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## Press Release Writing Handbook



Not much experience writing a press release?  
This booklet will get you started publicizing your Post.

Prepared for the American Legion  
Department of New Jersey  
by  
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Public Relations Chair

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# Notes



## Start by Asking: “Is it news?”

When you ask the press to cover a story, the first question editors need to answer is whether it is newsworthy. Is it important to their readers? Editors usually look at five criteria to decide whether they will run a story: timing, significance, proximity, prominence and human interest (mostly of their readers).

**While your story probably won’t have all of them,  
at least two should be applicable.**

### Timing

This where the whole concept of “news” comes from. Is your story new or is there new information that readers will want to know about? Something may be very interesting today, but tomorrow it could be yesterday’s news and papers won’t want to run it. Don’t send a press release about the success of your Toys for Tots drive in April.

### Significance

The number of people affected by the story is important. If you are trying to get coverage for an event that you know will attract a large number of readers, make sure you tell the editor/reporter.

### Proximity

Stories which happen near to us have more significance. This is especially relevant if you are trying to get coverage in a weekly newspaper. Make the connection for the paper by listing the town where you are located or where the subject resides.

### Prominence

Famous or prominent people get more coverage. If a Congressman, Senator, Mayor, famous actor is coming—make sure the editor knows!

### Human Interest

Human interest stories can override the above criteria because they appeal to emotions rather than news. A good human interest story will help readers relate emotionally to a story.



## How to send your release

For most media outlets, the preferred method for sending any press release is via email from a known, secure source. Rather than using a personal email account, consider setting up an account for your Post, which is used solely for Post business. There are a number of free account services available online.

Collect copies of all the media outlets you want on your mailing list. Contact information for your local newspapers or other publications, should be found someplace in the publication, usually on the editorial page. You may also get contact information from the publication’s website. You might have to do some searching, but, for most, it’s there someplace. Once you find the contact page, bookmark it on your computer because you will find that reporter turnover in the industry occurs constantly; your contact one week, could be someone different the next. If you cannot find contact information, or you want to confirm some information, give them a call. At the same time, you can do the following:

1. Introduce yourself as the person promoting your Post and tell them you are confirming their contact information.
2. Confirm the name of the paper, address, email and editor.
3. Is their preferred way to receive releases through email?
4. Ask if there are specific reporters to whom you should send articles or should they all go to the editor?
5. What are the deadlines? This is important. You need to know how far in advance to send a press release about Friday’s fish fry to get it published well before the event.

You can put all this information into a contact list in your email account.

Send your press release in the body of an email, not as an attachment. Editors and reporters are reluctant to open attachments, unless they are photographs, because of the possibility of it being infected with a virus.

The American Legion  
[Post address]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Contact: [name]  
[contact’s home or post phone number]

## Press Release/Media Alert

### [name of town or post] Veterans Day Services

[town, NJ, date] – American Legion Post [number] will host Veterans Day services to honor military veterans on [day], November 11, at 11 a.m., at [location & address]. Guest speakers will include [list names].  
[Refreshments will be served immediately after the ceremony.]

For information stop by the Post or call [Post phone number].

###

*[Add a boiler plate here of your Post that includes your mission statement and the population you serve.]*

## Press Release Templates

Department website: <http://www.njamericanlegion.org/>

*Making  
your  
job  
easier*



Go to the NJ Department website. On the Forms & Documents page, under Public Relations, open or save the Veterans Day Press Template (or one of the others) to your computer. With modification, you can use these to promote any event from a spaghetti dinner to your Memorial Day service.

- ⇒ Fill in blanks with your Post's information
- ⇒ Include a quote from your commander
- ⇒ Add program information specific to your Post
- ⇒ Add a Post or Legion boiler plate
- ⇒ Copy and paste the entire release into the body of an email.

**The American Legion *Public Relations Toolkit* contains a number of news release and media advisory templates on a variety of topics which you may use as a guide to craft your local release. It is available as a pdf for download at [http://www.legion.org/sites/legion.org/files/legion/publications/pr\\_toolkit.pdf](http://www.legion.org/sites/legion.org/files/legion/publications/pr_toolkit.pdf) on the National American Legion website. You will need Adobe Reader on your computer to view.**

## Timing

For the most part, newspapers like a two to three week lead time for events; possibly three to four for a letter to the editor. For a monthly publication, it could be six weeks. So you have to plan ahead.



