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Public Communication

What exactly is Public Communication?

UVM professor Thomas Patterson defines Public Communication as “the practice of understanding, designing, implementing, and evaluating successful communication campaigns within a framework of public service. It is used to inform & persuade, to build relationships, and to encourage open dialogue in the public interest.”

In the broadest sense, Public Communication focuses on strategic, goal-oriented writing. This is writing that has a very specific purpose and audience. As a Public Communication major, you will write a variety of different pieces, including news releases, magazine or web articles, interviews, brochures, newsletters, advertisements, or important business documents—each with their own specific formatting guidelines. Writing in this discipline is very succinct, and you will often be confined to strict word limits and formatting space. While being brief, writers must also grab the audience’s attention, and cut through enormous amounts of clutter to make sure that their message gets across loud and clear.

Getting Started

Getting Started

Approaching a piece of Public Communication writing can be overwhelming at times, so here are just a few tips to get you started on the right path.

- **Give yourself time.** The best way to avoid anxiety with your writing is to give yourself plenty of time to brainstorm and draft. Communication is difficult – especially when you have a strict word limit or formatting space. The more time you have to let your creativity flow and get your brain moving, the better.

- **Define your audience.** Before you start writing, make sure you know exactly who you’re writing to – what language does your audience use? What will they understand? What are their worldviews? What could be offensive to them, or appealing? What will they relate to?

- **Set a goal.** Ask yourself; after reading this piece of writing—whether it’s a news article, a web page, a flyer, or a brochure—what will your audience walk away with? Are you trying to change their behavior, teach them something, make them buy your product, attend your event, or spread the word?

- **Identify the Who, What, When, Where, and Why?** Then make sure that all of this information is included as quickly and concisely as possible.
Focus on the headline and the first sentence. The world is full of messages, all clamoring to get a reader’s attention. The headline is what makes your piece stand out. Do your best to make it great. The first sentence, or the lede as journalists call it, is what determines whether your whole piece will be read or skimmed over. If you spend 90% of your time focusing on these two aspects, your time will be well spent.

Types of Writing

News Stories

- **Start with a great lede.** A lede is the journalistic term for a “hook,” or a really great introduction that immediately grabs the audience’s attention.

- **Be timely.** News can only be newsworthy for so long before it’s just another story.

- **Have an impact.** It should be clear why this story matters to your audience.

- **Be unique or novel.** People pay attention to anything out of the ordinary!

- **Have a conflict.** Nobody wants to hear that everything’s ok—that’s boring! We pay attention to things that are going wrong.

- **Occur in reasonable proximity.** Think local news.

- **Include a celebrity (when appropriate).** Celebrities can draw attention to your story, whether they are endorsing a non-profit, somehow involved in a newsworthy event, or making a fool of themselves.

- **No conclusion?** That’s ok! Often news stories trail off and don’t need a solid ending.

Press Releases

Press release: a brief article that announces events to newspapers, magazines, and online media outlets. They follow a standard format because reporters and editors need to read them quickly and decide whether or not to publish the information they contain.

- Use the organization’s letterhead and include all relevant contact information; this includes address, phone number, email address, website URL, etc.

- At the top of the first page, type *For Immediate Release* and the date

- Include an article title in bold or capital letters

- Put the most important info first and the less important details last. This allows editors to easily cut for length
• Use an objective tone. Don’t use words that imply a positive or negative opinion on the matter; you’re reporting reality not viewpoints.

• Make sure the content is factual and newsworthy. Fact-check your own writing; don’t wait for someone else to find your errors because they can and will. Never resort to using inaccurate info just to make the writing more interesting.

Web Writing

• **Brainstorm Keywords.** What will your audience search to find your website or article? Think of as many key phrases and tags as appropriate that will guide users to your writing.

• **Aim for 600 to 700 words.** Most users scan rather than read, so keep it short and to the point.

• **Split content into information bytes.** Make text short with one idea per paragraph, with the most important information in the first few sentences.

• **Keep paragraphs short.**

• **Use the “bite-snack-meal” approach.** The headline will be the bite and serve as a hyperlink to a full “meal” of a text. A “snack” underneath the headline will summarize the text in one to two short sentences. This way, users can pick and choose how much detail they want.

