

Writing News Releases & PSAs

You may be called upon to write a **news release** about your program's activities, interesting news, or important events. News releases may accompany letters of correspondence, or they may be distributed to media outlets by themselves. In either case, the content of the news release should **stand alone**. This means that in case a cover letter is lost, the news release would contain the information that a reporter needs to follow-up on the story.

A news release provides reporters with the basics they need to develop a news story. In large cities, television stations and newspapers receive dozens of news releases a day. Here are some suggestions to get better *play* from your news release:

- **Target smaller newspapers, TV stations, or radio stations.** They are more apt to use "community" news.
- **Send the release to a particular person at a media outlet.** Don't just send it to the "Editor." Send it to a "*somebody*" (and make sure you spell the person's name correctly!). It's a good idea to send the release to the person who likely would cover the event.
- **Establish a rapport with the person who covers the types of event you promote.** Find out the names of your business writer, city reporter, or youth and community affairs correspondent.
- **Write your news release in one of two formats:** tip sheet or news story. Some people will combine the two formats and have a tip sheet at the top of a news release and a more detailed news story at the bottom.

Regardless of the format you choose, your news release **must identify a contact person**, in case a reporter wants more information. You must name a **contact person** and **phone number** at the top of the news release. It's also a good idea to list the writer of the release as a contact person.

Section 1: Tip sheets

The **tip sheet** presents the reporter's six basic questions in an easy-to-read format. The six questions are referred to by the news media as the **5 W's and H** for "*who, what, when, where, why and how.*" In this format, you would write the following:

Who: Organization's name

What: What's going on?

When: When is the event?

Where: Where is the event taking place?

Why: Why is the event taking place?

How: How is the event significant/important? (Sometimes this is not included.)

Example Tip Sheet

Who: Gainesville High School Band Boosters

What: Annual garage sale

When: Saturday, December 3, 8 a.m. to noon

Where: Gainesville High School Gym

Why: Raise money for band uniforms

Section 2: News story releases

The **news story** format is written in just the same way that reporters write news stories, and it provides more details than the tip sheet format. News story format releases are frequently used in newspapers and magazines in the exact form in which they were sent (especially if it's a small-circulation newspaper or magazine), with little or no editing. This format tends to be longer than the tip sheet. If you do write a news story format news release, you should emulate newswriting style. Here are some elements of newswriting style to keep in mind:

- **Lead** – The first paragraph. It is used to grab the reader's attention.
- **5 W's and H** – The most important of the questions should be answered in the lead. Others are answered later in the story.
- **Short paragraphs** – Paragraphs run one to two sentences in length. Rarely do you see paragraphs of more than three sentences.
- **Quotations** – The exact words of someone talking. It's a good idea to use quotations to bring "life" to your story.
- **Inverted pyramid style** – You want to include the most important information first, followed in descending order by less-important information.

Example News Release

Barn Owls May Help Solve Everglades' Rodent Problems

BELLE GLADE, FLA. – To help rid the Everglades Agricultural Area of destructive rodents, researchers at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences are hoping to increase the number of barn owls in South Florida.

Rodent pests, primarily cotton rats and marsh rabbits, can cause up to \$30 million in damage annually to the area's 750,000 acres of sugarcane, rice and vegetable crops. In sugarcane fields, rodents cause a direct loss by devouring the millable portion of the plant, the stalk containing the desired sucrose. But indirect losses due to stand reductions and harvesting losses may be even more substantial, said Richard Raid, an associate professor of plant pathology at the UF/IFAS Everglades Research and Education Center in Belle Glade.

“In the past, growers relied principally on chemicals to control excessive rodent populations, but rodenticides are short-lived and have to be reapplied,” Raid said. “Rodents can become bait shy, rendering chemicals less effective.”

With the current emphasis on “sustainable agriculture,” Raid has joined with Greg Hendricks, a wildlife biologist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, to look for a more environmentally sound method of rodent control. Their cooperative efforts have focused on one of nature’s most efficient rodent predators – the barn owl.

“The indigenous barn owl is very effective in preying on such agricultural pests,” Hendricks said, “with a single nesting pair capable of eliminating more than 1,000 rodents per year. But barn owl populations in the EAA remain far below optimum because of a shortage of suitable nesting sites.”

Hendricks said that while barn owls readily accept man-made structures, such as barns, silos, pole sheds and church steeples, as nesting sites, urbanization, farm consolidation and building modernization have all taken a toll on historical barn owl nesting sites and natural habitat.

With the help of Florida’s sugarcane industry, Raid and Hendricks are looking at the use of man-made nesting boxes as a way of enhancing barn owl populations. In a cooperative effort by UF/IFAS, the USDA/NRCS and Wellington Community High School, studies have shown that barn owls will readily colonize one of several nesting box models selected by Raid and constructed by environmentally minded high school students.