## Headlines

Well-written headlines are the essence of the news point of a story. They are positive and specific, containing strong, active verbs and short, simple words.

## What a great headline does

**Grabs attention!**

**Gets the editor/reporter to read your press release.**

**Classifies the story so the editor knows what to do with the article.**

The headline should be in a bold font larger than the font size used in the body of the article. In some instances, you might want to use a sub-headline or "deck" to give a second layer of detail to your headline to better sell your article.

**Pinpoints the main news point of the story.**

## Some hints to writing good headlines

**Do not use all upper case letters.**

**Use present tense and an active voice.** The dynamic active voice saves words. The subject and verb act as one.

**Use short, to the point words.**

**Summarize your article in one short sentence. If using a "deck" never repeat words from the headline.**

**Make it positive.**

**Omit articles; avoid abbreviations, exclamation points & other punctuation.**

**Use important numbers only.** Except for one, numbers in headlines should be written as numerals.

## The Basics of AP Style

Associated Press (AP) Style is the standard for newspapers. By using AP style you make the editor/reporters' job much easier allowing them to just cut and paste your story from your email without having to edit.

### Listing Events

Time– date– building—street– town—zip code

The event will take place 4 p.m., March 1, at American Legion Post 99, 123 Main Street, Anytown 12345 (include zip for GPS navigation).

### If you include the day then use:

Time—day– date– building– street– town—zip code

The event will take place 4 p.m., Tuesday, March 1, at American Legion Post 99, 123 Main Street, Anytown 12345.

**Be sure to add periods on a.m. and p.m. and make lower case** – nothing will drive the editor/reporter to tears than having to go through a listing filled with times that he or she has to go through to add periods and make lower-case, especially when they are on deadline!

Likewise, **do not** use bold, underlining, highlighting or all caps in the body. In how many articles in your local paper have you seen any of that?

### Abbreviations

It is preferable that titles are included after a person's name and are lower case; eg. John Jones, deputy commissioner of economic affairs.

After first reference, just use last name.

Before a full name abbreviate: Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Rep., the Rev., Sen. Mr., Mrs. and Ms. are seldom used in press releases; eg. Gov. Christie; Sen. Booker; but President Obama.

Occupational descriptions are always lower case: astronaut John Glenn, pitcher Nolan Ryan.

After the name of a corporate entity abbreviate a company (Co.), incorporated (Inc.), corporation (Corp.) and limited (Ltd.)

### HELPFUL HINTS

- In your email try to keep pertinent information visible in the computer screen.
- Use subject line to inform and attract:  
**Press Release: American Legion Post Hosts Memorial Day Services**
- Attach photographs as JPEGs and include caption. Resolution for publications is 300 dpi generally in a 4 x 5 or 4 x 6 format.
- You must identify everyone in the picture, usually from left to right. Some will ask for the photographer's name.
- **Be prepared for a call from a reporter.** If you sent out a release on Boys State, be prepared to answer questions on the program, such as history, what occurs, qualifications, officials from NJ who have attended. The reporter will be on deadline, so if you want your story published, saying you'll get back to him/her tomorrow may be too late.
- Occasionally, a reporter may want to talk to someone mentioned in your press release, such as a veteran you honored for 50 continuous years of membership or one of your Boys State delegates, in that case, get the reporter's name, phone number and deadline. Contact the person they want to interview, explain that a reporter wants to interview them for a story and the reporter's deadline, and, either get permission to give the reporter their phone number or have the person they want to interview call the reporter.
- At your event, have copies of your press release; fact sheet; backgrounder handy for reporters who show up.
- If a dignitary scheduled to be at your event cancels and a reporter/photographer is covering it because of the dignitary, let the editor/reporter know as soon as possible, so you stay in their good graces.

## Quotations

The use of a quotation in a press release gives you the opportunity to have the Post Commander make a positive comment or explain something further; personalizes the release; makes the reporters job easier by eliminating the necessity for a phone call; and your job easier by ensuring there isn't a misspoken comment to a reporter over the phone. You have already controlled that.

