

*This new column, called PE Tip Sheets, is written by the FWEA Public Education Committee and will be a regular "how to" feature in the Florida Water Resources Journal. A variety of public education topics will be presented. Please let us know if you have topics you would like to see addressed in this column. This first Tip Sheet provides information on how to write a News Release that will catch the attention of the media and receive the notice you are seeking.*

## **PE TIP SHEET No. 1:**

# **HOW TO WRITE A NEWS RELEASE**

**BY**

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A well-crafted news release captures the attention of print and electronic journalists and gets your message out to your stakeholders and interested public. The following information will assist you when writing a news release for distribution to the print and electronic media.

First, pay attention to the content of your news release. When we talk about content we refer to the news story you are telling. Keep the following points in mind when writing your release.

- 1. Is your news "newsworthy"?** The purpose of a news release is to inform the world of your news item. A good news release answers the five "W" questions (who, what, where, when and why) and provides the media with useful information about your organization, service or event. If you read your news release and it reads like an advertisement, rewrite it.
- 2. Start strong.** Your headline and first paragraph should tell the story. The rest of your news release should provide the detail. You have a matter of seconds to grab your reader's attention. Capitalize on this by writing a strong opening. Cover who, what, when, where, why and I'll add one "H" (how) in the first paragraph. Learn to write using the inverted pyramid style. Give the most important information or the conclusion first, with less important information following and the least important information at the end.
- 3. Write for the Media.** On occasion media outlets, especially online media, will pick up your news release and run it in their publications with little or no modification to what you send. More commonly, journalists will use your news release as a springboard for a larger feature story. In either case, try to develop a story as you would like to have it told. Even if your news is not reprinted verbatim, it may provide an acceptable amount of exposure. Follow an accepted journalistic style of writing. Get a copy of *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* and use it.
- 4. Not everything is news.** This is a common problem. Your excitement about something does not necessarily mean that you have a newsworthy story. Think about your audience. Will someone else find your story interesting? Let's assume that you have just spent a lot of effort and money to upgrade your treatment facility. Announcing the commissioning of your organization's new facilities is always an exciting time for you, but this may be the last thing the media wants to write about since undoubtedly more than one story on your new facility has probably been reported by the media. So, is old and uninteresting "news"? It could be so look for that new angle, which has not been reported on yet. Like the innovative process solution your staff has come up with that will improve the quality of the facility output or reduce cost to the ratepayers.



Ask yourself the question, "Why should anyone care?" Try to identify the aspects of your news item that truly set you apart from everyone else and write about them. Make it local. *One of the key criteria for what sells a release to an editor is the local angle or hook.*

5. **Stick to the facts.** Tell the truth. Avoid fluff, embellishments and exaggerations. If you feel that your news release contains embellishments perhaps it would be a good idea to set your news release aside until you have more exciting news to share. Journalists are naturally skeptical. If your story sounds too good to be true, you are probably hurting your own credibility. Even if it is true, you may want to tone it down a bit.
6. **Pick an angle.** Try to make your news release timely. Tie your news to current events or social issues if possible. Make sure that your story has a good hook.
7. **Use active, not passive, voice.** Verbs in the active voice bring your news release to life. Rather than writing "entered into a partnership" use "partnered" instead. Do not be afraid to use strong verbs as well. For example, "The committee exhibited severe hostility over the incident." reads better if changed to "The committee was enraged over the incident." Writing in this manner helps guarantee that your news release will be read.
8. **Economics of words.** Use only enough words to tell your story. Avoid using unnecessary adjectives, flowery language, or redundant expressions such as "added bonus" or "first time ever". If you can tell your story with fewer words, do it. Wordiness distracts from your story. Keep it concise. Make each word count.
9. **Beware of jargon.** The best way to communicate your news is to speak plainly, using ordinary language. Jargon is language specific to certain professions or groups and is not appropriate for general readership. Avoid terms that have no meaning to the everyday newspaper reader or television watcher.
10. **Avoid the hype.** The exclamation point (!) is your enemy. There is no better way to destroy your credibility than to include a bunch of hype. If you must use an exclamation point, use one. Never do this!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
11. **Use quotes.** Try to use quotes, even if they are difficult to get. Attributing the news to a person rather than an organization makes it more credible. For example, Joe Smith, wastewater department director, said, "The new facilities will reduce pollution in the river by another 20 percent" is much stronger than, "the Public Utilities Division's Wastewater Department announced today that the new equalization tanks will result in a more efficient plant operation." Be sure that you have permission, preferably written, before including information or quotes from employees or affiliates of other organizations or companies.
12. **Describe Your Organization.** Your news release should end with a short paragraph that describes your organization.

