The Killer News Release

Over the years, many people have proclaimed that the news release is dead.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

The news release is still an effective tool because it encourages journalists to report on the news, and because the release can "live" indefinitely online, making it visible to search engines.

However, to maximize its effectiveness and impact, the news release must be well written. Here are some pointers.

Part One: Getting Started

Have news.

The first essential for a killer news release is news. (No surprise there.) This means the topic must be:

- New
- Different
- Important
- Local
- Timely

- And have human interest.

The more of these characteristics your announcement has, the greater chance you have to attract readers. Without these characteristics, nothing else matters. People need a reason to read your news, and journalists need a reason to cover it.

This does not mean your announcement needs to be earth-shattering. Few are. It just means that your release can't be fluff, nor can it directly sell your product, service or cause. The release is designed to interest readers in your topic and perhaps generate some sales leads in the process. The sale comes later.

Keep your readers in mind.

Focus on your target audience, and emphasize the value your announcement has for them.

Focus on one idea.

The best releases do not try to do too much. They explain one or two related points. So before writing, determine your most important points and focus on them (and only them).

To determine your basic idea, ask yourself:
- What is the announcement?
- Who is the audience?
- Why should the audience care?
- What do you want people to *know*?
- What do you want people to *do*?
- What does the product or service do?
- What are its main features and benefits?
- What are its strengths and weaknesses?
- How is it different?
- When is it available?
- How much does it cost?

Stay focused. Keep the release simple.

Part 2: The Headline

The headline is the most important part of the release. This is what will appear as the result of an online search and will be the first thing journalists see.

It's estimated that journalists spend three to five seconds deciding whether they might even read a news release. Most people browsing online probably spend even less time. So get your news out quickly.

Some tips:

- Make your headline short, preferably 10 words or fewer.

- Include keywords in your headline. These are the words your target audience would use to search for information on your type of product or service. If you don't know your keywords, research them at services such as Google (https://adwords.google.com) or Wordtracker (http://www.Wordtracker.com). You'll get an idea of the relative popularity of terms, which can help you optimize your release.

- Write your headline in present tense and active voice. "Bill hit the ball" is more powerful than "the ball was hit by Bill."

- Use short words, preferably one or two syllables.

- Avoid using the word "announce" or "introduce" in your headline. These words are superfluous and can weaken the announcement.

After you've written your headline, ask others for feedback on whether they think the headline would interest the target reader. If not, re-write it.

Write a subhead to improve search engine results.

Most releases benefit from having a subhead, which expands on the headline. Subheads are good for search engine optimization (SEO), as the search engines will pick them up and display them after the headline.

In writing your subhead:
- Use different words from the headline.
- Explain the story in one sentence.
- Use sentence capitalization without a period.
- Keep the subhead short, preferably under 14 words.

Part Three: The Body of the News Release

Now it's time to write the body of the news release. Here are some tips.

Use the inverted pyramid style.

Time is of the essence, so begin with the most important material to grab attention, and then present the supporting material. Visually, the "inverted pyramid style" looks something like this:

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      Most Important Information
         Supporting Details
            Boilerplate
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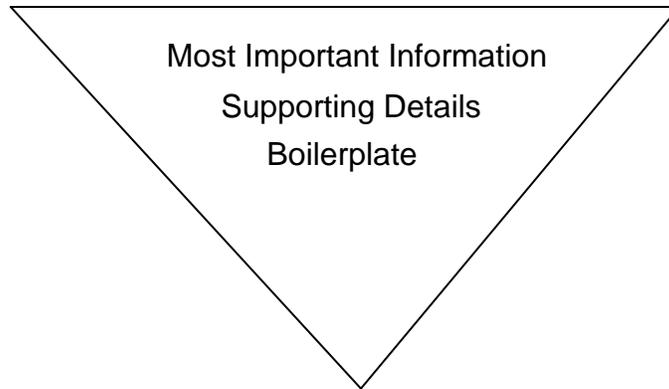
Here is a more detailed outline.

"Lede"
The journalistic term for the first or "lead" paragraph of the release
The main point of the announcement
One to two sentences

Expanded "lede"
The second paragraph of the release
More details and benefits
One to two sentences

The third paragraph
A quote, expressing an opinion

Body of the release:
Details of the announcement
One to four paragraphs, depending on the complexity of the announcement

Last paragraph: boilerplate
A description of the organization and contact information
Typically two to three sentences

Start with your most important points.

