

Press Releases 101

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The press release is one of the most effective, inexpensive marketing tools we have. It is easy to write a bad press release—but almost as easy to write a stellar one.

A great press release offers the reader concise information in an easy-to-digest form. Most press releases are written as a short (300–500 words) article. Assume that your release will be printed verbatim—because in some media outlets it might very well be.

Interest *and* timeliness are both important. The audience might be interested if the person, group, event, or issue involved is local, topical (i.e., related to quilting for quilters, business for entrepreneurs, etc.) or if the subject is famous or controversial.

The Structure

The Headline: Save this for last, despite your instincts. In the end, a phrase from your release might suggest itself, or you might choose something as simple as “Local Artist Has LA Debut.” The headline should be no longer than 4-5 words.

Important Facts First: Editors are very busy and might read only a few lines of your release, so put the most crucial information as near the top as possible, preferably in the first, or lead, paragraph.

The lead paragraph contains journalism’s “Five Ws and the H”: Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? Be sure to answer as many of these questions as are appropriate for your event.

Serviceable but sparse and dull:

Amherst, MA—From June 5 through July 19 the Fiber Art Center will exhibit Haitian Vodou flags. This exhibit is funded in part by the Bank of Western Massachusetts.

Better—more informative and interesting:

Amherst, MA—Catholic symbolism, Masonic insignia, and the spiritual beliefs of slaves kidnapped in Africa mingle freely in the sacred flags (*drapo*) of Haitian Vodou, reflecting Haiti’s complex cultural heritage. From June 5 through July 19, 2004, the Fiber Art Center (79 S. Pleasant St.) presents an exhibit of ceremonial flags made by some of the most celebrated Haitian artists working today. This exhibit is funded in part by the Bank of Western Massachusetts.

Supporting Paragraphs: Follow your lead paragraph with concise well-written detail. Topics for supplemental paragraphs might include information about:

- Related events such as receptions, classes, lectures, trunk shows, etc.
- Your professional life and experience. Keep it interesting—this is not a resume.
- The venue or organization involved. Sometimes the venue will get more attention in the media than you will, but all coverage is good coverage and enhances your exposure.

Beware the irrelevant, uninteresting, or inappropriate. Avoid highly personal information unless you can make an *important* direct connection to your artwork.

The Writing

Be simple and concise: Write as if you were talking to the guy next door, keeping the language clear and straight-forward. Now is not the time for “artspeak” or thesis language. In addition, most releases should be no longer than one page; you are writing for editors and the general public and they, like you, have limited time and patience.

Use the active voice: Active voice simply means that the subject of your sentence takes action rather than being acted upon. For example:

Passive	Active
The bone <i>was dug up by</i> the dog.	The dog <i>dug up</i> the bone.
Jane Doe’s art quilt “Levity/Brevity” <i>was accepted for</i> Quilt National (2007), which <i>is known</i> as one of the most important annual art quilt exhibitions in the United States.	Jane Doe’s art quilt “Levity/Brevity” <i>will hang in</i> Quilt National (2007), the preeminent annual art quilt exhibition in the United States.

The active voice is more interesting to read and generally requires fewer words. Simply changing passive sentences to active whenever possible improves anything you write.

Use the third person: Tempting as it may be to speak directly to the reader . . . resist. Use the third person unless, like the *SAQA Journal*, editorial guidelines specify otherwise. And in case it has been a long time:

- 1st person (do not use under any circumstances): I, me, my, we, our
- 2nd person (unlikely that you will use): you, your
- 3rd person (universally acceptable): he, she, it, they, him, her, his, hers, its (please note, there is no apostrophe), their, theirs

When using the third person in a press release about a gallery exhibit, for example, you might talk about “visitors,” “viewers,” “they,” “the gallery,” “it,” “the artist,” “she,” etc. The reader is not “you” and the artist or gallery is not “I,” “me,” “us,” or “we.”

Avoid contractions: Use “I am” rather than “I’m” and “are not” rather than “aren’t.” Your releases will sound more professional and less chatty.

Avoid cliché: That about sums it up.

Consult great resources: To ensure proper grammar, consistency, and usage in your writing check out the *AP Style Manual* (very easy to use) and the *Chicago Manual of Style* (often used in academia). Both are popular and used by many media outlets. Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* has, deservedly, been a mainstay for decades as well. In the end, *which* style you use is less important than consistency.

