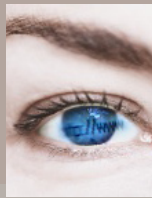


## Grabbing the headlines

How to write a press release that gets noticed



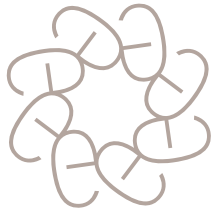
## Where people look online

Web users prioritise headlines over pictures



## Quick tips

Executive summaries that do your report justice



**emphasis**  
business writing trainers

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# Write Away e-bulletin

September 2010

## Put your readers first



Reader focus: remember your audience

It's strange, but true: many people simply forget their readers in their hurry to start writing. They launch headlong into a work writing assignment without even sparing a thought for the poor souls they're writing for.

But unless you're jotting down notes to yourself, the chances are whatever you're penning will have an audience in mind. So keep them in mind. You're much more likely to get the response you want.

This is just one of the pearls of writing wisdom contained in the second edition of *The Write Stuff*,

the Emphasis style guide, which is published today. You can win a copy in this month's competition (see page 8; the answer is buried in one of this month's stories, so read on).

### Get your writing read

The best way to focus your attention on your readers' needs is by asking yourself these three questions:

1. Why am I writing this?
2. Who is it for?
3. What am I trying to say?

**Continued on page 8 »**

## Ban the bull

In something of a first in the (admittedly brief) history of *Ban the bull*, we are stumped.

Generally, on finding an example of business bull, we like to have a go at rewording it so that its message can be grasped in one seamless, pain-free reading.

But take this specimen, lifted from the British Airways online booking regulations:

'Cancellations any time ticket is non-refundable. Note – where this fare is combined with another fare the cancellation policy of each fare component will apply changes any time changes not permitted. Note – a change is a date/or flight/or routing change or upgrade where this fare is combined with another fare the highest penalty of any of the changed fare components will apply.'

So... is the ticket refundable... or not? Answers on a postcard, please.

The only advice we can offer here is that using a forward slash ('/' or an 'oblique' as we called it in pre-internet days) makes 'or' unnecessary – or vice versa. But that is little to no help when you're still left wondering how

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## Ban the bull

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changes might be applied when any time changes are not permitted.

Moreover, we can't even take credit for finding this one. It was sent in to *The Guardian* by none other than the famous atheist, Richard Dawkins. And if an Oxford Doctor of Science with 11 honorary doctorates can't unravel it, what hope is there for the rest of us?

And, as another *Guardian* reader chipped in:

'I hope Richard Dawkins realises that his quote from the BA regulations makes the *Book of Revelation* sound like crystal-clear plain English.'

Amen to that.

### Continue the campaign

And, don't forget: if you ever find yourself baffled by some bewildering business-speak, send it to us so we can shine a light on it. There's a copy of the new second edition of our style guide, *The Write Stuff*, in it for you.

### Open your mind with an open course

If you're hungry for more advice to improve your writing, then try one of our courses that are open to everyone:

- High-impact business writing – 13 October and 16 November 2010. [Book now](#)
- High-impact tender and sales proposal writing – 5 October 2010. [Book now](#)

These courses take place at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 10 Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London, WC1H 0XG.

To book, call us on +44 (0)1273 732888, send us an enquiry using our [contact form](#) or book online using the links above.

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### Something niggling you?

Why not put your question to our expert trainers at the **Write Here** forum?

[www.writing-skills.com/resources/forum](http://www.writing-skills.com/resources/forum)



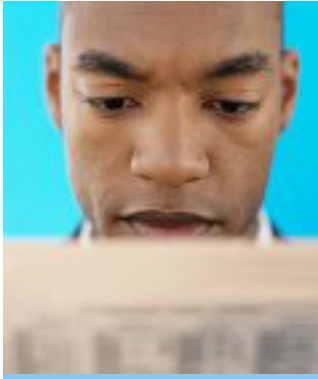
### Stuck on your sales proposal?

Spare a few minutes for our audio tips at the **Write On** podcast.

[www.writing-skills.com/podcast](http://www.writing-skills.com/podcast)

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## Grabbing the headlines

Capturing the attention of journalists is no mean feat, particularly in our unshockable internet age. But getting time-pressed journalists to sit up and take notice is a lot to do with how you present your story (and if it's newsworthy, of course). And whether you want to make waves in the world or merely catch some extra interest for your company, without a (sea)worthy press release you'll be sunk.

