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# Foreword

Dear reader,

Writing is the essential art and craft of public relations professionals. With the ability to communicate well in writing comes success and career advancement. Without it, you risk losing the trust and respect of your colleagues and clients. Your writing is the face of your professional image.

We live in a time of 140-character messages and viral marketing, and communicators can share information quicker and with more impact than ever before. But with our newfound connectivity has come a desire for more creativity and a growth in expectations. Today's PR campaign incorporates a wide variety of written content, much of which is long-form content or brand storytelling. Capitalizing on the new ways people create and consume content is the greatest challenge in PR today.

Thankfully, writing is not an innate skill. It can be learned. In this second edition of PR News' *Writer's Guidebook*, the necessity of communicating well in writing is met with more than forty articles detailing how best to write press releases, emails, speeches, biographies, backgrounders, crisis communications and annual reports. Our contributors also grapple with the question of how best to write for social media, as new platforms continue to shake the foundations that time-tested messaging strategies were built on. And they explore how to get your content noticed through search engine optimization.

Great writing has always been in style, and a major focus of this book is taking time-tested writing standards and applying them to the new situations PR professionals face today. Our contributing writers bring us insights from a variety of backgrounds and fields of expertise, from brands to PR agencies to academia, each with his/her own unique and thoughtful perspective.

I want to thank our contributors who so eloquently shared their ideas, tips and best practices. I also want to thank you, our readers, for letting us help you as you learn new skills and further develop existing ones.

Sincerely,



Brian Greene  
Editor, PR News' *Writer's Guidebook*

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# Gracefully Written Press Releases Require Self-Editing and a Commitment to the Basics

By Duncan Martell

**C**reating a pitch-worthy press release may sound like an oxymoron to reporters, but it can be done.

There's little doubt you've seen your fair share of vague, poorly written and poorly proofed press releases. The headlines are five lines long. Sentences go on forever. Quotes are stacked. Errant (or missing) commas and misused semicolons abound.

Using sound news judgment, thinking like a journalist and writing in largely simple, declarative sentences, PR practitioners can create press releases that are newsworthy, attract media attention and will be shared across social media channels.

Here's a guide to writing better press releases that will result in your releases being shared, picked up, written through into a news story and generating coverage.

The most glaring problems with many press releases are:

1. They're written in "corporatese" and, more often than not, are replete with hyperbolic, breathless buzzwords such as "disruptive," "groundbreaking" and "game-changing."
2. They're devoid of context, with a solipsistic emphasis on the brand or client.

I can say it no simpler: don't do these things.

As we were told at some point in school, show don't tell. Rather than use examples of the puffery mentioned above to describe a brand's latest product, show the reader and

explain what about the product merits a description of "disruptive" or "groundbreaking." Give examples, customer use cases and evidence to back up such claims. Writing, "Widget X lets customers do widget-y things 35% faster than any other widget" is better than, "Widget X is truly revolutionary."

There are more things in the world than just your brand, yet from reading many press releases, the reader could conclude that's not the case. While, for instance, you likely won't want to mention direct competitors in the press release, providing some context, history and a broader sense of why the news in this news release actually is important news is key. Nothing exists in a vacuum, unless you're in outer space.

Also, third-party validation, such as relevant market research firms, and a solid customer reference or example, are keys to providing independent confirmation and context that support the claims you're making in the press release. Reporters and editors respond much better to validated claims. Having these items in your press release strengthens it that much more.

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## Not all announcements are created equal.

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One of the best ways to create strong press releases is to rely on one of the fundamental tenets of journalism: the Five W's. Start by

answering them after you've gathered as many details about the news as you can.

- **Who.** Who is making the announcement?
- **What.** What is being announced?
- **Where.** Where is this happening? Is this being announced at a trade show, for example?
- **When.** Usually, press releases go out the same day as the announcement is made, so writing, "Fabulous Widgeteer today announced..." usually will suffice.
- **Why.** Why is this happening or did this happen? This is where we write about context, the industry landscape and where we must vigorously address the critical question of why should the reader care?

This last bullet point is key. It's the most fundamental question we should ask ourselves: Why should a reader care about this? While we're at it, let's also be honest. Not all announcements are created equal. Some are more inherently interesting than others. At the same time, keep asking yourself the "why" question until you can find, no matter how small, the one thing that answers the "why" question.

