

SMARTSHEETS

WRITING MADE EASIER

THE HUMBLE NEWS RELEASE

With the growth of radio and television, the advent of many Internet-based news vehicles, and the suggestion that “press” implies that the information is intended for print media, the preferred term for what we formerly called the “press release” is now *news release*.

This communications tool is often maligned by both journalists and communications practitioners for different reasons. The journalist profession often sees the news release as a shameless effort to obtain free news coverage for an organization or its products. The communications professional who has to write it sees it as a labour-intensive, time-consuming project that either goes into the editor’s garbage container or results in a telephone call by or a visit from a journalist.

Why won’t they just use it as I wrote it? The communications professional often asks. And why are they still being written and provided to news media in the electronic age?

Simply stated, news releases are provided to and used by the news media because they are useful, despite the disparaging remarks made about them. A conservative estimate is that up to half the news reports published originate as news releases. Thom Clark of Chicago’s Community Media Workshop sees news releases as *business cards for your story*. As a communications vehicle, they have survived the age of blogs, webcasts and an array of Internet-based communications tools.

The news release is a simple document that is principally intended for the news media. Despite complaints and criticisms, journalists depend on news releases because the simple reality of modern mass communications in that news room staffs have been dramatically reduced, bureaus have been closed and the reporters and editors who have survived these cuts spend less time gathering news than preparing it for publication or broadcast. In addition, the news release alerts journalists to an event, announcement or a development that they may not otherwise discover.

The news release is, as well, part of the official public record of your organization, providing the news media and the public with authoritative information about your business, ministry, organization or association, and its activities and relations with the general public.

Your news release first has to survive the editor’s quick assessment of its value. Depending on the size

of the community it serves, a newsroom can receive hundreds of news releases a day. Editors simply do not have the time to read each one completely, so in the process many are discarded. The best way for yours to be passed to a reporter for further research is to make its value obvious.

Step 1: Use a styleguide.

Communications professionals who prepare news releases and other products for news media consumption engage in “applied journalism,” so they must ensure that their products follow the basic conventions of journalism. The first step is to select a styleguide that is generally accepted by the news media of your community. These manuals are technical handbooks for the applied journalist as well as the professional reporter, and are produced and sold commercially by the Canadian Press, Broadcast News and the Globe and Mail. The Canadian Government has also developed and published the book, “The Canadian Style.”

If you are writing for the American market, purchase a copy of the Associated Press styleguide. If you are working in a region outside North America, purchase the styleguide is used by the media of that area.

Different newsmedia have styleguides for their particular markets and communities, and radio and television have their own broadcast styleguides.

To remain current with the changing standards of journalism within your market, obtain the most recent versions of these books.

Step 2: Is your information worth sharing?

Will the content of your news release be interesting or worthwhile to anyone other than you and your colleagues? Is it relevant to your community or any of your target audiences? Does it provide important information or a service?

In 2005, Spring came early in Nova Scotia and the black bears emerged from their hibernation and began looking for food. However, their traditional sources of food, berries and migrating salmon weren’t available yet, leading to several unwelcome encounters between the hungry bears and rural Nova Scotians. In at least one case, a black bear literally peeled the metal layer off a back door and entered a house to steal a blueberry pie that was cooling in a window.

The wildlife division of the province's Department of Natural Resources quickly prepared a news release to advise people how to handle a chance encounter with a black bear, that was immediately printed and broadcast throughout the province – an example of a news release containing relevant and important information.

Step 3: Write well.

Poor writing is the principal reason news releases are rejected.

The language of a news release must be clear, interesting and well-written, correctly using the conventions of language and vocabulary that makes the reader want to know the information you are providing. It should be crisp, vibrant and imaginative. The news release should convey information with simple description using short paragraphs and short sentences, without jargon, acronyms and slang.

The content of the release should provide information objectively, without an obvious effort to “sell” the reader about the product, event or announcement. This means that adjectives and adverbs, the modifying words that are used in the superlative in so many news releases, should be kept to an absolute minimum in yours. Convey the information in a way that the reader is drawn to the intended goal or conclusion.

Step 4: Make it easy for the editor.

Write a well-crafted, accurate and vivid headline and a lead (first) paragraph that summarizes the information interestingly and informatively. This may be as far as the editor has time to read.

