How to write a media release

Your media release will be one of hundreds of media releases that newsrooms receive every day. Most of them end up in the bin. To give your media release every chance of being picked up by the media, you need to crystallise your main message, find an angle, structure the release in a way that it immediately grabs attention, include all important details in plain language, and consider the timing and distribution method.

The advantages of a media release

Preparing a media release can be a lot of work and, if a number of partners are involved, can take time. But a good one has a lot of value.

- It saves time for you and the journalist. You can reach a number of media outlets at the same time.
- It makes you think about how you will explain the work in simple terms.
- It helps journalists get the details correct.
- It is a source of quotes, and may be used word-for-word by smaller papers.
- It forces you, your colleagues, your collaborators, your supervisor and your media liaison officer to think through and clarify what you want to say, to condense it, and to check that you are all saying the same thing.
- You can clear it with your organisation and collaborating organisations.

Who should write the media release?

Writing a good media release is not easy and is best done by a communication professional skilled in writing for the media. They are not as close as you are to your work, and can more easily identify what the story is and what will appeal to different media outlets.

A communication professional will also have established networks with the media and will be able to personalise the delivery and follow up of your media release.

If you can, work with a communication professional to write your media release.

Designing the main message

Think about your aims before you start. Why are you issuing this release? What are the main points you want to get across? This is particularly important for sensitive issues.

Why should the media care? What do they want to know—or need to know—about this work? They are much less interested in the clever science than the impact the science might have on the person in the street.

What could the media get wrong? List the most likely things they could misunderstand or get wrong unless you stress the correct information and explain any potential misunderstanding.

Finding the angle

Once you’ve designed your main message, the art of writing a good media release lies in finding the hook—the angle for your story. Usually, journalists will be interested if the work is going to affect the
How to write a media release

lives of their readers and viewers. A quirky story—for example, the greenhouse effect of methane emissions from cows—can also grab attention.

Journalists like newness, action, change, conflict, local relevance, rarity and personal stories.

To test whether your story will be of interest to the media, ask yourself the ‘so what?’ question.

**The inverted pyramid**

Media releases are written in the inverted pyramid style—the most important parts come first, followed by supporting information in descending order of importance.

The headline needs to be catchy. Think of it as a red flag for waving down a train. Yours will be one of hundreds of media releases that newsrooms get every day and, often, all they read is the headline and the first sentence.

Begin with an attention-grabbing ‘lead’ sentence that also covers the basic message. The entire release should be bright, direct and simple, but especially so in your first sentence.

**Who, what, when, where, why and how**

Journalists are trained to cover the six basic questions: who, what, when, where, why and how. You should answer all these questions in the first few sentences.

For a science story, **What** and **Why** are key (not so much **How**).

- **Who** said it? **Who** is this about? **Who** will this affect?
- **What** happened? **What** does this mean for people? **What** is so important? This paragraph could contain a quote from your spokesperson.
- **Where** did it happen? **Where** will this be applicable?
- **When** will it happen? **When** did it happen? **When** will it be available?
- **Why** is this so important? **Why** is this research being done?
- **How** was the research done? Is there anything unusual/quirky about this? And how does this make you feel?

**10 tips for telling your story**

1. The media likes ‘new’—write about a new report or announce new findings.
2. If the story will affect people in a certain area, the local media in that area is more likely to run the story.
3. Use simple and direct language. A 12-year-old should be able to read and understand the story.
4. The media likes the tangible, not the abstract—use colourful examples from everyday life.
5. If possible, include costs or benefits in dollars.
6. Use real people in the story. Include some direct quotes. Stories can often be told in people terms.
7. If it’s a first, say so. First in Australia is good, but first in the world is better!
8. If the story is about your own work, be cautious. It’s easy to assume the reader knows more about the situation than they actually do. Try the story out on someone not connected to the work, and see what interests them and what they don’t know.
9. A media release should fit on a single page. Keep the paragraphs to one or two sentences and keep sentences to less than 20 words.
10. Mention available photographs, photo opportunities and website details.
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Contact details
Include contact details for everyone who is quoted and for media assistance contacts. Wherever possible, include mobile or home contact details; the media may want to contact you outside of normal working hours. And don’t go on an overseas trip the day you issue the release. Contact persons must be just that—easily contactable.

Timing the issue of a media release
Early in the week is best as it tends to be a quiet news time. Weekends can also be good for Sunday night TV and Monday’s papers. Avoid Friday—it’s a big news day and there is too much competition.

