

Seven Steps to a Great Press Release

by Elizabeth Hanes

It's a simple equation: media exposure equals more money for you as a writer. Give an interview on a local radio station and watch your book sales increase. Get quoted in a magazine article and find yourself negotiating more pay for your next freelance article because you're a "recognized expert" on a topic.

And while you can dream up many creative ways to get the attention of the media, the fact is 99% of all media exposure begins with a simple, well-written press release.

Writing a great press release -- one that grabs the attention of an editor and results in media coverage -- is easy once you understand the basic elements involved and how they fit together.

Format Correctly. News is a time-sensitive, bottom-line oriented business. Give editors and reporters the basic information first: who you are, how they can reach you, and when they can run your story. Start by placing the release date in the upper left-hand corner.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 22, 2002

Most of the time, this is the release date you'll use, but if you're issuing a release well in advance of an event, you can give a specific date. For instance, if you're publicizing a book signing four weeks ahead of time, you might want to put "FOR RELEASE (date)." Choose a date that's closer to the actual event.

Next, drop down two lines and tell the editor whom to contact and how to do it. You would be surprised how many people make it difficult for the media to contact them about a story! Format the information like this:

CONTACT:
Elizabeth Hanes
555-555-0021 (office)
555-555-0034 (cell)
Elizabeth@elizabethhanes.com

Hook 'em With an Irresistible Headline. Drop down two more lines and type your headline in bold caps. Write your headline in the form of a question, provocative statement or outrageous claim to pique the editor's interest. "Do 400-year-old Horses Roam New Mexico?" works better than "Local Author Writes Book About Bloodlines of Local Horses."

Show You're a Pro by Giving a Dateline. Two lines below your headline, the story begins in earnest. However, before you dazzle the editor with your sparkling prose, provide dateline information. The dateline shows where the press release originated and gives the date it was written. This allows the editor to categorize the release in a variety of ways, while also letting her know your news is fresh. Here's how to format the dateline:

LOS LUNAS, NM (5/16/02) --

Immediately after the "em" dash, begin your story. Double space and use 12-point Times New Roman or Courier.

Reel 'em in With a Compelling Lead. Editors read dozens of press releases every day. It's crucial you provide a one or two-sentence lead that grabs and holds their attention. Playing off the headline above, here's an example:

"When Spain sent conquistadors, missionaries and horses to New Mexico 400 years ago, they expected their legacy to last. Now, surprising new DNA evidence shows that the blood of the original Spanish Barb horses -- long thought to be extinct -- may still flow strongly through the veins of local mustang herds."

Use the Inverted Pyramid Style. Chances are, you learned this technique when you worked on the high school newspaper, but it bears repeating. Editors are busy folks working on tight deadlines. Don't waste their time by making them wade through eight paragraphs before discovering your point. Instead, put the basic information in the first paragraph of your release. If applicable, use the "Five W's": who, what, when, where, why, and how. In the subsequent paragraphs expand on the Five W's. Focus on the newsworthy item or event you're publicizing, but also include information about yourself, your credentials and education. Be brief. A press release should run between 300-500 words or no more than two pages.

Tell Them When the Show is Over. If your press release runs to two pages, number the second page. Two lines below your last sentence, type either "-30-" or "###" to indicate the story's end. This tells the editor she received your entire release. If you don't mark the end of the story, the editor might wonder if there's a page missing.

Source: <http://www.writing-world.com/promotion/hanes.shtml>