While everyone understands that elected officials like to see their names attached to “good news,” a news release that begins with, “Minister of (whatever), the Honourable (whoever) announced today that ...” will normally go directly to the editor's recycling bin.

Use quotes with care. If you include gratuitous quotes simply to have name placement for one of your principals it will probably be deleted before the article or report is finalized.

Keep your news releases to about 500 words, and when possible, less. This is merely a guideline, and there will be occasions when you have to provide more detail than you can describe in two pages. If necessary, take the additional space, or consider preparing a *factsheet* or a *backgrounder*. Provide your information in the minimum number of words, without hyperbole, editorial commentary and overly descriptive language.

Provide the text by email, if possible, or make it scannable, so it can be easily digitized. In either case, most editors prefer text in *12-point courier font*.

Step 5: Don't forget the broadcast media.

Don't forget the broadcast media. News releases don't normally consider the broadcast media, so at the end of your print news release, type “FOR

BROADCAST” and provide a version of your text that is specifically prepared for radio and television. While I will address the applied journalism requirements of radio and television in a later issue of **Communications Notebook**, it is worthwhile to look at some of the basic requirements for radio.

- First of all, remember that radio is an “audio medium,” a news vehicle that depends only on sound to convey its messages. So you should write the way you speak, the way you would describe the subject to a friend.
- Radio news is “compressed,” its value for the communications professional is its immediacy and repetition, so make every word count. Keep the finished report to about 45 seconds, and only when absolutely necessary, to no more than 60 seconds.
- Use short sentences, short paragraphs and simple words without over-simplifying your description of the subject.
- Double-space the “broadcast” portion of your news release to make it easier for the on-air personality to read the report, and to make “pencil corrections” to the copy.

Step 6: Be a source of credible information that is professionally presented.

Establishing your reputation as a provider of important information that is well-written and presented in a manner and format that is easy to use will lead the editor to favourably consider your news releases for publication and broadcast. Develop a news release *pro forma* that has a miniature version of your logo with your address, and identifies the document as a news release. At the end of the news release, include your name, title, office and mobile phone numbers and email address so a journalist can easily contact you.

Step 7: Be available.

With very few exceptions, if your news release is accepted as a news source, you can expect that journalists will call for additional details. This will permit them to prepare a report that is local in its orientation, relevant to its own particular readership, and complete in its context and content.

Take the time to provide the details which the journalist needs and encourage him/her to call for any additional information. This is the first step in effective media relations.

As your reputation develops, the editor will associate your corporate identity with professionally prepared and presented information that is relevant, interesting and effective.

Arguably, technology's most profound impact on the newspaper since the invention of Guttenberg's printing press was Samuel Morse's successful

integration of the electromagnet into Joseph Henry's invention of the early telegraph. Morse invented a new telegraph system that was a practical and commercial success.

Morse was a professor of art and design at New York University in 1835 when he demonstrated that signals could be transmitted by wire, followed by the invention of his system of dots and dashes that became *Morse Code*.

On 1 May 1844, Morse demonstrated that his invention and his code would reduce the time between an event and its reporting in a newspaper. The Whig (later to become the U.S. Democratic Party) convention met in Baltimore to select the presidential ticket as crowds gathered at the train station in Washington D.C. to learn of the convention's decision.

Railroad stations were the news organs of the day, somewhat like today's radio stations, for those who were too impatient to wait for the next day's newspaper.

The train left Baltimore and made an interim stop at Annapolis Junction, where Morse's partner, Alfred Vail, telegraphed the convention's choice of Henry Clay and Theodore Frelinghuysen. Morse announced the result to assembled Washingtonians before the train arrived.

Within a month, newspapers began to use Morse's telegraph to carry reports to newspapers.

The U.S. Civil War's impact on journalism

The U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) is commonly believed to have provided the impetus for the development of the modern news writing style, replacing the literary prose style of earlier journalists. New reporting techniques emerged from the reports of battles and events transmitted through the new communication technology of the day, Morse's telegraph. But the cost of sending messages, the unreliability of the new medium, and the ever-present possibility that nearby military gun fire or artillery could cut the wires, topple the poles or disable the system created a need to develop a new approach to newswriting.

