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The right words for writing

Writing for Communications

Knowing how to write powerfully can help propel your issue to the headlines and build power behind your position.

Great prose writers are not automatically great PR writers—writing for PR requires a different approach than writing an essay or a piece of fiction. PR writing is goal-driven and directed toward specific strategic audiences. PR writing cannot afford to take its time setting a scene; rather, it gets to the most important information right away and then fills in the details. In that spirit, here are the cardinal characteristics of PR writing:

- Goal-oriented: aims strategic messages at target audiences through their preferred media outlets
- Contains news: meets criteria of newsworthiness as defined by target media outlet’s editors
- Inverted pyramid: built on an upside-down pyramid, placing the most important stuff at the top
- Has been edited and commented on by more than one person: a piece of writing will almost never be as good as it could be if it is passed around; that said, don’t get weighed down in a painful process of writing by committee

The four main written tools communicators use when work-

ing with the media are each described in more detail in the rest of this tutorial:

- Media Advisories
- Press Releases
- Op Eds
- Letters to the Editor

Heads Up! Media Advisories

Media advisories are notices sent to media outlets to alert them to the news you plan to make soon. These are extremely simple and



should cover one-half to three-quarters of a page. Editors, reporters, and producers are extremely busy and often only have 10 seconds to glance at your



release. Be sure to include only the information they need in order to decide that they will cover your news. If they want more information, they will contact you and look at your website.

An effective media advisory has these elements:

- A punchy, direct headline and lead paragraph that establish newsworthiness with clear “hooks”
- The “Who, What, When, Where, and Why” of your news, written in short sentences and paragraphs
- A clear indication of the exciting, camera-friendly visuals you’ve built into your event
- Contact name, office and cell phone numbers, and email addresses for two points of contact for the event
- Your organization’s logo
- Your web address or a link to your online press room
- A designation of whether it is for immediate release or “embargoed”—not for public consumption until a set date
- A boilerplate, or 3-4 sentence stock description of your organization, at the end (*italicize this to set it apart*)
- No jargon, acronyms, or policy-speak that your target audience would not immediately understand

Connect with Your Audience

In communications, all writing fits within your strategy. When you create releases, think in terms of what your target audience will find to be newsworthy. What are your news hooks? Take a look at two well-written Alaskan releases (one from [Perseverance Theater](#), and another from [United Way Southeast Alaska](#)), the organizations hit major benchmarks that key audiences would want to know about.

Reality Check

Reporters throw away or ignore many—if not most—press releases. Why? because they:

- Do not contain any news
- Do not have contact information or other key data to make the reporter’s job easier
- Are filled with typos and other embarrassments, causing the reporter to doubt the integrity of the organization that sent it
- Are confusing, poorly written or worse—boring

The Whole Story: Press Releases

A press release is longer than a media advisory but never more than two pages. A press release is typically written like a news story—containing quotes, “color,” and background—and summarizes your news. It is written as if it were to appear in the morning newspaper—though, of course, that will not happen, since most media will not run your release verbatim. The press release is distributed on the day (or the day before) you make your news; it should be included in a press kit to be handed out at a news event.

A press release contains all the information required in a Media Advisory, and adds to that information stories and quotes. Quote key spokespeople whose identities resonate with your target audience. The identity of the spokesperson can be more important

THE 5 C’S

A well-written release is:

- Compelling
- Concise
- Correct
- Clear
- Complete

than their words. The quotes in your press release don’t need to always come from an executive director. Rather, consider presenting quotes from sources whose identities frame your news, such as people affected by your issue or an unlikely source not usually associated with your issue.

Respond and React: Letters to the Editor

The “Letters” section is consistently one of the most-read parts of any publication. Fortunately for us, it’s also accessible to community organizations—many of us have the unique perspectives publications seek in soliciting letters.

Letters to the editor are simple pieces of writing that your organization should submit at least a few times a year. When should you write a letter?

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Sample Letter to the Editor

Vibrant arts

EDITOR, Daily News:

The arts are one protective coating on our economic house in Ketchikan, one of many elements that help insure that the house not only looks good but endures.

