

How to write a press release

Perhaps the most time-consuming task of producing the newspaper is rewriting news items we receive through e-mail and regular mail. It is also one of the most difficult, because we have to try to take information we know little or nothing about and translate it into a news format that is attractive and appealing to readers.

The goal of this piece is to help you understand and facilitate the news of your organization coming to us in such a way that it's published as soon as possible with as little damage as possible.

Rule 1: Who are you?

Because the *Idaho Catholic Register* is the official newspaper for the Roman Catholic diocese, we set the highest priorities on the news of the schools, parishes, agencies and ministries of the diocese. In almost all cases, this hurdle will be easily overcome. If you are not sure, you should refer to the Official Directory, which lists the agencies and groups recognized by the diocese. Not listed there either? Then what needs to happen is for you to examine why you are trying to appear in the *ICR*. If you are, for example, a speaker who is scheduled to appear at a parish, then you need to have a parish official contact us to verify that they support your endeavor. If you have good news about a Catholic in your organization, then he or she should be in good standing with their home parish.

If you send something in electronically and it doesn't fit into any Catholic niche, we'll let you know that.

Rule 2: Pictures help.

There is another entire "How to..." segment on submitting pictures, but you should know that without a picture of some kind, the publication of your item is almost certain to be delayed. Pictures make the story come alive and draw the reader's eye to the otherwise gray words.

Rule 3: The sooner, the better.

The *ICR* publishes twice a month, which means that 14 days (or more) can elapse between issues. If your event happened in February, and we don't see it until March, it may not appear until April or later. That said, a rushed, incomplete press release serves no one. The balance has to be found between submitting complete information and sending it in a timely way.

Rule 4: I said what?

Quotations give life to copy: Jim said he was pleased with the results OR "I was really pleased with the results," Jim said. Quotes must be accurate and properly attributed and usually reflect phrases or images that would be lost if paraphrased. At the same time, don't go crazy with quotes. As a press release, a good rule of thumb is to have no more

than one direct quote for every three paragraphs of explanation or paraphrase. Also, try to use the paraphrase to set up your speaker's quote. For example:

*It's sad, Wells noted, but there are a number of families who come to Corpus Christi because they have no other place to go.
"Seeing the kids is the worst part," she admitted.*

Finally, the best advice is to have the person quoted read the article, because even if they said what you recorded, once it appears in print, it's impossible to "unring the bell."
Better safe than sorry.

Rule 5: Curses! Writer's block.

Writing is easy. Writing well is an acquired skill. The most important tool in writing is your brain, and sometimes the enormity of putting down in three or so paragraphs a report on the greatest yard sale ever can force normally well-oiled brains to grind to a halt.

The first paragraph is called the LEAD (rhymes with bleed). Except for photos, the lead will be the element that determines whether your story will get read. The idea is to make it as simple as possible while summarizing the essence of the story. The essence boils down to simple sentence structure:

WHO did **WHAT** to **WHOM** and **WHY** does it matter?

Don't worry as much about **WHEN**, **WHERE** and **HOW** in the lead.

I have taught journalism to young people for years, so my advice tries to tap into their experience. You are at your locker in the morning, the bell for home room has just rung. Your best friend rushes by and you have 30 seconds to tell her the news you just heard:

"Jenny got a car and it's a clunker."

"Billy's new girlfriend split her shorts in gym yesterday."

"I got caught with an open beer and my folks grounded me for a week."

What you write might not be as exciting:

"St. Joseph Parish in Sandpoint dedicated its new church amid an overflowing crowd."

"Sixteen Bishop Kelly students were named National Merit Scholars."

"Mary Smith, a Grade 4 student at St. Edward School, Twin Falls, finished first in the state spelling bee."

If, during our editing process, we think we can make it pretty, we'll bring it to the Word Salon. Otherwise, just a simple cut will do.

Rule 6: Can I just submit what appeared in our local paper?

Um, no. That's copyright infringement. We would need to receive permission from that paper to reprint it, or we would have to rewrite it. The latter, that's what we're asking you to do.

Rule 7: Do I get my own byline?

Again, no. Only freelance writers with whom we have previously agreed to byline get a byline on a press release. If you are interested in this kind of relationship, please contact us at mbrown@rcdb.org.

Rule 8: That means as a writer, you DON'T really have a voice. Be OBJECTIVE.

Actually, you have more say than you might realize. You have the power to decide what information is sent in and what is omitted. You are the *unseen, objective representative* of your group to the *ICR's* 40,000 readers statewide. You have been appointed to get your group's message out and to get it right the first time. This can be daunting for experienced scribes.

A sure sign that objectivity is endangered is the use of first person pronouns "I" and "We." Please avoid them.

I once edited a 1,000-word story by a staff writer that was replete with details. Knowing the consequences of an incomplete, inaccurate or unbalanced story, I simply asked her, "Is it perfect?" She returned two days later with a much better product.

Rule 9: A press release is a press release is a press release – unless it's not.

For every 60 press releases that come into a newspaper office, one may become a major story. The other 59 are still important, but have no chance of winning a Pulitzer. This is the core of community journalism and its simple truth. The event you are describing may be a breakthrough to your parish or group, but the odds suggest that it has either happened in other places on a consistent basis or may simply not be as important as you think.

It is, however, still news, and the best newspapers don't print in New York or Washington or Los Angeles. The best publications are the ones that print what matters most to a community; what matters most to the *Idaho Catholic Register* is you.

Rule 10: Write right.

Most press releases should not exceed 500 words, and the best ones can usually be done in three or four paragraphs. After you've completed it, reread, corrected and edited it, (check for misspellings, incorrect figures or missed titles), had your sources check their quotes and run it by your supervisor (never surprise the boss), then please send it along with a photo to mbrown@rcdb.org. You'll get an e-mail reply alerting you to any other obvious needs, and another when the piece is published. Please include in your e-mail a daytime number or e-address where you can be reached in case of questions.

Rule 11: Headlines don't matter...

You can put a title or headline on the story, but don't expect to see that exact one in print. Headlines are as much a function of where a story is placed, as it does on actual content. Plus, we have a national award winner for headline writing on staff and want to make him earn his pay.

Rule 12: ... except in Spanish..

The Spanish-language Catholic community is eager for local news in the *ICR*. Whether you think the information is important or not isn't really the question. The request we make is that if you have someone who can translate English to Spanish – or vice versa, if the original piece is in Spanish, then please do, so we can provide your information to all the Catholics in the diocese. Please include a headline, in Spanish, for your Spanish-language story.