How—and Why—to Write a Science News Release

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Researchers write journal articles to share information about what they've learned and how they've learned it. But those articles are only able to impart that information if people read them. The role of a news release, in this context, is to raise awareness of a new discovery via established news media outlets (even if that discovery is a negative result). Put in more practical terms, the role of the news release is to get reporters interested in writing about new research findings, with the resulting news stories letting a much broader potential audience know that the related journal article exists. So, whether you are a journal editor, a researcher whose work is being highlighted, or someone tasked with writing science news releases, it is important to understand how these releases are developed.

Why Science News Releases Matter

Historically, news releases have been written with the primary goal of getting reporters to write about a given subject. A news release about scientific research cannot fully convey all of the details in a journal article, but it can give reporters a concise overview of the work and place it in context. Ideally, this allows reporters to decide whether they want to read the relevant journal article(s), interview researchers and third-party experts, and do all of the other things necessary to write a news story about the work. This makes news releases useful.

One reason this is of particular relevance to the research community is because news coverage of research findings appears to boost citations of the relevant journal article. It is impossible to both issue a news release for a research finding and *not* issue a news release for a research finding, so it is impossible to generate experimental evidence that news coverage causes an increase in citations. However, there is sufficient evidence of a correlation between media coverage and citation rates to suggest that such a relationship exists.[1,2]

News releases are also worth paying attention to because they can shape the way media outlets cover research findings. For example, there is ample evidence that exaggerations in news releases about health-related research findings are reflected in subsequent news stories about those findings—underscoring the importance of accurate news releases that place new findings in the appropriate context.[3,4]

Lastly, science news releases are important because a wide variety of media outlets no longer rely on journalism. Rather, these outlets simply compile and republish news releases written by research institutions or other organizations. And many of these media outlets, such as ScienceDaily and Phys.org, are read by millions of people every month. In other words, news releases are no longer read solely by reporters; they are read by a wide audience. This places additional emphasis on the need to portray research findings accurately and in context. In short, you can no longer assume that your news release will serve as the starting point for a well-reported news story; it's entirely possible that the news release will *be* the news story.

Now that we know why news releases are worth writing, let's focus on how to write them.

Getting Started

The first step in writing a science news release is deciding what to write about. Sometimes the person tasked with writing news releases works for a research institution, sometimes they work for a journal. They may have a background in journalism, or the sciences, or both. They may (or may not) have a background in relevant research fields. But regardless of one's professional background, before you can decide which research findings to write about, you need to know what you are trying to accomplish and who your audience is. There are no hard and fast rules for deciding what to write about—you have to understand what your organization's goals are and who the organization wants the new release to reach.

For example, if you are writing the news release on behalf of a journal, you may ultimately be trying to reach that journal's core audience with the goal of getting them to read the relevant article. If you are writing for a research institution, your audience may be funding agencies, peer institutions or

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the private sector. As the writer, your goals could be anything from highlighting your employer's position as an innovator, their role as a practical problem solver, or that your employer is a bastion of fundamental science.

Once you have some idea of what you are trying to accomplish, and the audience you need to reach to accomplish it, you can make informed decisions about the research you want to highlight through a news release.

Once you know what you want to write about, you need to read the journal article and talk to the research team. Odds are excellent that the science writer preparing the news release lacks the relevant expertise to understand all of the technical details in the article, but it should at least give you a general overview of what the researchers did, why they did it, and what they learned. However, there is ample opportunity for the person writing the release to misunderstand the work, which is why talking to the research team is crucial.

Regardless of how well you think you understood the paper, ask researchers to explain to you what question or challenge they were setting out to address and why. Ask them what they think the key findings are and why. Ask them whether anything surprised them—and why. You need to walk away from that conversation not only understanding what they learned and how they learned it, but how to place that work in context. What questions did this work answer? What questions does it raise? Does it have any applications? How far removed are those applications from practical use? Was it an observational study, an experimental study, or a study that relied solely on computational models? If it's related to human health, how far removed is the work from clinical trials? Is it something that would cost a jillion dollars to implement?

In short, as a news release writer, you need to be insatiably curious not only about the work but about how the work fits into the world around us. Don't stop asking questions until you have a fairly clear idea of what the story you want to tell in the news release will look like.

Writing the Science News Release

The hardest part of writing a news release is usually either writing the headline or writing the first paragraph (also called the "lede").

The headline should be concise, catchy, and intellectually honest. This is not always easy, but it is worth the effort to come up with a headline that meets those criteria. You cannot mislead people—honesty is essential. But if the headline is boring or unwieldy, the vast majority of people will read no further.

The lede is equally important. Tim Radford, former science editor for The Guardian, once wrote: "There are many ways to begin a story. And finding the right opening line can make writing the rest of the story much easier. Finding the right opening line is also important if you want the reader to keep reading."[5]

The lede must tell readers what's interesting about the story and why you're telling them about it now. You do not want to overstate the findings you are writing about, but you also do not have room to include all of the qualifiers that are often associated with research findings. So, for example, you absolutely do not want to say that there was a "cancer breakthrough." You also wouldn't want the lede to use terms like "oncogenic pathways" or "lymphotropic virus-1." Instead, you might say that a study sheds new light on how some viruses interact with their human hosts on a molecular level, and how that can increase the risk of some cancers. It's not horribly specific, but it lets people know what you're talking about right away, as well as why they might be interested. The rest of the release will flesh out some of the details.