My wife and I accidentally discovered Ketchikan in the month of February several years ago. Impressed by people, place and ambience, we arranged at that first wintertime visit to make Ketchikan our "getaway" home.

Several years later it became our permanent home. My wife works at Ketchikan General Hospital and I am professor emeritus continuing research and consulting.

There are many places we could live and work: We chose Ketchikan. The frontier spirit of people combined with the extraordinary fact that these same folks created and supported a major arts community, not for tourists but for themselves, were critical elements in deciding to move to Ketchikan rather than just go there. At every event — stage, studio or street — there were children of all ages in attendance.

The participation of children with friends and with parents at these events is the greatest and warmest surprise of all, reflecting a community value actively pursued and supported.

What a great place to live!

As the Borough Assembly continues its difficult responsibility of stretching limited dollars to seemingly infinite goals, I hope and strongly recommend that continued (or even increased) financial support for the arts (Ketchikan Area Arts and Humanities Council and First City Players) is passed.

It's a good investment!

DONALD P. SPEER, M.D.

it (only write these letters if you can demonstrate that you've consistently and persistently pitched your story to the publication)

Most publications will publish their requirements for letter submission or post them on their website, but the following are general guidelines for effective letters to the editor:

- Short and concise (150-200 words)
- Three or four short paragraphs, three lines per paragraph maximum
- Respond to coverage of a specific issue, and reference the article, series, or column you're reacting to
- Personalize it! Tell a personal story or offer a perspective that only someone in your unique position could offer
- Include your name, date, and location
- Follow up to ensure publication

Your Message, Uncut: The Op Ed

Op Ed pieces appear on the page opposite the Editorials page. These 500- to 800-word essays are tremendous opportunities because they allow you almost total control over the message. Unlike advertisements, the other communications tools that allow for high message control, op eds won't break your budget and they offer enough space to tell a story and explain an issue. Follow these steps to craft a powerful op ed:

- Pitch to opinions or op ed editor before sending (major outlets require exclusivity in using the piece; smaller outlets may only ask you don't pitch anyone else in their area)

- Keep it concise; the shorter the better
- First person, second person
- State specific point of view clearly and at the beginning of the piece
- Tell personal stories; they're the most powerful communications tool you have
- Tie your issue to current big news
- Choose a signatory (the person who claims to have written the piece) whose identity powerfully frames your issue. The identity of the spokesperson can be more important than the words of their message.

The Ketchikan Area Arts and Humanities Council realized the importance of broadcasting a uniform message through diverse spokespeople when they initiated a letters to the editor campaign that focused on their target outlet. They created easy-to-understand [message guidelines](#) and writing instructions for letters to the editor and distributed them to board members and other supporters.

- To respond and react to news items that very recently appeared in a publication
- To correct sloppy, offensive, incorrect, or simplistic coverage
- To praise solid journalism and attention to your issue
- To raise your issue when a publication has consistently ignored



Rasmuson Foundation is a private family foundation located in Anchorage, Alaska that works as a catalyst to promote a better life for Alaskans.

Founded in 1955, the Foundation invests approximately \$26 million annually in both individuals and well-managed nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life for Alaskans primarily in the areas of arts and culture, community development, health, and human services.

Our grantees are passionate about their work. Given today's crowded media environment, their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of their constituents and tell their story is of critical importance to their success. The Foundation supported the development of this toolkit to provide a comprehensive and accessible resource for its

grantees both to build internal capacity and to work more effectively on a day-to-day basis with strategic communications.

In today's crowded media environment, organizations working to build a fair, just and equitable society can scarcely be heard. Organizations hoping to shape debates and shift public policy must embrace strategic communications to achieve their goals. The SPIN Project strengthens nonprofit social justice organizations, small and large, to communicate effectively for themselves.

The SPIN Project provides accessible and affordable strategic communications consulting, training, coaching, networking opportunities and concrete tools, such as this online communications toolkit. Our skills and expertise are blended with our commitment to strengthening social justice organizations and helping them engage in communications to achieve their goals.

We develop communications skills, infrastructure and leadership, strengthening organizations to achieve their social justice goals.

THE **SPIN** PROJECT