Fortunately, if you follow these guidelines, you'll be well on your way to making the news (and getting you or your colleagues ready for a close-up).

### Pack a punchy headline

Your heading needs to be snappy and intriguing, to catch the eye of time-poor journalists. Just don't be misleading.

You might draw readers in with a line like, 'People from Mars land in Scotland', but they'll probably be rather dismissive when they find the article is about a confectionery company's pitch to build a factory in Glasgow.

Note, however, that the publication itself will almost certainly not use your headline, for two reasons. First, it will have sub-editors who will write a headline to fit the space available on the page. Second, they won't want to risk using the same headline as everyone else.

### So what's the story?

The first line is the most important, and by the end of it the reader should know the thrust of the story – and be raring to read on. It needs to be obvious from the very first line why your release is newsworthy. So pick an angle that might spark some interest. An angle-less press release will sound wishy-washy and unfocused.

Be brutal: look at your opening paragraph and ask

yourself 'so what?' – because that's what journalists will do. Pinpointing why people should care about the story is the key to finding a successful angle.

And lead with the facts: don't imagine that busy journalists will wade through piles of context and background to dig out the hidden story (save that for the 'notes for editors' at the end; see below). The same goes for your sentences: put the primary clause first. So write:

*Budding young thespians will soon have their very own theatre, thanks to a celebrity-backed fundraising event held on Brighton beach by local charity LIFE*

rather than:

*Thanks to a celebrity-backed fundraising event held on Brighton beach by local charity LIFE, budding young thespians will soon have their very own theatre.*

### What's new?

News: the clue's in the name. For it to be news, it needs to be new – at the very least, a new spin on an older story. Get the word 'today' or 'now' into the first line if you possibly can. And avoid using specific dates – these put an immediate expiration date on your writing (you can put any historical facts into 'notes for editors').

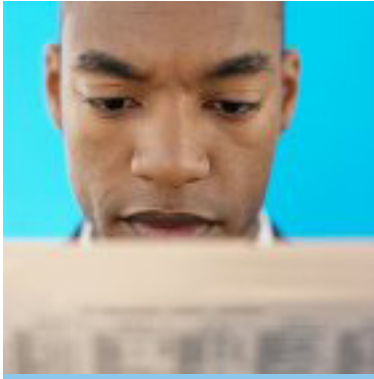
Use the present tense as much as you can – it puts you right in the middle of the action. Or show you've got insight (and possibly a man on the inside) by using the future tense.

Of course, sometimes you'll be writing about a past event – in which case use the present perfect tense ('have' + past participle), which implies something more current that may even still be going on.

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# Grabbing the headlines

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For example:

*Brighton celebrities have helped raise £20,000 by taking part in a trampolining marathon in full evening dress, to fund drama projects for local underprivileged children*

versus

*Brighton celebrities recently helped raise £20,000 by taking part in a trampolining marathon in full evening dress, to fund drama projects for local underprivileged children.*

### Structure for success

There is a formula for structuring news stories – one followed by newspapers the world over. It's based on the way most people actually read news articles: often stopping after the second paragraph. Naturally, you'll hope that your press release will be voraciously torn through from end to end, but just in case it isn't, your reader needs to know what's happened pretty early on.

So, you ask, WHAT's the formula? Well, yes:

**What's happened**

**How it happened**

**Amplify**

**Tie up loose ends**

Build your press release around this structure and you will guide the reader seamlessly through your take on the event, and – hopefully – right to the end. Limit your

story to one side of A4 (generous font size and line spacing) to make this even more of a sure thing.

### Can I quote you?

Quotes will enliven your writing, so don't waste them. Make the most of having a genuine voice in the piece by picking something that brings out the human interest side of the story.

Avoid anything that sounds clichéd and try to dig out something with some emotion behind it. 'It was a wonderful evening,' is pretty uninspired. Contrast this with:

*'It was both wonderful and hilarious. Now not only can I tell my kids that they'll get to perform on a real stage, but also that I saw Zoe Ball bouncing in her ball gown.'*

If the press release is from your company, try to include a quote from a third party, as well as from your company representative. It will give the story more kudos and objectivity in journalists' eyes.

### Signing off

Use the word 'Ends' (centred) to indicate the end of your press release, then add the subhead 'Media enquiries' to indicate who journalists should contact for more information or to set up an interview with someone. The contact details may be those of your PR agency (if you have one) or of a company representative.