You can place an embargo on your story—a request to the media not to use it before the stated date/time. Embargos are almost always honoured and can give journalists time to research and plan their coverage.

Distributing the media release
You can distribute media releases to established commercial media contact lists (fax and email) or you can develop your own personal contact lists.

If you are emailing the media release to journalists, include it in the body of your email as plain text and avoid document and jpeg attachments unless they have been specifically requested by the journalist.

Print journalists may request photos, and usually prefer them emailed as jpeg files with a resolution of at least 300 dpi.

Always follow up a media release with a phone call to half a dozen key journalists to make sure they received the release and know what is happening. Mid-morning is a good time to do this.

Communication professionals are the best people to help you distribute and follow up on your media release.
## Media release checklist

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The headline is catchy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The first sentence contains the story angle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The first sentence does not reference the person’s name or organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The first paragraph is bright, direct and simple. No adjectives used. It promises a good story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>The most important information is located at the top.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>As you read down, the material becomes of less importance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The story includes relevant quotes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>All quotes have been cleared by the individuals quoted.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The story passes the ‘so what?’ test.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>A 12-year-old could read and understand the story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Sentences are all under 20 words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Paragraphs are no more than 2 sentences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>The whole media release is no more than one page.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>The story includes personal words such as ‘you’ and ‘we’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>The story uses active language and has no redundant words or ‘empty’ phrases (e.g. in order to).</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>The embargo date/time is identified clearly at the top (if the story cannot be used until a particular date/time).</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Contact details for interviews and for more information are listed clearly at the bottom (date, time, place, phone numbers, email addresses, maps).</td>
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<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Photo opportunities are described in bold at the bottom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Details of photos available (for print media) and vision opportunities (for TV) are included at the bottom.</td>
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Wheat farmer’s home-grown crystal ball a winner

For immediate release: Tuesday 28 March

A home-grown computer model that predicts crop yield at sowing time could increase the profitability of South Australia’s low rainfall wheat growers by tens of thousands of dollars per year.

Built by Port Germein wheat grower Barry Mudge, the model helps Barry calculate the odds on getting a good yield. Based on the prediction, he then adjusts the number of paddocks he sows and the amount of fertiliser he applies.

Operating in a cropping environment with enormous variation in yield from year to year, Barry sees a profit in two to three years in 10. So he’s got to make the most of the good years while minimising his losses.

Depending on rainfall in the April-October growing season, the yield on his 1600 ha property can vary from 0.5 tonnes/ha to 3 tonnes/ha. And based on the outcome of his yield prediction model, he may sow as little as 300 ha or as much as 1400 ha. It’s a gamble— with economic viability at stake.

“I have been surprised at how close the predictions have been over the past eight years”, says Rural Solutions SA consultant Michael Wurst. “I have refined and trialled the model on a number of properties in the Upper North and there is no doubt that it will produce results for farmers in that area, as long as they are prepared to act on the prediction, like Barry, and change what they do.”

Mr Wurst estimates an average long-term net gain of $50,000 for an average local property, varying from -$20,000 to $150,000.

Barry Mudge feeds all the known variables, such as soil moisture, weed and disease burdens, into the model. But there is one major unknown—rainfall. To hedge his bets on the long-range forecast, for the past eight years he has engaged a private forecaster.

“I am pretty pleased with the model’s accuracy in the last couple of years”, says Barry. “But it’s a work in progress. Managing climate variability is not an exact science, and it never will be. There will always be a range of outcomes. And, like a lopsided coin, the model is about stacking the odds in our favour.

“With the tougher terms of trade now, to be profitable I see it that I’ve got two options. I need to scale up and at the same time try to manage the climate variability better. We’ve always managed climate variability—you have to in this environment. But I want to do it better every year. And I want to know about any tool that will give me the advantage.

“I’m always searching for tools that can improve the model’s accuracy. I’m particularly interested in Peter McIntosh’s (CSIRO) research into how the circulation of oceans and the atmosphere can be used to give more accurate and longer lead-time forecasts. If someone can demonstrate a relationship between my crop yield and frogs jumping off ledges in Albania, I’m interested.”

Excited about the projects that are bringing climate risk management tools and knowledge to the grass roots farmers, Barry is attending Climate Connect 2006, the Managing Climate Variability Program’s forum in Adelaide on 29-30 March 2006.

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