



News Releases and Preparedness

What if your agency wants to tell community members about new vaccination guidelines or needs to inform them urgently about protective measures to take during a disease outbreak? A news release can help you convey your message in both of these situations.

The standard format and elements of a news release are the same whether you are initiating contact with the media or they are contacting you—in the midst of a public health crisis or during day-to-day activities. By following the standard, you will be able to communicate better with reporters and transmit your message to the public quickly and effectively.



What is the standard format for a news release?

Always include the following elements in a news release:

- **Organization's name:** The name of your organization goes at the top of the release. Put your release on your organization's letterhead if possible.
- **Release date:** The release date is usually placed in the top left-hand corner. This tells the reporter when to publish or broadcast the information. If the information can be released immediately to the public, put "**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**" on the top. You can also request that the information be held until a certain date. In this case, you would need to put "**EMBARGOED UNTIL (release date and/or time)**".
- **Contact information:** In the left-hand corner, below the release date, put the **name, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address** of the staff person the media should contact to get more information. This person needs to be available whenever the media contact them (not just during normal business hours).
- **The internal media representative/contact person:** On the left, below your contact information, include the name of the person you are sending the release to.
- **Headline:** The headline runs, in bold, under the contact information and above the body of the release. The headline is a short phrase, but it is important, since it sums up your story and hooks your reader.
- **Body:** This is where you delve into the who, what, where, when, why, and how of your story.

How is a news release organized?

News releases are written in the inverted pyramid style—where the most important information is first, followed by supporting facts. Since the public and reporters are inundated with news stories, they may not read through to the end, so you must give them the essentials of the story right away. Because reporters' time is limited, they may use all or part of your release in their stories. The more your release is already written like a news story, the greater the chance a reporter will use it "as-is". This will in turn increase the chance that your agency's messages will be reported accurately.

- **Start strong:** The first paragraph, the lede, is your hook. This is where you put the most important information of the release so that you immediately grab the interest of the person reading it. Be sure to include the who, what, where, when, why and how of your story.
- **Be concise:** Keep sentences and paragraphs short and to the point. Aim for paragraphs of one to three sentences each. Keep your release short as well—one to two double-spaced pages at most. Any longer, and you run the risk that the reporter will not read everything you have written.

- **Use engaging and plain language:** Write in active voice, “our agency partnered” instead of “entered into a partnership”. Acronyms and jargon are confusing, so use plain language instead. If you need to use a technical term, be sure to define it clearly. For tips on using plain language, visit the Plain English Campaign’s writing guide webpage: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/guides.htm>.
- **Use quotes to humanize your story:** The best quotes support statements made in the lead paragraph, are from a significant person, and add a piece of information¹. An appropriate quote might come from an agency spokesperson or leader. Use quotes throughout your release, but be sure to include one within the first three or four paragraphs for the greatest impact².
- **Finish with agency information:** The last paragraph should be agency “boilerplate”, which is a brief description of your agency and any other information you would like to share with your readers². For example, in a story on an immunization program, you might include dates, times, and locations of upcoming immunization clinics, as well as the program web site address and contact information.
- **Signal the end:** Reporters and editors look for a symbol to signal the end of a news release. If your release is more than one page, at the end of the first page, type **—more—** to indicate that the release continues on the next page. At the end of the release, type **END or ###**¹. Center this on the bottom of the page below the “boilerplate”.

Formatting and organizational guidelines adapted from *APHA Media Advocacy Manual*, <http://www.apha.org/about/news/mediaadvocacy.htm>

Whom do you send it to?

Keep up with the local news to determine who covers public health issues to ensure that your release goes to the right reporter. You can fax or e-mail your news release. If you have an existing relationship with a media outlet or reporter, find out which method they prefer.

If the media contact you for information: Be sure to find out the deadline the reporter is working with and respond in time (they will run the story with or without your information, and you want your perspective included). Follow up to confirm the reporter received the information you sent.

If you are sending a news release proactively: You may want to follow up to make sure your release has been received and that the right reporter has it. Remember, reporters are busy meeting deadlines so keep your call brief and direct.

Where can I learn more about news releases?

- **APHA Media Advocacy Manual:** This manual covers a variety of media strategies from initiating contact with the press to writing news releases and conducting interviews. You can find it online here: <http://www.apha.org/about/news/mediaadvocacy.htm>
- **Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies-A WHO Handbook:** This handbook addresses media strategies for public health emergencies. Pages 42-44 address news releases specifically and include a news release template. Access it here: <http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/WHO%20MEDIA%20HANDBOOK.pdf>

References:

¹ APHA, *APHA Media Advocacy Manual*, <http://www.apha.org/about/news/mediaadvocacy.htm>

² Hyer, RN & Covello, VC (2005). *Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies: A WHO Handbook*, World Health Organization



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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide preparedness information to public health professionals.

If you have suggestions for future newsletter topics or to comment on preparedness issues, please e-mail us at cphp@yale.edu

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