### Notes for editors

Most press releases include 'notes for editors'

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## Quick tips: writing executive summaries



You may have just written the best report of your career, but it's vital that your executive summary is at least as gripping: it'll be all some of your readers have time to read.

Still, for those of you equally short on time, try our audio tips to hear trainer Kathy Gemmell explain how to write an executive summary that does your report justice .

Three minutes is all it will take to find out:

- how long it should be
- what to put in, and what to leave out
- how to achieve the perfect structure.

For more top tips in a jiff, try our [Knowledge Bank](#).

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## Grabbing the headlines

(put these on page two – maximum half a page – with your main story ending on page one). This is the place to put information about your company and any relevant background information about the event you're hoping to get coverage for.

This needs to be fairly short with numbered points:

1. The Local Initiative for Future Entertainers (LIFE) charity was founded in Brighton in 2000. Its aims include cutting delinquency among young people by encouraging them into local drama projects.
2. The organisation's most high-profile campaign to date was its 2004 'Get a LIFE, get on stage' programme, which had support from Cate Blanchett and Richard Attenborough.
3. Zoe Ball is a Brighton-based television and radio personality best known for her work on the children's TV show *Live & Kicking* in the 1990s. She is married to DJ Norman Cook (aka Fatboy Slim).

### And finally

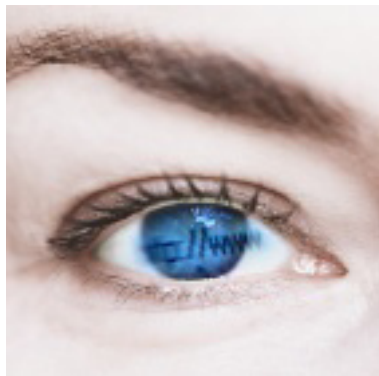
Double-check you haven't put anything in your release that could result in a newspaper putting a creative – and quite possibly unwanted – spin on your story. And proofread thoroughly. Journalists have an in-built intolerance of poor English.

**Emphasis offers an in-company [Writing for the media course](#), which explores how to write press releases, feature articles and news.**

**Call us on +44 (0)1273 732 888 or [email us](#) to find out more.**

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## Where people look online

Recent eyetracker research reveals that users of news websites look at the headlines first, rather than the images.

The study, called *Eyetrack III*, from The Poynter Institute in the US, looks at how people's eyes move, focus and skip while reading the sites.

It found that people zoomed in on headlines first, although they tended to read only the first few words of the headline. Similarly, they scanned down the left-hand menu of headlines until something prompted them to read on.

This and other findings from the research have important implications for those involved in creating online content. That people are attracted by headlines first online (as opposed to in print, where photos are generally viewed first, according to a 1990 study from the same institute) highlights the importance of gripping online readers in the first few words. The research also found that people devote an average of less than one second to scanning a headline, so your words need to captivate visitors almost instantly.

Short and snappy headlines are clearly the order of the day when it comes to attracting and – more importantly – keeping website visitors. There are implications for email writing too. Subject lines should be fairly short and as self-explanatory as possible, with the key words first.

### **Text: bigger is not always better**

Surprisingly the study found that smaller fonts encouraged people to focus and read content,

rather than just scan it. This finding seems a little counter-intuitive, but suggests that if you want people to read closely, making the text size smaller may be a good idea.

Obviously, this could be taken too far: try not to induce squinting, but choosing a small(ish) font may encourage your visitors to read more closely. People tended to just scan those news websites using large fonts.

Paragraphs, too, should err on the side of short. The research found that people focused on shorter paragraphs twice as often as they did on long ones.

### **Images: faces and click-throughs**

Although they weren't the first thing the study participants looked at, pictures did tend eventually to draw the eye. And the bigger the image, the more attention it got. Seventy per cent viewed an average size photo, compared with a postage stamp sized picture, which caught the eye of only ten per cent. Pictures of 'clean, clear' faces were the biggest draw (though not on stamps, presumably).

Many of the test subjects tried to click on photos – even though it got them nowhere. Picture links that lead somewhere useful could be a good way to cash in on this apparent reflex. And it's an area that is often underutilised or overlooked when creating online content.