In most instances, unless it is an after-event release which includes a spoken quote you wrote down, you will be crafting a short quote for the Commander and should get approval before sending out the release. Keep the quote short and positive. It's your job to portray the Post and Commander in the best light possible.

### HELPFUL HINTS

- One of your biggest challenges will be to look at the news release through the eyes of a non-member and write from that perspective. The news will be about your Safety Essay Contest winner; your delegates to Boys State; your donation to the local food pantry—usually not your Post or commander. The story can't be told without mentioning your Post, but your Post is not the lead of the story. Your goal is to show your Post's value to your community through your involvement, support and contributions. Keeping your activities in the eye of your community will make the residents and elected officials aware of what you do and why you do it.
- The exception to the above is when writing a release announcing your newly elected officers or when your Commander/Post receives an award.
- If writing about a membership drive, make it a story about your Post's community involvement and activities; the benefits and opportunities to being a member.
- Proofread & have someone else proofread your copy before sending.

## What kind of release should you send?



Now that you've collected your contacts, set up an email account and decided your message is newsworthy, the next question is what kind of release should you send?

While it would be nice if everything rated a full length feature story, it doesn't. The best way to understand what kind of release you should send is by looking at your newspaper and comparing those articles to yours and noting what kind of coverage was received.

Did it receive one or two paragraphs (blurb), half to full page article, an article with a picture, a picture with a caption or a calendar listing? That would be a good indicator of how the editor would feature your story.

**Type of coverage:** Blurb or community calendar listing  
**Type of Release:** Media Advisory/Short Press Release

An alert to the media of an upcoming event or story that is relevant to the media's audience. This is a very straight forward release that lists the who, what, when, where and why. It also tells of a photo opportunity which may be passed on to a staff photographer to cover the event. Make sure you include directions to the event.

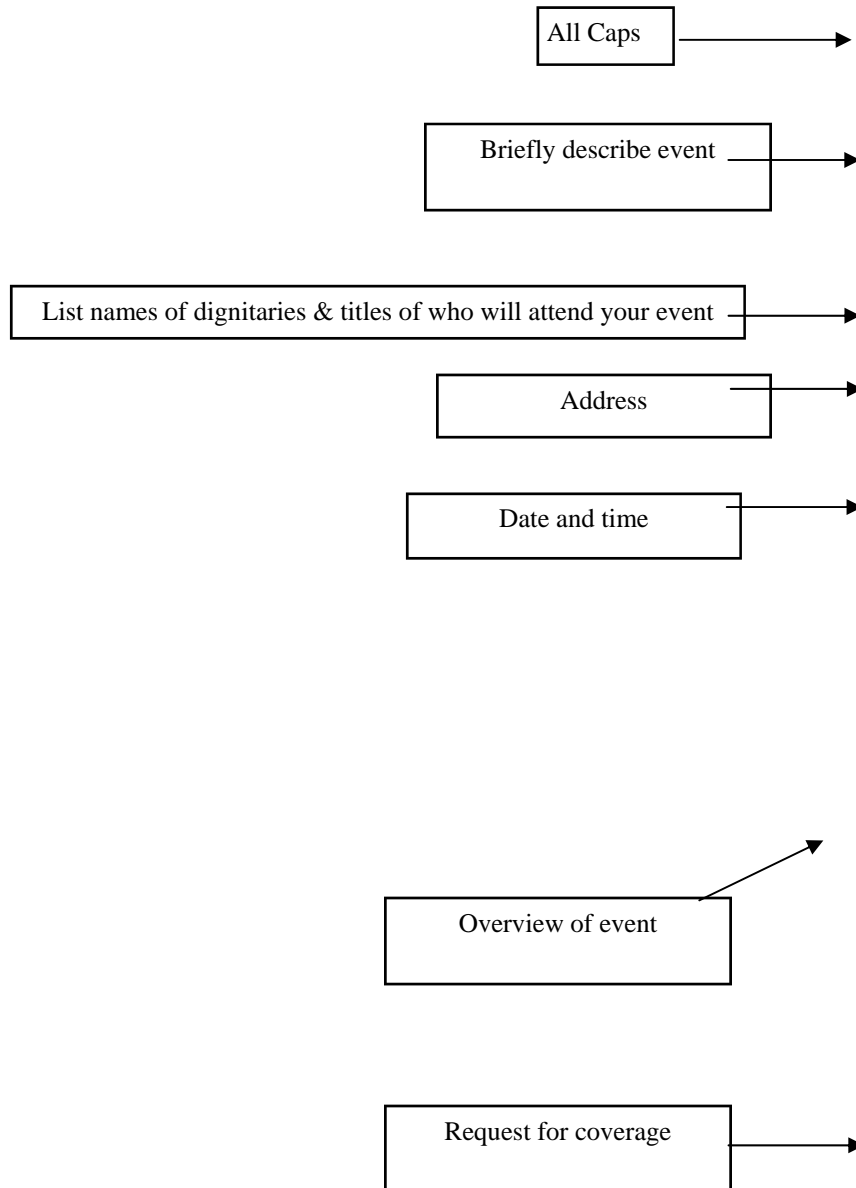
**Type of coverage:** Picture with caption, feature story  
**Type of Release:** Press Release with photo caption