The now-familiar *summary lead* and *in-*

verted pyramid style were born. In fact, the two elements were adopted by the journalist community so enthusiastically that when novelist Theodore Dreiser began his short tenure as a journalist at the *Chicago Globe* in 1892, his editor pushed him to answer the questions, "who, what, when, where, why and how" in the first paragraph as the basis for a good story.

Journalists now wrote the opening paragraph to summarize the report. Additional details were presented in a descending order of importance in an abbreviated and *telegraphic* format, stripping the literary excesses, editorialized commentary and wordy descriptions from the story. The more important or critical information was at the beginning of the news story, and the journalists of the day began to adopt a more objective approach to the stories they were presenting.

Historian David T.Z. Mindich suggests that Edwin M. Stanton, Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War and Civil War censor, brought a terse and impersonal style to his *redacting* of reports of conflict between the Union and Confederate forces, further paving the way to modern newswriting.

Marcus Errico, in his essay, *The Evolution of the Summary News Lead* (www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/mhjour1-1.htm), adds that America's Progressive Era (1880s to 1920s) may have served to further entrench those changes to journalism. The surge in scientific discovery and invention led to improved educational standards which, in turn, enhanced the interest of the general public in the news of the day and how journalists presented the results of their research and fact-finding.

The first news release

Ivy Lee, accepted as the father of public relations, is believed to have crafted the first news release in 1906. The Pennsylvania Railroad, which was under public scrutiny for refusing to provide information to the newspaper reporters, had a tragic accident. Lee convinced railroad executives to prepare and distribute the first news re-

lease to reporters. This allowed the railroad owners to have their information disclosed to the public before speculation, fabrications and suppositions could spread.

He issued the press release and transported journalists and photographers to the accident scene to foster an open communication with the newsmedia.

Organization of the news release

The consequence of the transformation of the journalist style was that a news release now had taken a standard form and structure. Adopting the journalistic style of the newspaper report, the news release became more easily integrated into the newspaper's system of research, writing and publication. Its principal elements have become:

- **Headline**, to capture the attention of the reviewing editor and encapsulate the news.
- **Dateline**, to place the release date and story's location in the body of the press release.
- **Lead paragraph**, that normally answers the questions *who, what, when, where* and *why* (and often *how much*).
- **Bridge**, the transition between the lead and the body of the news release.
- **Body**, the remaining details, information, background, attribution, quotes and statistical information relevant to the subject.
- **Boilerplate**, a brief section placed at the end to provide objective background on the organization, agency or institution issuing the news release.
- **Close**, traditionally the symbol "-30-" to note the conclusion of the text of the news release, and to show that information below the symbol is contact information and coordinating details, not intended for publication with the news release.
- **Media contact information**, the name, phone number, email address, mailing address, and/or additional contact information for the representative of the agency issuing the release.
 - **Coordinating notes.**

“FOR BROADCAST.”

Writing the News Release

The Headline

Your news release normally starts with a headline to give the editor and the reader the subject of the news release. It should be succinct, direct and easily-understood. If it is well-written, imaginative and descriptive it may be the headline that introduces your news story in the paper.

But a headline can do more than simply capture the editor's attention, it can also communicate your full message to the reader and him/her into the body of the news report.

There are plenty of examples of “cute” headlines that attempt to lure the reader into the text, but this newsletter advocates the direct approach, avoiding embellishments, tricks and puns. Rather, a headline that communicates the meaning of the report will capture the serious reader more quickly than an attempt at humour or a pun.

There are rules to headlines:

- Accuracy is as essential in the headline as in the news story.
- Use strong, active verbs.
- Maintain subject-verb agreement.
- Relate the headline to the person or event of the report.
- Do not repeat words.
- Do not over-use abbreviations and numbers.
- Develop the headline from the lead and bridge paragraphs.
- Avoid misleading headlines.
- Do not editorialize (offer opinions).
- Avoid slang and trite expressions.
- Keep headlines brief (six words maximum).
- Punctuate the headline:
 - Only use periods in abbreviations;
 - Use the dash and colon to replace “says” in headlines in direct and indirect quotes;
 - Use single quotation marks;
 - Replace “and” with a comma or semi-colon.

