How to Write a Press Release
by Bill Hopkins

A press release or news release is a document or email sent to a media channel in the hopes of persuading them that a story is sufficiently newsworthy to be featured in their publication. The publication could be a newspaper, magazine, radio or tv station, website or even a blog.

There are two parts to the process. First you need to write the news release. Then you need to send it out to a list of contacts. Here we will deal with writing the news release as an email. You can refer to the associated Sample News Release as we discuss the various elements.

We suggest writing the entire news release in the body of the email rather than attaching it as a document. The reason is that it makes it more likely to be read by the reporter or editor who receives it.

You can start the email with a couple of personal sentences if you actually are acquainted with the person you are sending the email to. This can help remind the recipient of who you are and may help get your story published. Obviously if you don't personally know the recipient then you should just skip this step and start with just the actual news release.

By tradition it starts with the lines “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” in all caps. Alternatively some organizations send news releases starting with HOLD UNTIL (date) if there is some reason to send the news release before they want it published.

Then skip a line and write a brief headline, again in all caps. Below that write a “subhead” in all caps which elaborates a little more.

Skip another line and commence telling your story. The headlines and main body of the release are written in what we call “newspaper” style, which is a style taught in journalism school and practiced by newspaper reporters. For examples read a newspaper such as the New York Times or Washington Post. The style is concise and to the point.

Your first paragraph should tell the “who” and “what” of the story, as well as possibly the “when” and “where.” Later you will elaborate on the “what” and explain the “why” and “how” of the story. Try to write like a newspaper reporter, use the third person, avoid sounding like a salesman or a booster. Opinions should be avoided unless they are quotes from a person. Assume that the reader is completely unfamiliar with the subject matter.

Remember that a reporter or editor is not necessarily looking to help you in your cause. They are looking for stories that they think will appeal to their readers and fit with their publication.

Avoid using “NPSOT” in the news release for a couple reasons. First in journalism school writers are taught to avoid abbreviations. In the second place, the abbreviation is completely unfamiliar to most of the general public. Instead write out the complete phrase “Native Plant Society of Texas” every time you use it.

Be careful to use good grammar and spelling and write complete sentences. Ideally reporters should be able to “cut and paste” entire sections of your release into a story for their publication.

Following the main body is a at least one paragraph we call “boilerplate.” This is two or three sentences explaining what the Native Plant Society is. It is called boilerplate because you can use the same paragraph in every news release. Don't leave it out even if you send news releases to the same person many times. It makes the release look professional.

If there are additional organizations who play a part in your story you may wish to include a paragraph about
each of those in your “boilerplate.” You can usually lift two or three sentences from their websites for this purpose. Look for a tab called “About” or something similar. Be sure to include a website address where complete information can be found. Use your judgement about when to include boilerplate about other organizations. If you are partnering with the City of Austin or with Texas Highway Department, you don't need to explain who those organizations are. But if your partners are Monarch Watch or Coastal Prairie Partnership then you probably do.

Following the boilerplate type “###” which is the traditional symbol for the end of the story.

Optionally at this point you could include a link to a “press kit.” Traditionally a press kit was a folder containing some additional supporting material. For instance it might have 8x10 glossy photos, business cards for contacts, other typewritten documents and such. In our case we might put a link to webpage with links to pdf versions of stories in our website or newsletter that bear on this story, as well as pdf versions of brochures from us and other organizations, jpg files of photos, etc.

Another option if you only have one or two such items is to attach them to the email. Always they should be in pdf form unless they are photos. Links are preferable to attachments however if you have a choice.

Finally the last part of the news release is the contact information. This should include your name, your title or relationship to the organization, and your preferred means of being contacted. Email is usually the best, and it is good to include a phone number if you can. It is best to have only one contact name.

Finally you are ready to send it.

You may already have a list of contacts already at local newspapers and other organizations where you send announcements of events and meetings. You can find contact information for many publications at this site - http://www.usnpl.com/txnews.php

Other possibilities are similar organizations that have newsletters or calendars, Facebook pages, your Chamber of Commerce, prominent bloggers in your area, or almost any place where news is being circulated.