This may be something sent before or after an event. If it's an after event photo, include a caption identifying everyone in the photo with a press release detailing what occurred (use your 5 W's). If it's before the event and you think it's something that can be expanded to a feature story, then make sure you include a full release.

**Type of coverage:** News or feature story  
**Type of Release:** Longer, more detailed Press Release

You have a great event or a news item and it covers 2, 3 and possibly 4 of the criteria editors are looking for in a story noted on page 1. Then you would write a full news release. A large daily paper may use it as a base for an article, but most daily/weekly papers will pop a "Staff" byline on it and publish it in full or part, depending on relevance and space they have to fill.

## Format for a Media Advisory



## Sample News Release

The American Legion  
Lt. John Farnkopf Post 401  
148 Major Road  
Monmouth Junction, NJ 08852

### **PRESS RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact: Gary Cooper, 732-821-2086, alpost401@hotmail.com

### **Post 401 Memorial Day Service Monday, May 27, at 11 a.m. marks 65 Years of Service**

South Brunswick, NJ, May 12, 2013 -- Memorial Day Remembrance Services will be held on the front lawn at the Lt. John Farnkopf American Legion Post 401, 148 Major Rd, Monmouth Junction, on Monday, May 27, at 11 a.m. It will also mark the Post's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Post's three 60 plus year members will be on hand to commemorate the occasion: Joseph Spataro, William Bason and Charles Wolfe. Gary Cooper, post commander, and Barbara Buhl, auxiliary president, will present the ceremonial wreath which honors those who gave their lives in military service to the United States. Music will be provided by the South Brunswick High School Band. Refreshments including birthday cake will be served following the ceremony.

###

Reporters and photographers are invited.

Major road is off Route 1 at the South Brunswick water tower.

#### **About the American Legion**

Lieutenant John Farnkopf American Legion Post 401 was chartered on May 12, 1948, but organizers had signed and submitted the application a good two years before that. The post is named for Monmouth Junction native and Army Air Force World War II pilot John Farnkopf. The American Legion was chartered and incorporated by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization devoted to mutual helpfulness. It is the nation's largest wartime veterans service organization, committed to mentoring youth and sponsorship of wholesome programs in our communities, advocating patriotism and honor, promoting strong national security, and continued devotion to our fellow service members and veterans.



## Format for New Releases

**ID Block upper left side or center:** name and address of your Post. →

**PRESS RELEASE**—all caps and bold. →

**Contacts:** name, phone number and email *\*Hint— you may want to include two names or phone numbers to make sure reporter can reach someone, especially if they are lost on their way to the event.* →

**Headline:** Succinct and informative—convey your message while intriguing the editor/reporter to read more →

### Notes

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
The standard title for a release date is” **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**” in all caps. You may omit this line but should then include a Release Date.

South Brunswick, NJ, May 20, 2013 -  
**Datelines** tell the editor the city of origination for the article. If you include, type city and state, and include the date of your press release followed by a dash.

### Dateline

The end of the release is designated with “End” or “30” in quotes or “###” →

In the old printed copy days, if a release ran more than one page, you would put “more” in brackets or between dashes, centered at the bottom of the page. With electronic copy, your release will be just one page in the body of an e-mail.

