

How to Write for Non-Specialist Audiences

An Introduction on how to write for non-specialist audiences.

Designed to help you develop skills in writing about your research and/or creative projects in a way that is both accessible and engaging for audiences beyond your own institution and peer groups, with a view to creating the best possible public engagement and impact outcomes for your work.

A series of 'How To Guides' commissioned by **The Exchange**.

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What's the story?

You have an interesting idea and you want to share it... But what is your story? Practice writing a press release about your project and limit the copy to one side of A4.

The first paragraph needs to sum up the whole project and act as a **snapshot** for the journalist. Be succinct and avoid jargon.

The second two paragraphs should expand on the first and **credit key protagonists**, identify sources and include any research that may have been used to illustrate its purpose. Include comment from the project lead and, if available, an endorsement.

The final paragraph should **wrap up** and once again repeat the key messages you want any journalist to take away with them.

The headline is key in getting the journalist's attention and must stand out against the hundreds of others in a busy email inbox. The headline should reflect your single most important message while capturing the reader's imagination, perhaps through creative use of language or an element of surprise.

The purpose of a good press release is to tell a compelling story that motivates the journalist reading it to research further and write about the project. The release needs to act as a catalyst.

Make sure you have remembered to include all crucial information. This can usually be checked by remembering the **5 W's - Why? What? When? Where? Who?**

Who do you want to tell it to?

Where would you like your story to be told?

Spend some time thinking about the kinds of media you consume, it is also always worth trying a few new titles. Consider whether your project/event idea would work for them. Include broadcast, print and online/blogs. Research key journalists and note them down.

Start noticing how they write, what they cover and how they might talk about your project if they were to be reporting on it. And don't underestimate the power of the blogger. Find the bloggers in your content/industry niche and observe what they do, who they connect with, how they grow their platform and think about ways to give them access to learning more about the benefits to the end user.

What do you need to get ready to tell it?

Preparing the press assets

1. Press pack: this will include your one page release. If necessary attach a separate page with background information, such as: Research (if relevant), corporate background / biographies of the project team and any partners case studies.

2. Key information: e.g. website URL, any relevant credit, for example, photo credits, relevant dates e.g. project launch and press contact details.

3. Images: powerful hi res images are increasingly important. Include spokesperson shots, product shots, screenshots and

anything else that might be relevant. Some websites will not publish a story unless they have a high quality image to accompany it and, if your story is picked up widely, it's important to have more than one image available. Images must be hi-res - most journalists need images over 300dpi, online spaces often do not require such hi res.

4. The elevator pitch: describe your project in a sentence or two.

5. Quotes: Journalists often call and follow up news with a further quote, make sure that you have something prepared so that the journalist can get value from a conversation.

This will encourage them to call back for comment in the future. Make sure the journalist publishes key relevant information relating to your project i.e. website URL and any relevant dates so the public can find out more.

Preparing for interviews

Never say anything to a journalist you didn't set out to say. Don't assume the journalist knows anything about your field. Don't do your thinking in front of the journalist/camera/microphone.

Before you do an interview, decide:

- What's in it for me / my organisation?
- Will this make the situation better?
- What is our objective?
- What quote do I want the journalist to pick up?

A good interview has three elements

Message Development

What do we want to say?

How far do we want to go?

Message Control

Sticking to my agenda not being led by the interviewer.

Message Delivery

How do I look? (if TV broadcast)

How do I sound?

Preparing key messages

In preparing your key messages, consider the following:

1. Message

What are the three points or three compelling arguments you wish to make?

The audience won't remember more than three points. You will be lucky if you get the chance to express one - be succinct.

2. Audience

Remember your audience. In the mass media, this will always be the general public.

How much do they understand about your project/ organisation/ your concerns/ your perspective? What interests them? What worries them? How does it relate to them and their loved ones?

3. Language

Use plain speech. Jargon leads to misunderstanding. Don't let the journalist be your interpreter - they may misrepresent you when they translate what you say.

4. Evidence

Substantiate what you want to say with examples: paint pictures with words.

Emphasise your key points:

POINT: use your first message.

EVIDENCE: give evidence – build an evidence ‘bank’ before the interview so that you can use fresh examples when you repeat your points.

POINT: end the answer by repeating your first message e.g. ‘so you can see that...’

Soundbite

Prepare to express the most important thing you want to say as a soundbite that lasts no more than 20 seconds. In a news package that is as much as you will get for your point of view.

Technique

- Sit up - look alert, energetic and serious
- Look the interviewer in the eye
- Don't be defensive
- Empathise

Addressing challenges

A journalist's role is to ask the questions their audience would ask if they had the opportunity. They wouldn't be doing their job if they didn't question/challenge your story. The best way to prepare for challenging questions is to anticipate them in advance. What would you ask if you were interviewing yourself on the subject? Are there questions your story gives rise to?

Think of the three most difficult questions you would ask about your topic and practise an answer to each of them before an interview.

The questions

- Journalists ask the questions their audience would ask if they had the opportunity
- Confront 'tricky' questions in your preparation and decide how to deal with them
- We distrust people who avoid obvious, legitimate questions

Bridging

1. Acknowledge: difficult questions by answering them quickly

2. Bridge: then move the interview back to your home ground, some pointers

- The real issue here is...
- The important thing to remember is....
- What the research/ordinary people tell us is....
- The fact of the matter is....
- That's not true...
- That may have been the case in the past...but now
- I don't know about that ...but what I do know is...
- That's a question we would also like the answer to....
- I can't tell you that because the information is confidential but...

Communicate - your message

If you have worked out your key messages in advance, you will have a safe haven to go to if questions are difficult or hostile:

- Don't be drawn into speculation
- Don't be led into areas you don't wish to talk about
- Don't get sidetracked
- Don't lose your temper. The calmer you are, the more unreasonable a hostile interviewer will seem
- Do correct mistakes

And finally...

Don't go off duty before or after the interview. While the journalist is with you, even walking to the lift, they are still working.

Summary

When communicating with the media be clear, to the point, succinct and captivating:

1. Identify your single most important message - this will be your headline and lead interviews.
2. Identify the second and third most important message - this will form the first paragraph of your release and be included in any interviews.
3. Develop supporting evidence to demonstrate your three points - this will make the delivery of your story more powerful.
4. Develop supporting assets to illustrate your three points - this will make your story more captivating.