Writing the “Dateline”

The dateline gives the point of origin (*location*) of the story, date and sometimes credit to the agency making the release. It appears as the preliminary part of the lead, and if received from another source or written for external release, it will usually have a dateline.

The simplest dateline is written for external release—

SCOTTS BAY, NS, Feb. 19 – A volunteer search and rescue specialist saved the life of a six year-old child yesterday by carrying her up the cliffs of Cape Split faster than the rising Fundy tide.

Note that the specific location (SCOTTS BAY) is written in all caps. If “Nova Scotia” were written in full, perhaps for an international audience, it would be in written in upper and lower case (“up and down” style).

The Lead Paragraph

The *lead*, or opening paragraph, is critical to the success of the news release. It “sells” the rest of the story, and if it doesn’t capture the reader’s (ie: the editor’s) interest, it may not be considered for publication or assignment to a reporter for further research.

The normal practice among professionals of institutional writing is to prepare a lead paragraph that is one sentence long, comprising about 30 words (or less, if possible), that sets the tone or paints a picture for the subject of the news release. The lead should be impersonal, without expressing an editorial opinion, and arouse interest in reading the remainder of the release.

Of course, these are guidelines and not strict rules. There are subjects that will not lend themselves to these conventions, and the only actual solid rule is that no guideline should interfere with readability.

The classically good lead paragraph is drawn from the answers to the six (or seven) questions:

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?
- (and sometimes) How much?

This formula is nicknamed “The 5 dubs H” for “The five W’s and H.”

News leads can take whatever form the writer feels may be most effective. They can be “descriptive,” can take the form of “contrast,” may ask a “question,” or may make a statement with “impact.” But in each case, it takes the most important element of the story and makes it the subject of, and at the front of, the lead. While it is becoming commonplace for journalists to use single words and phrases as attention-getting leads, this newsletter feels that in all cases, however, the professional writer should use full sentences that follow the traditional conventions of language and composition.

The following example shows how the various lead elements can take the emphasis in a lead:

WHO? – A volunteer search and rescue specialist saved the life of a six year-old child yesterday by carrying her up the cliffs of Cape Split faster than the rising Fundy tide.

OR – A volunteer search and rescue specialist snatched another world-be drowning victim from the Fundy high tide yesterday by carrying a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs with the tide in close pursuit.

NOTE: This is an impersonal “who” lead, which is used when the person is not well-known. If the subject or the victim were a prominent person, then that person would be identified and take prominence in the lead, such as, “Former provincial premier John ...,” or “President of the Downtown Merchants Association Elizabeth ...”.

WHAT? – A drowning was prevented yesterday when a volunteer search and rescue specialist carried a six year-old boy up the Cape Split cliffs faster than the rising Fundy high tide.

OR – Fundy’s famous high tide was denied another victim yesterday when a volunteer search and rescue specialist carried a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs with the tide in close pursuit.

Mnemonic Aid

The “5 dubs &h”

Who -
What -
When-
Where -
Why-
How -
How much -

WHEN? – At high tide yesterday, a six year-old child was saved from drowning when a volunteer search and rescue worker carried her up the Cape Split cliffs before they could be caught by dangerous tides.

WHERE? – Cape Split was the site of a daring rescue yesterday when a volunteer search and rescue worker carried a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs before they could be caught by rising waters.

WHY? – The need to save a young girl's life prompted a volunteer search and rescue specialist to scale down the Cape Split cliffs to get her to safety ahead of the Fundy high tide.

HOW? – Using his training as a volunteer search and rescue specialist, a young man carried a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs to save her from drowning.

As noted above, normally the lead is a single sentence within a single paragraph, but sometimes this simply is not possible as it might compromise readability when there is just too much information. The writer should then divide the information into another sentence or another paragraph, whichever makes it more interesting to read.

Whatever device the writer uses for the lead, it must meet the reader's initial curiosity and prompt him/her to read further.

Writing the Bridge

The Bridge is simply the transition from the lead to the main body of the news release or news story to allow the reader to move comfortably to the presentation of details that comprise the remainder of the story – a lead-to-body link. After writing a summary lead, the writer looks over his facts and decides what items will be in the bridge. This second part of a news story is normally one or two paragraphs.

The bridge can serve one or more of five major functions, depending on the summary lead written for the story.

