How to write a good press release

If you tell the media about something that's happening, they'll usually ask you to email them a press release. Journalists use press releases to write stories.

The basics

Your release should sound like a story in a newspaper. Here are some top tips for getting it right:

- Write in the third person: talk about what they did, rather than what I or you did.

- Avoid including opinions (apart from when you're using direct quotes).

- Keep it to one or two sides of A4. You may want to write a draft and then cut it down.

- Use plain English and avoiding jargon. Lots of words and abbreviations we use in Scouts (like Districts and GSLs) are confusing for people who aren't part of Scouts, so find another way to say it.

- Use short, punchy sentences and paragraphs. This will help make it as interesting as possible.

- See if your story can tie into specific campaigns or dates, for example, World First Aid Day or Random Act of Kindness Day.

- Don't use fancy formatting like footnotes and textboxes.

Writing your press release

When you're ready to write your press release, thinking about the five main sections (headline, opening paragraph, second paragraph, quotes, ends and notes to editor) may help. We've included some examples below.

Headline

Keep your headline clear, short and simple. Show journalists that it's a local story, for example, by including the name of your group.

For example: Second Westchester Scouts help prepare the community to save lives

Opening paragraph

The first paragraph is the most important part of the press release, because it shows why your story is relevant and newsworthy. Answer the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why.

For example: Today, a Scout group in Westchester took part in the Scouts' A Million Hands initiative. Scouts from the group have been encouraging the community to learn basic first aid through events in the town centre; they've also been fundraising to provide a defibrillator on the side of their Scout meeting place.

Second paragraph

Now you've got the details down, you can include some detail. You may want to talk about people's inspirations or motivations and who they're trying to help. You could also throw in some statistics or information about partners and funders.

For example: A study by the Red Cross and Manchester University found that up to 59% of deaths from injury may have been prevented if the injured person was given first aid. By raising awareness of vital first aid skills and encouraging people to download the Red Cross' first aid app, Scouts are preparing people in Westchester to deal with first aid emergencies and save lives.

Quotes

Quotes are a great way to include key messages in your press release. Think about who you'll quote on behalf of the group (your spokesperson) – it could be a Section Leader or a Group Scout Leader. You could also include quotes from people who've been involved with the project, for example, a manager of a service you helped, someone from an organisation you supported, or a local decision maker who got involved.

For example: Maria Nowak, leader of 2nd Westchester Scouts, said 'this is a really exciting initiative, which we hope will save lives'. Sam Brown, 18, is one of the Scouts taking part. They said 'we really enjoyed learning the first aid and passing the skills onto others, so one day they too might be prepared to save a life'.

Ends and notes to the editor

After your last paragraph, write 'ENDS' at the end of the release to tell the media outlet that you've finished the main bit of your press release. After this, you can finish off with anything you want to tell the editor that's not part of the press release (the bits you don't want published), including web addresses, contact details and important background information.

For example: People can learn first aid online or download the Red Cross app at www.redcross.org.uk/firstaid. Anyone interested in getting involved should contact 2nd Westchester Scouts on 01234 567 890.

ENDS

Notes to editor

- 2nd Westchester Scouts works across Westchester.

- For more information, email m.nowak@westchesterscouts.org.uk or call 01234 567890.

Sending your press release

It's best to copy the text into the body of the email (rather than sending any documents as attachments). If you attach a document, your email's more likely to end up in their junk folder, and there's a risk that the attachment will be lost or deleted.

Give your email the subject line 'Press release: headline' (but include your headline instead of the word).

Busy journalists can receive hundreds of press releases a day. You could make yours stand out by giving them a quick call before or after you send it – think of two or three things that you think will stand out and sell your story, then tell them quickly (but clearly). Remember they'll have plenty of deadlines too.

If a journalist comes to your event, it's a good idea to give them a quick call afterwards to check that they have everything they need to run the story.

Even if you don't end up securing any media coverage for this story, it's always helpful to build relationships with journalists. If you've got a relationship with them, they're more likely to pay attention to your story and do all they can to get it published.

Taking a good press photograph

Local papers always love a good photograph to illustrate a story, so send a few of your best shots with your press release to give journalists a choice. Usually, newspapers are looking for brightly coloured, high resolution images that focus on people.

Do

- Make sure you get about consent from everyone in the photo.

- Try to include action shots of the project with some of the key activities taking place.

- Take pictures of small groups (between two and six people is perfect).

- Take pictures of people looking cheerful and enjoying themselves.

Don't

- Take photos of people far in the background (or the backs of people's heads!).

- Take photos without people in them.

- Have dull-looking backgrounds or take pictures in front of windows (they'll ruin the light).

- Take big group shots where you can't see people's faces clearly.

For more advice or support, contact your County's media team or email scouts@redcross.org.uk

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