However, the rest of the release will only flesh out *some* of the details. A news release is not a thorough recap of the entire journal article itself—that would be both far too long and much too detailed for most of the people reading the release. Instead, the news release should highlight what is interesting and important about the work and place the work in context for the reader. People who want to dive into all of the technical aspects raised in the journal article should read the journal article. (This applies to reporters who may want to cover the work, members of the research community, and anyone else who is curious about the details.)

Here are some of the things you'll likely want to include in the body of the release:

- an overview of the question or challenge that researchers were setting out to address;
- a concise description of the findings;
- why the findings are important (fleshing out what you wrote in the lede);
- the methods used in the study;
- the study's limitations (be honest!);
- future directions for the research;
- the names and affiliations of the researchers;
- where the work is published (including a link to journal article); and
- if applicable, who provided funding for the research.

(Note: this list is paraphrased from Shipman.[6])

In addition, the body of the news release should usually include at least 1 quote from someone on the research team. A quote not only provides insight into the researcher's perspective, it lets reporters know that the researcher is capable of talking about the work in an accessible way.

A key issue when writing a science news release is that your reader needs to understand what you are saying.

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This does not mean that you have to avoid using jargon or technical terms. Jargon can be immensely valuable since it often allows you to convey a great deal of information in 1 short word or phrase. However, if you do use jargon, you have to define it. For example, if there's a technical term for a key concept that you will be referencing repeatedly in the body of the news release, it may be useful to define the term early in the release. It could be as simple as including a sentence in the second or third paragraph that begins "At issue is a phenomenon known as [X], which is…". Having done that, you can then use the term X in the remainder of the release without confusing your reader.

The last issue I'll single out here is how long a news release should be. I used to think a news release should not exceed 500 words in length, because the conventional wisdom was that writing for online audiences had to be short. I no longer believe that. In my experience, the length of a piece is less important than what the release has to say. In other words, a news release should be as long as it needs to be—say what you need to say and then stop. If you write 1,000 words that are compelling and keep the reader's attention, it is not too long. If you write 400 words, but lose the reader's interest, it is too long.

Review and Editing

Once you've completed a first draft of the release, standard practice is to share it with the researchers who did the relevant work. This gives them an opportunity to identify anything that is technically incorrect. It also gives them an opportunity to highlight anything in the release they feel has been placed out of context, over- or under-emphasized and so on. Ultimately, you want the researchers to feel comfortable with how you are presenting them and their work.

However, while it is critical to address any concerns the researchers have, it is also important that the release remain accessible to nonexpert audiences. If the researchers want to rely solely on technical language and inaccessible jargon, then the news release serves no purpose. The goal of the release is to help people get a broad understanding of what is interesting or important about the work. It bears repeating that readers who want all of the technical details can refer to the journal article.

Once you've incorporated any necessary revisions from the researchers, it's time to edit the release. Broadly speaking, editing should ensure that the release is highlighting the key points and can be easily understood. In addition, the copyediting process identifies any punctuation or grammatical errors. Ideally, editing would be done by a third party. However, depending on the size of the organization drafting the release, there may not be another writer/editor on staff.

What Next?

Once the release has been written, revised, and edited, you need to decide how to distribute it.

Generally, whatever organization wrote the release will publish it on the relevant organizational website, such as their newsroom site. The organization will also likely send the release to a mailing list of reporters who have a track record of covering related topics. Professional communicators at the relevant organization may also want to reach out to reporters individually to let them know about the relevant findings and provide a link to the news release in case reporters are interested in learning more. Organizations, or the researchers themselves, can also share the news release with any relevant funding agencies, who may amplify the release by resharing it through their own channels. Lastly, the release can also be posted on a variety of news release distribution sites such as EurekAlert, AlphaGalileo, or Newswise. These news release distribution sites do help organizations reach an audience of reporters. But they also serve as a way to feed research items to news aggregation sites, such as ScienceDaily or Phys.org, which amplify the reach of the news with the general public.

This is a concise overview of how to go about crafting a news release about research findings, but most of the rules here should be viewed more as guidelines. Yes, a news release must be honest and accurate about the research—that is nonnegotiable. On the other points, there is often room to maneuver. For example, you can use more technical language when writing about work that may be of interest almost exclusively to news outlets that focus on discipline-specific audiences. And it is okay to have fun with the subject, as long as the researchers are on board and you keep your target audiences in mind. (I once wrote a headline about forensic research that included the phrase "Hips Don't Lie," if that tells you anything.) Ultimately, if done well, news releases are a useful tool for raising the visibility of scientific discovery with all types of people. And in an increasingly crowded marketplace of ideas, there is very real value in that.

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