As stated earlier, the "lede" is the journalistic term for the first paragraph of the news release. Typically your lede should include most of the following elements:
- Who (the company or organization)
- What (the news)
- When (the release date)
- Where (the geographical origin of the release)

- Why (the benefit)
- And how (the process)

Getting all this into one paragraph is not always possible (especially with technical subjects), and the "how" and "why" are sometimes inferred.

Here are some tips:

- Pretend that you're telling a friend the news. Write down what you would say. That is your lede (or at least the start of your lede).

- Include keywords in your lede.

- Make your lede short.

- Use strong verbs.

- Avoid quotes in the lede unless you're quoting someone important.

- As with the headline, avoid the word "announced." Your lede will be stronger. The statement that "ABC Company today announced its XYZ battery, which lasts 25 percent longer than competitive products" is weaker than an alternative version, "The new XYZ battery from ABC Company lasts 25 percent longer than competitive products."

- If possible, start your release with your benefit statement. Building on the example above, the release might state that "Organizations can stay 'powered up' 25 percent longer with the new XYZ battery from ABC Company."

As an exercise, I recommend you visit the websites of some major wire services (e.g., www.BusinessWire.com, www.PRNewswire.com and www.PRWeb.com) and read the headlines and ledes of some releases.

Include a quote that moves your story along.

A quote is the only place in the release where you can state an opinion.

Keep the quote restrained. You can market, but do not try to sell. Saying "you should buy this wonderful widget today" won't cut it. You could say something like "this is the smallest and strongest widget on the market." See the difference?

Even better than quoting someone in the company, quote an outsider such as a customer, business associate or industry analyst. You can even quote two people if the announcement is complex and if they represent different aspects of your story (e.g., a company executive and a customer).

I have analyzed articles in various publications, comparing how much material was attributed to the companies and how much to third parties. I found that about 60 percent of the quotes or attributions came from third parties, with only about 40 percent from the companies themselves. That proportion is dramatic since the average release contains little or no third-party material.

End the release with a boilerplate.

A boilerplate describes the company and gives contact information. The boilerplate is the last paragraph of the release and is the same for every release.

Here is an example.

About Silicon Valley Open Studios (SVOS)

Silicon Valley Open Studios (SVOS), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, has been connecting art enthusiasts with local art and artists in Silicon Valley for 33 years. SVOS is one of the oldest, largest and most popular art events in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. One of its goals is to act as an incubator for new and emerging artists. In addition to its open studio activities, SVOS works with schools throughout the Peninsula and South Bay to increase exposure for the art their students create. For more information, go to www.svos.org.

Part Four: Writing Tips

Emphasize benefits.

When discussing products and services, include features and always explain their benefits. Ask yourself why should people care, and answer that question clearly and convincingly. For example, instead of simply stating that "the widget weighs only one ounce," point out that "the widget's light weight makes it appropriate for mobile applications."

Focus on people as much as possible.

Even if you're promoting a product, focus on its impact on people. For example, discuss how the medication helped a particular person; describe how the new software reduced processing time; or tell how an accountant saved his client hundreds of dollars in taxes.

Use subheads to break up the content.

Subheads are a great way to improve readability. Make the subheads tell the story, so a reader can get the basic information just by scanning. For example, instead of saying "Features and Benefits," consider a subhead that highlights the major feature or benefit, such as the "Industry's Best Performance."

Write in journalistic style.

Write so that your release reads like the articles in traditional magazine and newspapers. That means writing in third person instead of second (i.e., using "they" instead of "you"). Avoid exclamation points and superlatives like "best," "unique" and "wonderful."

Write in meaningful English.

Explain technical terms. Avoid acronyms if possible, unless they are commonly used (e.g., "ATM" for "automated teller machine"). If you must use an acronym, define it first and put the acronym in parenthesis after that, e.g., "Internet of Things (IoT)." From then on just use the acronym.

Also avoid gibberish and jargon, which seem especially prevalent in the technology world. Words like "solution," "robust," and "next-generation" have lost their meaning. Avoid them and you'll strengthen your releases.

A good resource is the Bullfighter software, which you can download free from https://bullfighter.software.informer.com. The software will analyze your writing and rate it according to its jargon and understandability (or lack thereof).

Write on an appropriate level.

The rule of thumb is to write four years below the education level of your audience. Microsoft Word will calculate the reading level of your content. (For directions on activating the readability feature, go to https://bit.ly/2HGvaXZ.)

Write for the online world.

Increasingly releases have a dual purpose, to inform journalists and to reach other readers directly through online postings. News releases can increase traffic to your website and boost your rankings with the search engines.