A good thesaurus also can be helpful, but beware. Remember to keep it simple; if you find a synonym you have never heard before, chances are most of the reading public has not either.

Use a good dictionary. *Webster’s Collegiate* has been my favorite for years. If it is not in *Webster’s Collegiate* and it is not a trade-specific phrase you probably should not use it.

Proof and check spelling: Always use the spell check on your computer—but never rely on it. It will not catch misused words that result from the slip of a finger (such as “shy” instead of “why”). It is crucial that you read the entire release when you are done—and have someone else read it if possible. Then read the release out loud. Reading aloud prevents skimming, and if you stumble on a passage as you read aloud, chances are your audience will as well, so fix it.

Learn to let go: Whenever you have the opportunity, let your release sit for a couple of days so you can reread it with a fresh eye. Cut out any passages that do not support the document as a whole, particularly if your release is running long. Be brutal.

In addition, sometimes you will come up with, even fall in love with, a clever phrase to express your idea. Unfortunately it will not always work in to the release as a whole. Practicality and clarity are more important than cleverness.

Presentation

Letterhead or not letterhead: Some books and experts suggest never using letterhead while others strongly suggest using it. As with many things there is no one right answer, so make the decision that works best for you. Whatever you decide, your presentation should be clean and understated. Most important is a substantive release and, if appropriate and possible, compelling high-quality images.

At the top of the page (below your letterhead if you have decided to use it, you should place “For Immediate Release” (time is of the essence) or “Press Release” (time is less of an issue).

Contacts: Below that (or at the bottom of the page) list one to three appropriate contacts, including their names, titles, phone, and e-mail. If you did not opt for letterhead, be sure to list your address as well. Your contacts should be knowledgeable about the event/issue you are touting. For example, if you will have a solo exhibit at a gallery, both you and the gallery director should be listed (be sure you clear this with the director).

Datelines: Oddly, the dateline is the location of the subject. Sometimes you need it—sometimes you don’t. For example, if Rhode Island artist Mary Contrary has a solo exhibit in Los Angeles:

Los Angeles—Impressionist macaroni sculpture by artist Mary Contrary of Countryside (RI) will hang in the Wannabe Gallery (123 Art Street) from Jan. 7 through Feb. 23, 2007. . . . [good for LA-area media]

But:

Countryside, RI, artist Mary Contrary’s “Feelin’ Groovy” impressionist macaroni sculpture will appear at Los Angeles’ Wannabe Gallery from Jan. 7 through Feb. 23, 2007. . . . [Mary might be important to her local media, but an exhibit in L.A. is not.]

Beyond the Release

Supplemental materials: Other items you might include with your press release as appropriate are:

- An event listing.
- Images, either:
 - Quality prints between 4" x 6" and 8" x 10" (write relevant information on the back).
 - Digital images that are at least 300 dpi at 4" x 6" inches. (JPEGs are a great universal digital format, but be sure to save your image at high quality. Include an index sheet with a thumbnail of the image, the filename, and relevant information about the image.)
- A postcard for the exhibit (if that is the subject of the release).
- A business card.

Present your release professionally; If you enclose several items, either paperclip them or use an inexpensive pocket folder.

Distribution: Some news outlets prefer to receive email, but most still prefer to receive snail mail. Of those that want email, some prefer the text of your release to be embedded in the body of your message (less chance for virus transmission), and some prefer attachments.

Lead time: Check the editorial guidelines of the media you wish to approach. Magazine lead time is generally several months, whereas you can send a release to a local paper only a couple of weeks before an event.

Last Thoughts

A variety of factors determine which articles editors run, including whether similar articles have been published recently, perceived audience interest, timeliness, etc. If you do not hear from an editor, if an article has not appeared, never fear. The editors are becoming more familiar with your work and may reach saturation at some point and publish an article.

Perhaps most important, you are not entitled to have an article published. Nothing will kill your chances faster than annoying an editor, either by pestering or by demanding attention. Following up discreetly about a week before published submission deadlines is fine. Simply confirm that the editor received your release packet and ensure they have everything they need. After a few regular releases, or better yet a story, it is also fine to ask a couple of editors for feedback for improvement.

Good luck.

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—This article appeared in the Winter 2006/2007 issue of the SAQA Journal.