• **Use headlines, sub-headlines, hyperlinks, and lists.** Headlines should be information rich – not cute, silly, or promotional. They should serve to make information easier to find and access, as will hyperlinks and lists.

• **Highlight, enlarge or bold key points.** This will make important information stand out to the reader.

Print Advertisements

• **Create an interesting catch phrase:** Why should the audience care? What is going to make them remember? Don’t be forgettable.

• **Adhere to size limitations:** There is only a limited amount of space. Be purposeful with word placement, and make every word count!

• **Include the brand logo:** Brand recognition is a huge aspect in advertisement. Strategically place the logo so that it doesn’t distract from your words, but is noticeable enough to catch the consumer’s eye.

• **Limit use of words:** Less really is more. No one has the time or interest to read a paragraph on a print ad. Cut the excess and edit, edit, edit. Make sure the wording is as concise as possible.
• **Incorporate communication strategies:** use responsive chord theory, hegemonic ideologies, mimetic desire, tactical typography, etc.

• **Avoid logical fallacies at all costs:** make sure your logic is sound. The message can’t be effective if there are holes in the logic.

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**Tips and Tricks**

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Public Communication writing is incredibly diverse, but here you can find a few general tips to help you get started. Below you will find tips for **general pointers, tips for Newsworthy Information, and tips for Website Writing.** The following pointers have been generated from my own personal experiences, courses I have taken here at UVM, and the textbook *Strategic Writing* written by Charles Marsh, David W. Guth, and Bonnie Poovey Short.

**General Pointers**

• **Get to the point as quickly as possible.** The reader should know what’s up within the first few sentences. If they don’t, you’ve already lost their attention.

• **Start with Who, What, When, Where, and Why.** The sooner you communicate this, the better. Follow immediately with the most important details, and finally the least important background information.

• **Omit needless words and repetition.** People don’t have the time or patience to read more words than absolutely necessary!

• **Always use active voice.** (“A sales slump affected our profits” rather than “Our profits were affected by a sales slump.”) You will sound more direct and in control.

• **Remember your audience.** Be sure that your writing is audience appropriate.

• **Make it easy to read.** You don’t need to overcomplicate things. Keep it simple!

• **Challenge “to be” verbs.** These are verbs like “be,” “will,” “were,” and “was.” These verbs convey no action, and so can make your writing seem indirect and lifeless. Be direct! Say “He will communicate well,” rather than “He will be a good communicator.”

• **Challenge modifiers.** Modifiers, or adjectives, are descriptive words. Avoid using boring common words, and be more expressive with your language. (She was “ecstatic” rather than “happy”)

• **Challenge long sentences.** Your sentences should be long enough to make your point clearly and gracefully, and no longer!
• **Know your message:** This is where the “communication” aspect comes in. Have a clear and relatable message to convey so that your audience can find a shared understanding.

• **Edit, Edit, Edit:** Wording is everything when you have limited space and limited attention span of your audience. Make sure the wording and sentence structure is absolutely perfect—this requires many drafts.
The Communicator’s Dictionary

The Communicator’s Dictionary

The world of Public Communication is filled with a lot of specific terminology. In this section, we define the terms and phrases most commonly used. Definitions were developed with the help of the textbook Strategic Writing written by Charles Marsh, David W. Guth, and Bonnie Poovey Short.

Active Voice – The active voice means that in your sentences, the subject is actually doing the verb. Example: You wrote this paper. This sentence in the passive voice would be: This paper was written by you.

Backgrounders – supplies supplemental information for a news release or media kit. Should be unnecessary but relevant information that bolsters the story but isn’t vital. For example, a full biography of a key individual, visual aids, or fact sheets.

Blogs – a blog, as defined by “thenewsmanual.net” is an online commentary often written by individuals about their hobbies, interests, etc.

Brochures – typically a single piece of paper folded into panels, brochures do not tell a whole story, but merely deliver highlights. They often are educational and have a very specific audience and purpose.

Clutter – In advertising, clutter refers to the plethora of messages out there that consumers face each and every day. The question is, how will your message cut through the clutter and be the one that stands out?