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### **In crafting a press release that's newsworthy and shareable, the goal is to write crisply and cleanly.**

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Once you've gathered all the facts (through a creative brief, interviews of the relevant parties at the brand and research), it's time to start writing. In addition to the points already made, buy a copy of the AP Stylebook (full title *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*). While it may seem quaint in our always-on, always-connected digital world and unnecessary in the Twitterverse, AP style remains the gold standard in news

writing and press releases. And reporters notice—not just those older than 45 or old enough to remember typewriters and FAX machines.

Is your client headquartered in a city that stands alone in datelines? Do I write 7 or seven? Are executive titles capitalized? The answers to these questions and many more are in the AP Stylebook. Newspapers and wire services such as AP, Bloomberg, Reuters, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* use either the AP Stylebook or their own (which are based on the AP Stylebook, anyway).

Also, buy a good dictionary and thesaurus. It may seem old school, but having hard copies of these books come in handy because you can see the related words that are proximal to the ones you're looking up. It's also easier to skip around than repeatedly tapping words into a search box.

If you're tempted to use a word whose definition you aren't 100% certain of, look it up. As one example, plenty of people use the word "decimated" to mean completely destroyed, when, actually, it means to reduce by a factor of 10. Similarly, with a thesaurus handy, when the urge strikes to use a "lazy" word such as revolutionary, you can swat it away. In place of revolutionary, for example, you could perhaps write "unprecedented."

In crafting a press release that's newsworthy and shareable, the goal is to write crisply and cleanly. If your sentences are longer than 30 words, it's time to start looking for some periods. Edit the sentences down or break them in two with either a period or a semicolon. To avoid buzzwords, try doing an Internet search for "worst business buzzwords" and excise your copy of any offenders. Reach for that thesaurus and find another word.

To help snare better media interest, keep headlines to a maximum of two lines. Subheads should be four lines or fewer. And keep

the first paragraph of your press release to three sentences (each of which is not more than 30 words). Large, imposing blocks of text on a display can be off-putting or even intimidating, even reporters, who often write lots and lots of words every day. Imagine which looks less challenging to read in your mind's eye: Boulder-sized clumps of sentences or crisp paragraphs populated by medium-length arrangements of words.

There is, of course, no shortage of resources online for writing press releases. Many are more than adequate. To craft a press release that's a cut above requires an eye for detail, an exacting self-editing function a commitment to the basics and a good deal of practice.

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*Duncan Martell is editorial director for Bhava Communications.*

# It's Not What You Say, It's How You Say It: Mastering the Art of Tone Over Email

By CK Oliver

Chances are, you've been misunderstood in an email at some point in your career. Whether it's a misplaced thank-you that came across as passive aggressive, seeming to not care about deadlines or being seen as too aggressive, the art of mastering tone in one's email can be a challenge. Everyone has a unique voice when they write. Thus, what you might view as standard conversational tone can be read differently depending on your message's recipient. Here are tips and tricks to ensure that your email doesn't end up forwarded to your CEO with a demand for an explanation.

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**There's no need to write a novel when a one-liner will do.**

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## It's How You Said It

When you email to check on deadlines, you might write: "This is due by 12:00 noon, or the deadline will be missed." The person reading it might take your message to mean: "If we miss this deadline, guess whose fault it is? Yours." That's not what you intended. Re-wording this email doesn't require a lot of work, fortunately.

What to say instead: "Whenever you're free today, can we circle back and touch base on this? I noticed a few things I'd like to get clarification on. Thanks!"

In the field of PR, we're always on the go. There's always time for another coffee, one

more check of email or a last-minute check-in with the boss. When an email comes in at a less-than-opportune time, it can be easy to reply "Yep," "Got it," or even the dreaded, "K." to confirm a meeting. While we all can hope no one would resort to this, it's bound to happen. There's no need to write a novel when a one-liner will do. Any PR pro will tell you brevity is key, except in this case. Any of these responses translate directly into, "I'm too busy to take the time to reply to this properly." This is, of course, not what anyone wants to imply in his or her business-related emails.

Rather than writing, "Yep," in response to, "Did you get this memo/pitch/revision request?" write something like this instead: "Yes, and I'll be in touch shortly. Thank you."

It should go without saying to avoid textspeak, emoji and emoticons in any email unless you know the person incredibly well. In 99.99% of cases, not even then. It's best to avoid these in professional settings, even if you feel you have a good rapport with your press contact or coworker.

