finished, go through the entire story and try to remove any words which aren't completely necessary.

# What Makes a Story Newsworthy?



News can be defined as "*Newsworthy information about recent events or happenings, especially as reported by news media*". But what makes news newsworthy?

There is a list of five factors, detailed below, which are considered when deciding if a story is newsworthy. When an editor needs to decide whether to run with a particular story, s/he will ask how well the story meets each of these criteria. Normally, a story should perform well in at least two areas.

Naturally, competition plays a part. If there are a lot of newsworthy stories on a particular day then some stories will be dropped. Although some stories can be delayed until a new slot becomes available, time-sensitive news will often be dropped permanently.

## **1. Timing**

The word *news* means exactly that - things which are *new*. Topics which are current are good news. Consumers are used to receiving the latest updates, and there is so much news about that old news is quickly discarded.

A story with only average interest needs to be told quickly if it is to be told at all. If it happened today, it's news. If the same thing happened last week, it's no longer interesting.

## **2. Significance**

The number of people affected by the story is important. A plane crash in which hundreds of people died is more significant than a crash killing a dozen.

## **3. Proximity**

Stories which happen near to us have more significance. The closer the story to home, the more newsworthy it is. For someone living in France, a major plane crash in the USA has a similar news value to a small plane crash near Paris.

Note that proximity doesn't have to mean geographical distance. Stories from countries with which we have a particular bond or similarity have the same effect. For example, Australians would be expected to relate more to a story from a distant Western nation than a story from a much closer Asian country.

#### **4. Prominence**

Famous people get more coverage just because they are famous. If you break your arm it won't make the news, but if the Queen of England breaks her arm it's big news.

#### **5. Human Interest**

Human interest stories are a bit of a special case. They often disregard the main rules of newsworthiness; for example, they don't date as quickly, they need not affect a large number of people, and it may not matter where in the world the story takes place.

Human interest stories appeal to emotion. They aim to evoke responses such as amusement or sadness. Television news programs often place a humorous or quirky story at the end of the show to finish on a feel-good note. Newspapers often have a dedicated area for offbeat or interesting items.



# Media Contacts

A screenshot of the CNN website's 'CONTACT US/NEWS TIPS' form. The page has a red header with the CNN logo and navigation links. The form is titled 'CONTACT US/NEWS TIPS' and includes a sub-header 'Send a story idea'. It contains several input fields: 'Name', 'City', 'State/Province', 'ZIP code', 'Country', 'E-mail', and 'Phone number (optional)'. There is also a 'Subject of story' field and a large text area for 'Your story idea'. At the bottom of the form are 'Submit' and 'Reset' buttons. A small disclaimer at the bottom of the form reads: 'CNN values your privacy. The information you submit is subject to our privacy policy.'

Visit relevant news websites and look for the "Submit a Story" page. This one is from [CNN.com](http://CNN.com).

The very first thing you need to do is create a list of contacts in the news media. It's important to do this before you begin writing stories as you need to have some idea of who you are writing for.

For example, if your media contacts are general news publishers, your press release will be written with the general public in mind. If your contacts tend to be specialist publications with a niche audience, your story might be more specifically targeted, containing language and terminology to suit the readers.

Make sure you are familiar with the publications you are submitting to. Notice how their stories are written and try to make your press release fit with their theme.

Most publications include contact details for editorial matters and press releases. With a small amount of effort you should be able to compile a reasonable list. Media sources to look for include:

- Local, regional and national newspapers
- Magazines which specialise in your industry or area of interest
- Local and national television
- Radio
- Websites