Dateline – this is how you traditionally begin a news story, and consists of capital letters and a dash (for example: BURLINGTON, Jan 1st –). Datelines always give the location, and occasionally the date as well.

E-Blasts – mass-produced emails that are sent out to a targeted list of recipients. Think of the emails that go to your spam folder – most of those are E-blasts – but they can also be used for fundraising efforts!

Inverted Pyramid – this is a term used to describe how to best write newsworthy information. The idea is that the “who, what, when, where, and why” of the story will be the base of the pyramid, and start any good news story. This will immediately be followed by other important details, and trail off into unnecessary but relevant information.

Jargon – The Miriam-Webster dictionary defines jargon as “the language used for a particular activity or by a particular group.” Most of the definitions on this page are examples of journalistic or communicative jargon. They are words that people outside of communications would understand in a different way, or not at all.
Lede – this is journalism jargon for a “hook,” or an introductory sentence. It should be gripping, and should make the reader want to keep reading.

Media – Technically the plural of “medium” the media are “the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, etc., that reach or influence people widely” (as defined by dictionary.com).

Media Kit – A media kit is, in a sense, an expanded news release. It will include backgrounders, brochures, photo opportunities, fact sheets, and any other relevant information concerning your subject. It can be printed, but is usually offered in a digital form - either online or on a CD.

News Release – A news release is a document that conveys newsworthy information to the news media. It is written in a ready-to-publish format and is very short and concise. It is not a promotion for your business or service, but important, informative, and relevant to a specific audience. News releases will be sent to journalists and media stations in the hopes that your story will be broadcasted to their audience. Think of it as a tip off to a great story. You’re saying to them “listen up! You should tell your audience about this!”

Nutgraf – an abbreviation for “nutshell paragraph,” the nutgraf is the paragraph following a lede that includes why the story is newsworthy. It is explanatory and informative.

-30- or ### - these symbols are found centered, at the bottom of the page, and signify the end of a news release. If you have multiple pages, “-more-“ will be at the bottom of each page until the end.

Professor Interview

Professor Interview

Here’s what UVM professor Joyce Hendley has to say about writing in Public Communication. You heard it here, straight from the top!

What have you noticed makes a PCOM piece really stand out from others?

Pieces written for public communication piece are eminently understandable. They’re always written with an awareness of their audience, and speak in the language of their readers. They get to their points clearly and concisely, without wasting their readers’ time. The writing is vivid and creative, but not just for creativity’s sake. It’s creative in order to be understood, because that’s what communication is all about.

What makes you go “wow” when reading a student paper? In a good way!

If the first paragraph is engaging, surprising, or otherwise pulls me in and makes me want to read more, I know I’m probably in the hands of a great writer.

Journalists call these opening sentences a lede, and a great lede is all-important no matter what you’re writing – from a news story to a business letter. Often it’s the only part of a
piece that gets read in today’s media-saturated reading world, so it had better be strong. When a student has taken the time to carefully craft a lede, the rest of the story falls into place much more smoothly.

In a bad way?

If a paper states the same information over and over again just to fill a required word length, or uses overly formal language in an attempt to sound impressive, I get out my (dreaded) red pen. Students often have a hard time breaking the high-school habit of trying to please teachers by adding lots of words, especially SAT-worthy words. Who talks that way? Who wants to read that way?

I’d rather read three paragraphs of well-chosen words that get to the point clearly, than three pages of filler words and repeats.

What can turn a good piece into a great piece?

In a word, time. Taking the time to plan what you’re going to write first, whether it’s an outline or an “elevator speech”- like summary, so that you’re not treading water when you finally start writing. Taking the time to write at least two drafts, because you will find things to fix every time. Lastly, leaving enough time to edit and polish, so that the final piece is a pure distillation of what you meant to say.

In other words, don’t wait until the day before a deadline to start writing.

Any other advice for writing in Public Communication?

Write in as much detail, and as much length, as you think your subject needs. Then cut it by at least half. (Sorry, you have to be a ruthless copy editor to produce good writing.)

Read it over to yourself, aloud. Better yet, have someone else read it aloud as you listen. You’ll be amazed at how many glitches, awkward phrasing, and unnecessary words you catch this way.