Tone discrepancies can happen. It's how we meet these challenges that matters. Whether it's a case of mistaken intent, or lack of clarity, do your best to ensure that your emails come across as poised and professional as you are in the office. If you're not sure about your tone, ask someone to proofread your message unless it's under NDA or contains sensitive information.

If you're familiar with your contact or coworker, chances are you've already established

a rapport in your emails. Keep it comfortable and always make sure that you're on top of things. If you're going to miss a deadline or have questions, know when to pick up the phone rather than sending an email.

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### **Knowing when something wasn't properly addressed is the first step in avoiding back-and-forth emails asking for direction.**

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#### **When in Doubt, Clarify**

Clarifying what you mean, or asking what someone else meant in an email, can turn into a constant back-and-forth of, "Yes, but," which eventually takes the shape of a face-to-face meeting without the ability to manage how much time is spent on it. The dreaded email-meeting is the result of people often asking too many clarifying questions in an email series rather than setting aside a block of time that they could meet and get clarification on anything that might have been confusing.

It's best to avoid getting your press contacts or coworkers involved in an email meeting by asking too many clarifying statements. If you find yourself asking for more than two clarifications on a stated goal, revision or a series of changes to a media asset, then it's time to schedule an in-person meeting or a Skype call. Knowing when something wasn't properly addressed is the first step in avoiding back-and-forth emails asking for direction. If a task is properly outlined, has clear deliverables and has revisions reviewed and returned in a timely manner, this will ensure that you don't have to send email after email asking if you're on the right track.

Examples of good clarifying statements:

- "Based on what we've discussed, it seems like this media asset isn't working for you. Is that accurate?"

- "It seems like this pitch needs some attention in the following three sections: A revision to its headline, the second gaffe, and the hook. Does that cover everything you'd addressed?"
- "Can you be more specific?"
- "Just to make sure we're on the same page, this goal was set for 16:00 EST Friday, correct?"

If you find yourself asking more than one clarifying statement in an email, or having to ask multiple times for direction in a task, then it's often better to schedule a quick meeting. Going over deliverables, deadlines and ensuring your goals align with your client's not only goes a long way toward avoiding a day-long email meeting but also shows your client you take their business seriously. Using a clarifying statement is a surefire way to show that you're listening and will address potential pitfalls before they derail a project entirely.

#### **Getting Your Email Read**

As a PR professional, everyone wants his or her pitch to be read. The cardinal rule here is to read the submission requirements. Don't pitch outside of a journalist's scope. This is

#### **Quick Tips**

- Know when to stop emailing and schedule a call or meeting instead.
- Check what time it is for your press contact when scheduling meetings.
- Don't be pushy. One invitation is enough.
- Stay on topic. Pitch the right person the first time.
- Use clarifying statements, but realize when they signal a lack of direction.
- Get your email proofread to double-check your tone.
- Avoid using shorthand to confirm receipt of an email.

the first thing that will turn your email into an automatic red flag. If you're pitching a journalist a product or story beat she doesn't cover, chances are she's not going to be interested.

If you're trying to set up a meeting with a journalist, check the time zone where they are. Matching it with your executive's availability can be a challenge, especially if a journalist is across the world from your executive. If your media contact has specified she is in a time zone that's 5 hours behind your executive, don't set a press briefing for 9:30 a.m.

If you can't get a call set up, offer the journalist the option of emailing a set of questions over to your executive. This will not only ensure the journalist knows they can email you for a quick source quote but also that they can still tell your product's story.

Don't send multiple meeting invitations for the same executive. One is enough. Bombarding journalists with requests to connect to the same executive on different topics is not just unprofessional—it comes across as desperate. If a journalist already has accepted a meet-

## Resources

[tonecheck.com](http://tonecheck.com)

[timezoneconverter.com](http://timezoneconverter.com)

[timeanddate.com/worldclock](http://timeanddate.com/worldclock)

[tone-analyzer-demo.mybluemix.net](http://tone-analyzer-demo.mybluemix.net)

ing with your executive, there's no need to send a second invite asking for them to meet with your executive again on a different topic in the same week. Ask if you can bundle the topics into one call or offer your executive as a source for a quote.

Remember to pitch the right person, follow submission instructions and be polite—not pushy.

If you follow these simple tips, you should be one step closer toward mastering the art of communicating via email and ensuring that your pitches land in the hands of those who will tell your executive's story.

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*CK Oliver is a freelance content consultant.*