

The Press Release

General Guidelines

- Study the news. Before you try your hand at a press release, pick up the newspaper and read a few news (not feature) stories. Notice that the most important information is at the top in inverted pyramid style, with the “who, what, when, where, why, and how” in the first two to three paragraphs, followed by quotes and background. Do contextual research on your topic to see how it is being covered to determine the best “news frame” for your press release. Has your angle already been covered before?
- Focus on the news. Define what exactly is being announced today. Don’t think of the press release as a lengthy journal article. A press release is intended only to report on a very specific piece of news at hand, and it should concisely present only the most fundamental information about a story.
- Interview scientists or key spokespeople involved. The best source for strong information is from researchers themselves. Ask probing questions that would be asked by journalists to tease out the meat of the story and its weaknesses. Ask them what is surprising about what they found. Ask how their research advances knowledge on the topic.
- Use clear, concise language. Avoid jargon at all costs, both in quotes and in background information. The audience of a press release is the educated lay public, who often are not familiar with health care jargon.
- Grab attention with a problem. The lead paragraph and the headline is the most important part of the press release. This is your only shot at grabbing a reporter’s attention. If this part has jargon, is ambiguous, or doesn’t capture the story’s main idea, or does not present a problem being solved or a new problem that is unsolved, then your press release will likely go into the reporter’s trash heap.
- Keep it short. There are exceptions to every rule, but try to keep to a two-page (double- or single-spaced) release.
- Don’t ramble. Omit needless words.
- Write in the active voice, not the passive voice. Use specific, concrete language.
- Create interesting quotes. Quotes are an opportunity to be creative, provocative, attention-getting, and colorful. Quotes carry your organization’s key messages.

Take the time to craft “good” quotes. Think of a metaphor or allegory to use in your quote.

- State who you are. Put the release on your organization’s letterhead or include the names of the organizations releasing the information at the top of the page.
- Remember contact information. Include the name, phone number, and email of someone reporters can contact with questions.
- Spell out the rules for release. Specify whether the information is “for immediate release” and provide a date. If the information is to be “embargoed”, set a date and time for release. In the latter case, reporters are responsible for not releasing the information until the time and day that you have specified, such as “Embargoed for Release until 00:001 GMT, Monday, March 6, 2008.” Be sure to highlight embargo information in bold type and in a prominent place in press release.