



UNIVERSITY OF  
**FLORIDA**

AEC 355

EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

## Writing News Releases and PSAs for Environmental Education Programs<sup>1</sup>

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You may be called upon to write a **news release** about your environmental program's activities, interesting news, or important events. News releases may accompany letters of correspondence, or they may be distributed to media outlets by themselves. In either case, the content of the news release should **stand alone**. This means that in case a cover letter is lost, the news release would contain the information that a reporter needs to follow-up on the story.

A news release provides reporters with the basics they need to develop a news story. In large cities, television stations and newspapers receive dozens of news releases a day. Here are some suggestions to get better *play* from your news release:

- **Target smaller newspapers, TV stations, or radio stations.** They are more apt to use "community" news.
- **Send the release to a particular person at a media outlet.** Don't just send it to the "Editor." Send it to a "*somebody*" (and make sure you spell the persons name correctly!). It's a good idea to send the release to the person who likely would cover the event.

- **Establish a rapport with the person who covers the types of event you promote.** Find out the names of your business writer, agricultural reporter, or youth and community affairs correspondent.
- **Write your news release in one of two formats: tip sheet or news story.** Some people will combine the two formats and have a tip sheet at the top of a news release and a more detailed news story at the bottom.

Regardless of the format you choose, your news release **must identify a contact person**, in case a reporter wants more information. You must name a **contact person** and **phone number** at the top of the news release. It's also a good idea to list the writer of the release as a contact person.

### Section 1: Tip sheets

The **tip sheet** presents the reporters six basic questions in an easy-to-read format. The six questions are referred to by the news media as the **5 W's and H** for "*who, what, when, where, why and how.*" In this format, you would write the following:

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**Who:** Organization's name

**What:** What's going on?

**When:** When is the event?

**Where:** Where is the event taking place?

**Why:** Why is the event taking place?

**How:** How is the event significant/important?  
(Sometimes this is not included.)

Example tip sheets and news releases are provided on the website *Example Tip Sheets, News Releases, & PSAs* (<http://mediarelations.ifas.ufl.edu/ExampleTipSheetsNewsRelease.htm>).

## Section 2: News story releases

The **news story** format is written in just the same way that reporters write news stories, and it provides more details than the tip sheet format. News story format releases are frequently used in newspapers and magazines in the exact form in which they were sent (especially if its a small-circulation newspaper or magazine), with little or no editing. This format tends to be longer than the tip sheet.

If you do write a news story format news release, you should emulate newswriting style. Here are some elements of newswriting style to keep in mind:

- **Lead** – The first paragraph. It is used to grab the readers attention.
- **5 W's and H** – The most important of the questions should be answered in the lead. Others are answered later in the story.
- **Short paragraphs** – Paragraphs run one to two sentences in length. Rarely do you see paragraphs of more than three sentences.
- **Quotations** – The exact words of someone talking. Its a good idea to use quotations to bring “life” to your story.
- **Inverted pyramid style** – You want to include the most important information first, followed in descending order by less-important information.

## Elements of a Good News Story

You should strive to do the following when writing news stories:

- Cover most, if not all, of the 5 W's and H.
  - **WHO** will do, said or did something
  - **WHAT** will be done, was said or happened
  - **WHEN** it will be done, it was said or happened
  - **WHERE** it will be done, it was said or happened
  - **WHY** it will be done, it was said or happened
  - **HOW** it will affect me or how it was done
- Follow the inverted pyramid style with the most important facts first.
- Keep sentences short.
- Use short, well-known words. Avoid jargon.
- Use active words to add zest to your writing. Avoid, for example, “it *was* said,” or “it *is* thought.”
- Use specific, concrete – not abstract – words and terms.
- Do not editorialize, which means injecting your own preferences or even preferences of the subject you are writing about without attributing.
- Avoid adjectives that reflect opinion. Stick to the facts.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Avoid overusing prepositions in sentences.
- Write stories in third person (he, she, it or they, or “John said”). It is, however, becoming more common to write in the second person (you).
- Proofread the story and edit unnecessary words; eliminate grammar and spelling errors.

- For good measure, have others read the story and have them tell you what they think it said.
- If the news story is longer than one page, write "more" at the bottom of the page.
- Indicate the end of the news story by a typing "-30-" or "###" (*journalese* for "end") at the center of the page below the final line of story.

### Section 3: Public Service Announcements

A **public service announcement (PSA)** is a free advertisement that radio and television stations air or newspapers and magazines run to highlight information about your educational program. Please keep in mind that you do not have control over when or if PSAs run. A television station makes its advertisement programming decision this way: paid product advertisements have priority, followed by promotions ("ads" for programs on that station) and then PSAs. Therefore, PSAs may run during late night or early morning hours when few paid advertisements or promos run.