Second, how you present your news is just as important as its content. These suggestions are commonly accepted news release concepts.

- ◆ **Mixed case.** NEVER SUBMIT A NEWS RELEASE IN ALL UPPER CASE LETTERS. This is very bad form. Journalists will definitely ignore it. Use mixed case.
- ◆ **Correct grammar usage.** Always follow rules of grammar and style. Errors in grammar and style affect your credibility. Excessive errors will cause your news release to be rejected.
- ◆ **More than one paragraph.** It is nearly impossible to tell your story in a few sentences. If you do not have more than a few sentences chances are you do not have a newsworthy item. *Note that each paragraph should be comprised of one or two sentences.*

- ◆ **Summary paragraph.** Failure to include a summary paragraph may reduce the effectiveness of your news release. The final paragraph of the news release should summarize the key points of your release.
- ◆ **Take time to do it right.** Write, print, proof read. Rewrite, edit...
- ◆ **Release Dates.** Most often releases are for immediate release and release dates other than immediate can be counterproductive to your relations with the news media, so avoid them if possible. It is safer to plan a release time that is good for you and your most important media outlet. "For Immediate Release" should be the first statement at the top of the release.
- ◆ **Make sure your news release looks like a news release.** Follow a standard release format like the example below. Remember the purpose of a release is to acquaint an editor with the basic facts of a potential story. The editor will then decide if the story warrants attention. If so, a reporter will be assigned to gather more information and rewrite the material to fit. Go easy on the length; no more than two typewritten pages, double-spaced. Indent the paragraphs and select a typeface that is easy to read. Avoid breaks. Your release will be easier to read and will result in more accurate typesetting if you do not split words at the end of a line or split a sentence at the bottom of a page. Type "-- MORE --" at the bottom of page 1 to indicate there is a second page. The last paragraph should be followed by # # # to indicate the end of the news release.

Third, make an effort to contact the journalists to whom you are sending the release in advance to give them a heads up.

You will likely achieve better coverage of your story by building relationships with the journalists who have a reason to print your story such as environmental reporters or editors. If you are distributing the release electronically (via email), be sure and paste the entire release into the body of the email AND attach the word document. Some media outlets limit reporters' ability to receive attachments.

Don't get discouraged if every news release you submit does not get printed in the paper or make the 6 o'clock news. Practice makes perfect. Perfecting your news release writing ability and strengthening the relationships you build with your local press will result in more successful coverage for your stories.



## Example News Release Format

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Headline - Be creative. One sentence. Use proper title case, capitalizing every word except for the following: of, it, the, a, an, from ...

City, State, Month, Day, Year - Grab their attention here. A strong introductory paragraph should cover who, what, when, where, why and how.

Put the body of your news release here. Expound on the information provided in your introductory paragraph. Include quotes from key staff or subject matter experts.

The body of your news release should contain more than one paragraph. The final paragraph should restate and summarize the key points of your news release.

About XYZ Organization

Include a separate, short backgrounder, if appropriate.

### CONTACT INFORMATION:

Contact Person

XYZ Organization

555-555-5555 office

555-555-1111 cell phone

555-555-2222 pager

555-555-4444 fax

<http://www.YourWebAddress.com> (if applicable)