So, when writing your release, write for both online "consumption" and for traditional print media. Specifically:
- As mentioned earlier, use keywords in the headline.
- Use keywords in your subhead and lede.
- Use keywords one or two more times in the release. Often this just requires substituting a keyword for "it" or "its."
- Include your URL in the boilerplate.

Edit.

Years ago, the standard rule was that news releases should be one page (or something between 300 and 400 words). That may still be appropriate for some "soft-news" releases.

However, most hard-news announcements, especially technical ones, are longer partially because the subject matter is complex and partially because traditional length guidelines do not really apply online. However, in general, keep your release as short as possible. You can always refer readers to other material elsewhere.

Use links wisely.

One way to keep your release short is to embed links to other information (e.g., visuals, websites, and presentations) rather than include all the information in the release. Using links strategically can make it easier for journalists to get all the information they need, and may encourage online visitors to read your other material. But don't make the release a "link farm." Include links when you refer to specific features, or include a description and listing of links at the end of the release.

Proofread carefully.

Have someone else read the news release before distributing it. I've seen cases where the product name was misspelled or some other important information was missing or incorrect. Only a fresh perspective saved the day.

Read the release aloud.

You can learn a lot by reading a release aloud. For one thing, if you have to take a breath in a sentence, it should be two sentences. If a word appears too often, it's time to substitute some other word(s).

Follow a style guide.

To look professional, follow the guidelines in a style guide such as *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* or *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*. These books, which are available at most bookstores, give guidelines for word choice, punctuation and the like. If you are unfamiliar with style books,

I recommend reading one or two pages a day to familiarize yourself with its content.

Part Five: Formatting Guidelines
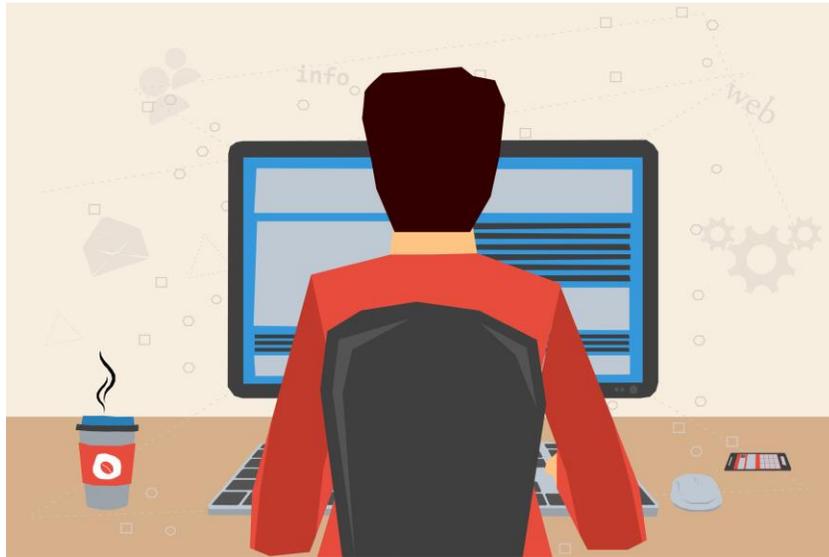
Follow established format guidelines so that you appear professional. Here are the major elements in that format:

- Release information – In almost all cases, the information is "For Immediate Release." That means the journalists are free to use the material when they receive it.

- Headline – Use initial caps in your headline. All caps make the headline look "angry."

- The dateline – Include the originating location (which is usually the city and state of the company's headquarters) and the release date (the date the announcement is made). If you're announcing the news from a location other than your headquarters (e.g., at a trade show), use its location for your dateline.

- A completion sign – Center "-end-" or "###" at the conclusion of the release.

- Contact information – Include the name, organization, phone numbers (both office and cell) and e-mail of the PR person who can provide journalists with more details or arrange interviews. Put this information at the bottom of the release.

Here is a correctly formatted release.

Release information
<u>For Immediate Release</u>

<div align="center">

Headline
Silicon Valley Open Studios (SVOS) Connects Artists and Art Enthusiasts

Subhead
Peninsula, South Bay and coastal artists open their studios the first three weekends in May

</div>

Dateline
Campbell, CA (April 2, 2019) — During <u>Silicon Valley Open Studios (SVOS)</u>, South Bay, Peninsula and coastal artists will open their workplaces to the public. This free, annual event lets visitors "get up close and personal" with artists the first three weekends in May (May 4-5, 11-12 and 18-19).