However, **any** free airtime is better than nothing. Radio stations are much better about airing PSAs because they do not take much time to produce. Radio also has more time to fill. They may read the information "live."

**Example:** "The Tiger Glee Club will sponsor a hay ride Saturday night, starting at 7. Tickets are \$3. Proceeds benefit the student scholarship fund. For more information call here at KUFG, Central Floridas choice for news."

Radio and TV announcers may help you write the PSA. If you have "live" copy for announcers to read on-air, make sure it is complete. It should have the phone number of someone in your organization to contact. And try to make it brief and as easily readable as possible. Go for a conversational style.

### Section 4: Scriptwriting and storyboarding

Part of your environmental education campaign may be to develop a video to show activities that you are doing in your community. This fact sheet will not cover all that you need to know about video production; however, this section should provide you with enough information to get you started. If you would like more information on developing your own educational videotape program, visit these websites: Producing an Educational Video (<http://aee6541.ifas.ufl.edu/educationalvideo.html>) and Producing Your Own Video Program (<http://aee6541.ifas.ufl.edu/producingvideo.html>).

Writing a script and storyboard will help you meet your educational objectives. You can use the ideas for video scriptwriting and storyboarding for other media: slide programs, interactive computer programs, and oral presentations. A storyboard is a rough sketch of an anticipated video shot. Under each video shot is a brief commentary of the narration that goes with that shot. Using a storyboard helps you visualize what your shots will look like in the finished video.

A **script** is the narration, audio (music and background or *natural* sound), and visual directions (shot selection, on-screen text) that will be used in your video production. A well-written script is a **must** for a video production to be successful. To help you get started in the scriptwriting process, here are some tips:

- **Start by dividing your page into two columns.** Video commands, explanations of what shots you need, and other special effects should be listed on the left side; anything related to the audio should be included on the right side. This will help you and your producer visualize what you need to say, and will remind you to explain what you need to show. Below is an example of a two-column script.
- Scripts also may be written using just the narration, with no video directions.
- **Decide what type of approach your video will need.** Will the program consist of narration only, covered by video? Will it be hosted on-screen by someone on your staff or by a professional? Will you include interviews?

- **Consider your audience.** This is imperative throughout the entire production process. At the scriptwriting stage, such questions as the following arise: What will the audience members' interests be? How long will you be able to retain their attention? An adult audience's attention span will last about 8 to 10 minutes. For children, plan for three to five minutes.
- **Write the way you speak.** The key to writing a good script is to write the way you speak. Write for the ear. Remember that your audience cannot go back and refer to something in a previous paragraph. Most people will not stop a tape and rewind to refresh their memories, so write in simple, easy-to-understand sentences.
- **Use on-screen text to support what you need to state.** For instance, if your video is about an academic program with six components which you are about to describe one by one, show them on the screen as you tell the audience about them. This approach also will assist your visual learners with retention of your information.
- **Use music and special effects** to indicate to your audience that you are changing topics.
- **Keep it simple.** Remember that your video tells a story without your needing to state everything. If your video shows children intent and focused on a classroom lesson, you do not need to tell your audience that children in this program are "intent and focused on their lessons." While the shots you choose should support your narration, they do not necessarily need to duplicate the narration.
- Have I avoided technical language/jargon?
- Have I used music and natural sound (background sound) to help tell my story and break up constant narration or interviews?
- Do I have any lists or main ideas that could be reinforced on the television screen as they are being discussed?
- Have I included proper titles, name identification and location information in the video column of the script for the video editor to type onto the screen?
- Have I described the type of video shots I need in the video column?

## Section 5: Additional Materials

News materials examples developed by the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Educational Media and Services are provided on the website *Meeting the Press: Communicating 4-H Environmental Education Programs to the Media* (<http://envmedia.ifas.ufl.edu>). Each of these materials pertains to environmental conservation. They are provided to show you how news materials can provide quality information to news media outlets.

### Note

All materials and fact sheets related to this *Extension Enhancement Award* program are provided on this Web site: <http://envmedia.ifas.ufl.edu>

### Checklist

When you've finished writing a polished draft of your script, use the following as a checklist to evaluate if you need to make any changes:

- Will my audience be interested throughout my entire program?
- Have I explained myself in simple language? (When I read the script aloud, does it sound as if I'm *talking* to an audience or just *reading* to an audience?)

**Table 1.** Example of a two-column script.

VIDEO	AUDIO
Fade up to Super: "Starting a Successful Oil Collection Program"	<b>Music</b> fades up, then under narration
Dissolve to shot of oil well pumping.	<b>NARRATOR:</b> Oil. Black gold. Crude. Whatever you want to call it, it's changed our world.
Dissolve to shot underneath a car, oil dripping into drain pan.	
Cut to traffic. Cut to plane taking off.	With it, millions of people can take to the roads or to the skies for easy, quick travel.