### **Be careful with 'visual breaks'**

Those participating in the study often didn't read

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## Where people look online

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blurbs beneath an underlined headline, and researchers found a similar phenomenon with adverts. Adverts were read less frequently if they were separated from editorial content and preceded by white space or a rule. So use lines, rules and other 'visual breaks' with care.

### Eyetracking and the future

The process of eyetracking, which – you've guessed it – tracks and records a person's eye movements while they are reading, has advanced greatly in the last 20 years. Where subjects once had to wear cumbersome (and, frankly, unflattering) camera headgear while under observation, now the technology consists of a small video camera, which is placed under the computer monitor being viewed. From there it locks onto and records the subject's gaze, making for a more natural experience and therefore providing more realistic results.

The researchers themselves point out that research in this area is far from exhaustive (test subject groups tend to be quite small and variables are not always tightly controlled), but they'd like to see it continue.

'We hope that *Eyetrack III* is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a beginning of a wave of eyetracking research that will benefit the news industry,' say Steve Outing and Laura Ruel, the study's project managers.

And with over 1.73 billion people currently logging on worldwide and the paperless office potentially just around the corner, it looks like this area of research is definitely something we should all keep an eye on.

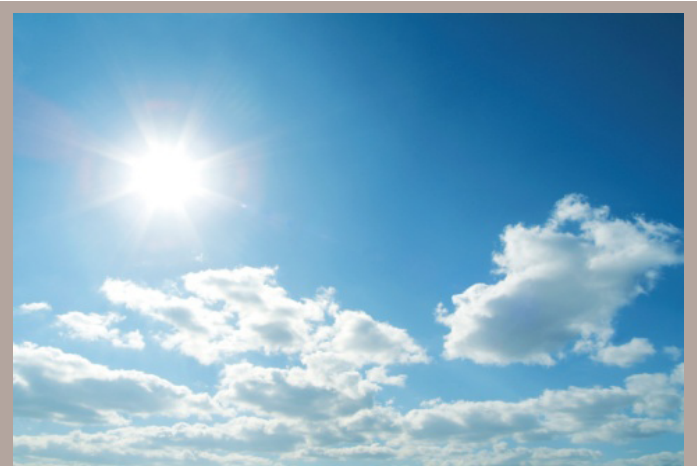
**Emphasis offers an in-company course, called Writing web content with clout, which explores the specific skills required to write compelling web copy. Call us on +44 (0)1273 732 888 or email us to find out more.**



### In need of writing inspiration?

Try our free tips and advice at the **Knowledge Bank**.

[www.writing-skills.com/resources/knowledge-bank](http://www.writing-skills.com/resources/knowledge-bank)



### See things clearly

Confused messages? Let us examine your organisation's writing in detail with a full communications audit.

<http://www.writing-skills.com/in-company-consultancy/communications-audit/>

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## Put your readers first

This may seem obvious, but it's easy to start your writing off at a gallop, harping on about your processes, your company's history or any other tangent that isn't relevant to your readers. This is where you might lose them. If you focus on your objectives and your readers' needs, you'll be off to a great start.



### Towards great writing

*The Write Stuff* offers principles of readability to get your writing really working for you. It's crammed with advice on getting the most out of email, writing for the web and cross-

the-pond communications; plus it lays the foundations for saying what you mean, helping you to punctuate perfectly, tackle problem words and avoid complex jargon.

We trust that it will help you with your writing, because we trust it to help us with ours. Here at Emphasis, it is vital that we are as clear in our thinking and writing as we urge others to be. This guide is designed to help us achieve this. It can help you achieve this too.

### Win *The Write Stuff*

Our first edition proved so popular that we all but ran out. But now our style guide is back for a second edition and is even easier to access with a new comprehensive index. However, from now on the hard copy will be available only to Emphasis course delegates. Everyone else will be very welcome to the all-new PDF version, which will be available shortly.

But if you'd prefer to have a copy you can physically flick through and display proudly on your desk, we have 50 copies of *The Write Stuff (second edition)* to give away to the first *Write Away* readers to send in the correct answer to our competition.

Here's the question (the answer is buried in one of our *Write Away* stories):

***What's the average time visitors to news websites devote to scanning a headline, according to recent research? Is it (a) two seconds, (b) less than one second, or (c) three and a half seconds?***

Just fill in our [contact form](#) and select 'Style guide' from the 'I'm interested in' drop-down menu, leaving your answer in the 'message' field. And don't forget to leave your address.

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