**Boiler Plate:** a short paragraph that describes your post, products, service and a short history or mission statement. This serves to give more information about you, but is not required. →



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## MEDIA ADVISORY

August 23, 2013

**WHAT:** Miss New Jersey Cara McCollum will be recording a children’s book for blind & disabled children at the NJ State Library Talking Book & Braille Center (TBBC).

**WHO:** Miss New Jersey 2013 Cara McCollum

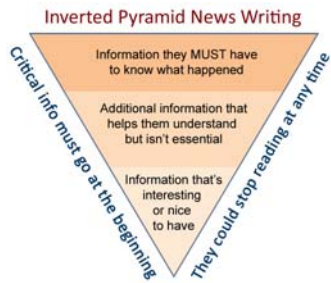
**WHERE:** Talking Book & Braille Center is located at 2300 Stuyvesant Ave., Trenton 08618

**WHEN:** Friday, August 23, 11:15 a.m. Miss NJ will arrive at the Talking Book & Braille Center & get set-up in the recording studio.

**DETAILS:** As a long time avid reader, this Princeton University junior’s platform is “Giving the Gift of Reading.” “I believe in the power of books, each one has opened my mind and my horizons just a little bit more.” For this reason, she believes books are particularly important for children in underprivileged situations, thus her involvement with Toys for Tots; the Birthday Book Project, which she started in 2008; and recording a book for children who cannot read a book due to a vision or other impairment at TBBC. Miss New Jersey Cara McCollum will be competing in the Miss America pageant on September 15 when it returns to Atlantic City after a nine year absence. This event stresses her support for libraries and the importance of reading and the availability of books for all children.

###

**Photographers & Reporters are invited.**



## The News Release

### Use the Inverted Pyramid style—important information first

- Get attention in the first two sentences
- Get right to the point in the first paragraph with the who, what, where, when and how; make it interesting & easy to understand
- Use short paragraphs
- Avoid military jargon and acronyms
- Try to include at least one quote
- Keep an active voice
- Try to keep it to a single page; two at the most
- Include photographs whenever possible—attach to the email.



## Attachments

**If you have more that you want the reporter to know you can offer the following with your release:**

### 1. Photos

Make sure you include a caption identifying everyone from left to right. Photo can be color or back & white, and should be a JPEG, 4x5 or 4x6, at 300 dpi. Caption eg. *Members of American Legion Post 401 delivered a “truck-load” of food to the South Brunswick Food Pantry just before Christmas thanks to donations from members and Post charity funds.*



*before Christmas thanks to donations from members and Post charity funds. Pictured are, from left, Rich Allen, Post service officer, LouAnne Wolf, director of the Food Pantry, Don DeMayo, Dennis Collingwood, Post 2nd vice commander, & Hank DeG-roff, Post chaplain.*

### 2. Backgrounders

In depth information that is comprehensive but concise. This is great to use when you want an editor/reporter to have lots of information, such as what we sent out regarding the Ballot Question in the Nov. 2013 election, or for a program, such as Boys State.

1. Open with concise statement of issue or subject
2. Use subheading for each section so reporter can find info easily
3. Follow with historical overview of issue or subject—be factual
4. Work your way to the present
5. Present the implication of the issue.

### 3. Fact Sheets

Just the facts—use charts, headings, bullets that the reporter can use for the story.

### 4. Links to web sites

Provide links to appropriate information on the National or State web-sites; your Post website or Facebook page.

## The State of the Newspaper Industry

The print newspaper industry is struggling to survive. Large pools of reporters at newspapers no longer exist, so you may never get a call from a reporter; but if your release is written well enough and sent correctly, it will end up in your local publications anyway. You will be an unpaid reporter/photographer for the local press.

In your publication list, don't forget about specialty publications that are available for free, such as the monthly “Our Town” magazines, “People Papers;” or the online outlets such as your local Patch or Alternative Press reporters. Some online editions of newspapers, such as the Home News (Gannett) or Packet Publications, allow you to post your press releases and photos on their sites.

Don't forget about News12New Jersey, NJTV and your local cable channel and radio stations.

With the cutbacks of reporters, outlets are severely short-staffed on week-ends. You may be holding the greatest event ever, but if there's a fire burning the boardwalk or a plane crash, you won't see a reporter.