

## HOW TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

By Eileen Watkins

You've published a novel, gotten a short story into a prestigious anthology or won a prize in a contest, and you want to publicize your success. Or maybe you need to get out the word about a reading you're giving at your local bookstore.

The best way to do this is to compose a press release and circulate it to the media. Here are some tips to help you get results:

\* **Keep it short...but not too short.** Contrary to some advice you may have heard, I do not believe a press release needs to be kept to a single, double-spaced page. That might be fine if its only function were to pique an editor's interest, but many local newspapers will print your release verbatim, as a short filler. Three paragraphs don't constitute much of a story, whereas five or six at least seem worthy of a headline.

\* **It's what's up front that counts.** All of the key information should appear on the first page, preferably in the first two sentences. Get to the point as quickly as possible. Avoid the cutesy lead-in, unless it makes a special point. ("This Halloween, three members of the Garden State Horror Writers hope to scare the wits out of audiences at Barnes & Noble...")

The journalistic rules of "who, what, when and where" apply

even more strongly to a press release. A busy editor wants to see at a glance what's happening, so he can make a quick decision about whether to run the item or send out a reporter. Don't be afraid to go with a straightforward lead, such as, "Three members of the Garden State Horror Writers will mark the Halloween season by reading from their works on Friday, Oct. 27, at 7 p.m. at Barnes & Noble, Route 17, Paramus."

As in your fiction writing, use clear prose, short sentences and active verbs. Convoluting, meandering sentences will frustrate an editor, who may simply toss your release in the trash. Always include a phone number to call for more information.

\* **Get personal, but keep it real.** Although editors get used to wading through a certain amount of "p.r." fluff, don't blow your own horn too much. They'll assume you're writing your own release, and no one wants to hear how great you think you are. Let your accomplishments speak for themselves. The more factual your release sounds, the more likely a paper will run it as you wrote it. (On the other hand, if someone reputable has sung your praises publicly, go ahead and quote him!)

Background information on yourself, or the person you're promoting, can be the same as you'd put in a query letter--your previous publications and prizes, and your "day job" if it's interesting or gives you some special expertise.

A local angle can make the difference in whether or not your item sees print. If you're from Morristown, NJ, be sure to say so in the release you send to the Daily Record. If you're publicizing a reading by several people, give their home towns and send releases to their local papers. Many weeklies will only print stories with strong local angles.

\* **Don't waste your time and effort.** These days, putting a typed press release in the mail has become the exception rather than the rule, unless you're including a photo. Otherwise, print up one tidy release on your letterhead and fax it, along with a cover sheet. Most publications today also accept releases by e-mail. Despite all of these electronic time-savers, don't wait until the last minute! Even daily newspapers make up their calendar listings and "feature" sections well in advance.

Feature reporters also plan well ahead of time what stories they will cover. Three weeks is not too early to send out a release on a timely event.

Do some research and make sure you're contacting the right person. With a very small paper, you probably can get away with addressing your material to "The Editor"; with a big one, you'll be shuffled to the bottom of the "in" basket, possibly forever. Check the paper's bylines and masthead, or call the newsroom and ask who should receive this type of release. (I used to cover visual art--painting, sculpture, etc.--but I got releases about

classical concerts, dance programs and every other kind of "art." A lot of time often was lost before I could reroute this mail to the various other critics, especially if I was on vacation!)

Finally, follow up. Keep a list of your contacts, give them a week and then call to make sure their received your material. This can be the most frustrating part of the process. At a small paper, they may respond kindly and tell you right away when the item will run. At a large one, they may claim they never saw your fax. (They probably didn't--it's at the bottom of a big pile.) Keep your cool and simply send it again. At least they'll probably keep an eye out for it the second time!

While you're at it, don't forget local radio and cable t.v. stations. They might be interested in featuring local authors, they often run community calendars, and they can be approached through a faxed release, also.

Occasionally you'll hit the jackpot, and someone actually will call you for an interview or come out to cover your event. Then you'll be glad you made the extra effort to get their attention!

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