



How to write a compelling press release

Press releases are short, factual news stories written in the third person and given to the media to encourage editors/journalists/broadcasters to feature the story in their publications and programmes.

1. Make sure you have a newsworthy story

You need to have something new and important to say. You need to find a newsworthy angle. For local newspapers, it's good to have a local link

Ask yourself why would people be interested in this venue or event now in particular? What's new or different? What's happened to make it newsworthy? What local links does this story have?

2. Target a particular media sector

A press release should be written for the editor/journalist/broadcaster of specific publications/programmes and you tailor them to the readership/viewers/listeners of that publication/programme. Most of your press releases will need to go to local media including the Craven Herald, Westmoreland Gazette and the Yorkshire post. Local radio stations include Stray FM, Dales Radio, Drystone FM.

The bulk of each tailored press release might be relatively similar but you'd write a different headline, opening paragraph and possibly quote for each media group (ie a different one for the Craven Herald or Stray FM etc).

3. Answer the Who, What, Where, When, Why, How questions

Let's use Stainforth Village Hall running a fund raising event as an example.

- **Who:** Stainforth Village Hall
- **What:** Running a Bring and Buy stall and homemade afternoon tea event
- **Where:** Stainforth Village Hall
- **When:** 3 September
- **Why:** Raising money for a new disabled toilet
- **How:** Allen Bennet will open the Bring and Buy stalls at 2pm, raffle tickets for a holiday in Italy will be on sale and every visitor gets free entry into a prize draw for a year's supply of Yorkshire tea.

4. Structure the press release

- Short, clear headline tells media what the story is about
- Paragraph 1: sums up the entire story in one or two sentences
- Paragraph 2: puts story in context - why it's important

- Paragraph 3: presents details – who’s involved, how it came about, etc.
- Paragraph 4: includes a relevant quote to add information, credibility and/or opinion
- Paragraph 5: shows where people can find more details, buy product, get involved, etc.

If the publication is short of space, it will delete paragraphs from the bottom up.

5. Write a newsworthy headline

Press release headlines not only tell the reader what the story is about, they are your sales pitch to the media.

The media use headlines to determine whether a story is even worth reading. If it doesn’t grab their attention, they’ll probably delete or bin the press release without even reading it.

But grabbing the media’s attention isn’t the same as grabbing the audience’s attention. Don’t try to be cryptic or clever. Leave the resulting news story headline to the media’s own headline writers.

Ambiguous: Rugby’s gone touchy feely

Clear: Skipton Rugby Club starts new tag teams for girls

Ambiguous: How green is our dale

Clear: Farmer wins international environmental award

Ambiguous: Pitch perfect

Clear: Ermysted’s School opens new synthetic turf pitch

So for the Stainforth Village Hall story, some headlines we might use are:

Allan Bennet to open Stainforth Village Hall Bring and Buy

Allan Bennet supports disabled toilet fundraising at Stainforth

Ideally, you want your headline to say

‘someone/something does something worthwhile’.

6. Write in the third person

You need to write your press release in the third person. So “Stainforth Village Hall is delighted that Allan Bennet is presenting awards” not “We’ve got Allan Bennet to present awards...”

Also, you are not writing the story that might appear in the paper. You are writing it from your organisation’s point of view.

For example, if you were writing a press release about village hall repairs blocking the traffic for a while, apologising to residents for the upheaval caused, you wouldn’t write “Residents are up in arms over village hall building works” – that’s what the paper might print. You write “The village

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hall is taking residents' concerns seriously and holding a public meeting on..."

7. Summarise the story in the opening paragraph

The opening paragraph complements the headline by giving a fuller explanation of what the story is about. The skill is in getting all the key information in without saying too much too soon. A good opening paragraph should be able to stand alone. Think of it almost like a radio news bulletin.

8. Put the story into context

If you think of the first paragraph as 'who is doing/has done what', the second and third paragraphs go on to give you more detail and explain the 'why and how' behind the 'who and what'.

For the 'Allan Bennet to open Stainforth Village Hall Bring and Buy' story, you might mention that Allan Bennet heard of the fundraising efforts made so far for the disabled toilets and was so impressed that he wanted to support the hall.

Your third paragraph could then give some detail on what the disabled toilet will be like, where and when it will be installed, what difference it will make to visitors to the area, etc.

9. Stick to one story per press release

If your press release has gone onto a second page, you've probably got two or more stories.

Discipline yourself to recognise when one story ends and another one begins. And don't weave a weaker story into your strong one. You'll simply dilute the good one.

If you must add extra information, put it in 'notes to editors' at the end of the release. Or write a second press release.

10. Write a decent quote

Too many quotes are put into press releases simply to acknowledge the presence of a CEO, partner, sponsor, client, etc. There's nothing wrong with having endorsements, just make sure they say something worthwhile.

Quotes need to do one or more of the following:

- provide useful information/details not included elsewhere in the release
- explain why a particular product/service/partnership is of benefit to people
- give credibility to an unknown product/service/partnership

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- express an opinion on an important issue
- not sound as if they've been written by a PR department

11. Send an image

If you possibly can, send an image with your text. You can send a low resolution image with the email of your press release, and let them know you have a higher resolution image available. (That way you don't clog up inboxes with large image files and you can send a number of images for them to choose from.) The Craven Herald in particular welcomes interesting images.