More than 385 artists in over 160 locations will display their art, which will include painting, fiber arts, mixed media, jewelry, sculpture and ceramics. The art (except for photographs and prints) is one-of-a-kind.

"SVOS gives visitors the opportunity to connect with the artists and see a lot of their work at one time," said Mel Thomsen, executive director of SVOS. "The event showcases established and emerging talent, so it is an easy way for art enthusiasts to start an art collection."

Dates and Locations

SVOS occurs over three consecutive weekends, each focusing on a different area. Specifically, artists in 28 cities from Burlingame to Morgan Hill and along the coast will open their studios between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. according to the following schedule:

Weekend 1 (May 4-5): Northern Area: Atherton, Belmont, Burlingame, Hillsborough, Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Menlo Park, Palo Alto, Portola Valley, Redwood City, San Carlos, San Mateo, South San Francisco, Stanford, and Woodside

Weekend 2 (May 11-12): Central Area: Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Mountain View, Palo Alto, Santa Clara, Stanford and Sunnyvale.

Weekend 3 (May 18-19): Southern Area and Pacific Coast: Campbell, Cupertino, El Granada, Half Moon Bay, Los Gatos, Montara, Morgan Hill, Pacifica, San Jose and Saratoga.

Subhead
Directory

For a complete list of locations, artists and contact information visit www.svos.org. A digital copy of the [directory](http://www.svos.org) with listings and maps to the artists' studios is available at https://svos.org/online_directory.php. Hard copies of the directory are available at about 400 locations throughout the Bay Area, including many libraries, shopping centers, and community centers. To find a location near you, go to www.svos.org and click on "Find a Directory."

To find the artists exhibiting in given city, go to www.svos.org, click on "Find an Artist" and search by city. To see samples of an artist's work, click on "Find an Artist" and fill in the box under "Select an Artist by Name."

Boilerplate
About Silicon Valley Open Studios (SVOS)

Silicon Valley Open Studios (SVOS), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, has been connecting art enthusiasts with local art and artists in Silicon Valley for 33 years. SVOS is one of the oldest, largest and most popular art events in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. One of its goals is to act as an incubator for new and emerging artists. In addition to its open studio activities, SVOS works with schools throughout the Peninsula and South Bay to increase exposure for the art their students create. For more information, go to www.svos.org.

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Contact Information

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For More Information
Kay Paumier
Communications Plus
408-370-1243
Mobile: 408-806-1177
kay@communicationsplus.net

So there they are, tips on how to write the killer news releases. I trust you'll find these helpful. Please let me know if you have something to add.
kay@communicationsplus.net

News Release Checklist

Here is a checklist to help you review your release.

- ❑ Does my release contain news?
- ❑ Does my headline convey that news?
- ❑ Are the five "H's" and the "W" in the lede?
- ❑ Are my keywords in the headline, lede or both?
- ❑ Is the lede compelling?
- ❑ Is the release written in inverted pyramid style?
- ❑ Does the release emphasize benefits, not just features?
- ❑ Did I cross-check my facts?
- ❑ Did I express any opinions only in quotations?
- ❑ Did I write in third person?
- ❑ Did I write in journalistic style? Does the release read like something from a traditional newspaper or magazine?
- ❑ Did I write succinctly?
- ❑ Did I include pricing and availability if appropriate?
- ❑ Did I include a boilerplate?
- ❑ Did I include a ticker symbol (for a public company)
- ❑ Did I include my organization's URL, phone number and e-mail address?

Recommended Resources

Communications Plus blog
www.CommunicationsPlus.net/blog

Information on news releases, as well as on other publicity and writing topics.

Bullfighter software, https://bullfighter.software.informer.com
Free software that identifies jargon

62 Ways to Improve Your Press Release
http://www.badlanguage.net/62-ways-to-improve-your-press-releases

Elements of Style, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, Longman, 2000.
This is the classic book on writing. Some of the word selection information has changed, but overall it remains an excellent reference.

The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law, Norm Goldstein. The Associated Press
This is the most popular style guide and the one I use. If you're just getting started, I recommend reading a few pages a day.

Ann Wylie, *Revving up Readership*, http://www.wyliecomm.com
Lots of good tips for improving your writing

About the Author

Kay Paumier works with B2B companies to get the word out and get the sales leads in through content marketing, public relations and other marketing services. She has a long track record of increasing awareness of companies, products and services. Her clients praise her ability to grasp the big picture, deal with the details, and do everything in between. More information is available at www.communicationsplus.net/about.