Any 'W's not included in the lead: Include any of the "5 dub H" elements not included in the lead paragraph.

One of the functions of the bridge is to explain other Ws or H not included in the lead. For example, the amount of detail required to explain why an event happened may have preempted including the "WHY" in the lead, then it could logically be presented in the bridge.

For example: **(lead paragraph)** The School Board yesterday postponed until its regular Thursday meeting a decision on whether to pay \$14,250 an acre

for a 42-acre tract as the site for the new St. Crispins High School.

(Bridge) Board members complained they were given insufficient time to consider the proposal saying that they didn't receive notice of the special meeting until yesterday morning.

Attribution: Another function of the bridge is to give attribution to those leads which, by their nature demand such attribution. Attribution gives the sources (*who said it*) or authority (*directives, regulations, sources, etc...*)

For example: (Lead paragraph) Nova Scotia's Law Amendments Committee met last evening to finalize details for new legislation to finalize legislation that will increase worker safety at jobsites within the province.

(Bridge) This legislation began as a private member's bill introduced into the provincial legislature by Opposition labour critic William Rikker three months ago.

Identification: A third function of the bridge is to provide complete identification after an **impersonal who** lead. Complete identification means full name, rank (for military, police and Coast Guard), age, title or occupation. (A word of caution – addresses and identification of family or next of kin information is normally not appropriate for release, contingent on the subject of the report.

Example: (Lead paragraph) A volunteer search and rescue specialist saved the life of a six year-old child yesterday by carrying her up the cliffs of Cape Split faster than the rising Fundy tide.

(Bridge paragraph) Ms. Helen Gendron, a long-time volunteer with the Halifax Search and Rescue organization and participant in numerous searches, received the heart-felt thanks from the little girl's family for her daring rescue.

Tie back: A fourth function of the bridge is to give the reader a recap or tie-back to an earlier story on the same subject. The writer must never assume that his readers have read the first version of the story. Therefore a tie-back is necessary to put the reader in a proper perspective.

Secondary facts: A fifth function of the bridge is to bring out additional information which is not a lead element, but complements the lead.

The five types of bridges are:

• **Other "Ws"** not answered in the lead sentence;

• **Attribution** – gives authority for lead information;

• **Identification** – always used after "*impersonal who*" leads;

- ‡ **Tie-back** – jars the reader’s memory;
- ‡ **Secondary facts** – facts of lesser importance than the lean emphasis.

Memory aid acronym

The servant bridge WAITS and serves the master lead.

- ‡ **W** (why or how) that are not in the lead;
- ‡ **A**tribution;
- ‡ **I**dentification;
- ‡ **T**ie-back;
- o Secondary facts.

Mnemonic Aid
The “bridge” WAITS

Ws - (or how) not in the lead.
A - attribution
I - identification
T - Tie -back to a previous story.
S - Secondary facts.

The Body

The common fault of the novice writer is to crowd too much into the introductory paragraph.

A function of the body is to expand on the summary information given in the opening and bridge. Where the opening may tell the story in a “nutshell,” the body “fleshes out” the facts of the lead with interesting and significant details. It explains in more detail each fact contained in the lead and it supplies additional information of secondary importance not mentioned in the opening.

Nomenclature

How does your ministry, organization, company, or department wish to be identified and what is its official abbreviation?

The name of your agency is spelled out in full in the first use with the abbreviation in

brackets following immediately. Each time the agency name is used the abbreviation can be used instead. Some examples include:

- Supreme Court of Canada (SCC);
- Ministry of Transportation (MoT);
- Transport Canada (TC);
- Canadian Red Cross (CRC);
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC);
- Department of National Defence (DND);
- Canadian Forces (CF);
- The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

Conclusion

Good writing is often dismissed as something at which a communicator is good or not. However, as you look at a writing task you have to deal with the memories of grade school teachers wielding their red pens to accuse you of bad writing practices. Often, they created grave, life-long misgivings about our abilities to write well and fostered the belief that we were only capable of mere mediocrity with the written word.

You may be surprised to learn that many probably weren’t much better than the students they were correcting.

Good writing begins simply with the application of the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.

SMARTSHEETS are produced as guides and aids to assist writers. They are available by contacting the author at:

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