

# THE SPIN PROJECT


149 Natoma Street  
 San Francisco, CA 94105  
 phone 415.227.4200  
<http://www.spinproject.org>  
[info@spinproject.org](mailto:info@spinproject.org)

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The right words for writing

## Writing for Communications

Knowing how to write powerfully can help propel your issue to the headlines and build power behind your position.

Great prose writers are not automatically great PR writers—writing for PR requires a different approach than writing an essay or a piece of fiction. PR writing is goal-driven and directed toward specific strategic audiences. PR writing cannot afford to take its time setting a scene; rather, it gets to the most important information right away and then fills in the details. In that spirit, here are the cardinal characteristics of PR writing:

- Goal-oriented: aims strategic messages at target audiences through their preferred media outlets
- Contains news: meets criteria of newsworthiness as defined by target media outlet’s editors
- Inverted pyramid: built on an upside-down pyramid, placing the most important stuff at the top
- Has been edited and commented on by more than one person: a piece of writing will almost never be as good as it could be if it is passed around; that said, don’t get weighed down in a painful process of writing by committee

The four main written tools communicators use when working with the media are each described in more detail in the rest of this tutorial:

- Media Advisories
- Press Releases
- Op Eds
- Letters to the Editor

### Heads Up! Media Advisories

Media advisories are notices sent to media outlets to alert them to the news you plan to make soon. These are extremely simple and should cover one-half to three-quarters of a page. Editors, reporters, and producers are extremely busy and often only have 10 seconds to glance at your release. Be sure to include only the information they need in order to decide that they will cover your news. If they want more informa-



tion, they will contact you and look at your website.

An effective media advisory has these elements:

- A punchy, direct headline and lead paragraph that establish newsworthiness with clear “hooks”
- The “Who, What, When, Where, and Why” of your news, written in short sentences and paragraphs
- A clear indication of the exciting, camera-friendly visuals you’ve built into your event
- Contact name, office and cell phone numbers, and email addresses for two points of contact for the event
- Your organization’s logo
- Your web address or a link to your online press room
- A designation of whether it is for immediate release or “embargoed”—not for public consumption until a set date
- A boilerplate, or 3-4 sentence stock description of your organization, at the end (italicize this to set it apart)
- No jargon, acronyms, or policy-speak that your target audience would not immediately understand

**The Whole Story:  
Press Releases**

A press release is longer than a media advisory but never more than two pages. A press release is typically written like a news story—containing quotes, “color,” and background—and summarizes your news. It is written as if it were to appear in the morning newspaper—though, of course, that will not happen, since most media will not run your release verbatim. The press release is distributed on the day (or the day before) you make your news; it should be included in a press kit to be handed out at a news event.

**THE 5 C’S**

A well-written release is:

- Compelling
- Concise
- Correct
- Clear
- Complete

**Reality Check**

Reporters throw away or ignore many—if not most—press releases. Why? because they:

- Do not contain any news
- Do not have contact information or other key data to make the reporter’s job easier
- Are filled with typos and other embarrassments, causing the reporter to doubt the integrity of the organization that sent it
- Are confusing, poorly written or worse—boring

A press release contains all the information required in a Media Advisory, and adds to that information stories and quotes. Quote key spokespeople whose identities resonate with your target audience. The identity of the spokesperson can be more important than their words. The quotes in your press release don’t need to always come from an executive director. Rather, consider presenting quotes from sources whose identities frame your news, such as people affected by your issue or an unlikely source not usually associated with your issue. For examples of News Releases and Media Advisories, see our [tipsheet](#).

**Respond and React:  
Letters to the Editor**

The “Letters” section is consistently one of the most-read parts of any publication. Fortunately for us, it’s also accessible to community organizations—many of us have the unique perspectives publications seek in soliciting letters.

Letters to the editor are simple pieces of writing that your organization should submit at least a few times a year. When should you write a letter?

- To respond and react to news items that very recently appeared in a publication
- To correct sloppy, offensive, incorrect, or simplistic coverage
- To praise solid journalism and attention to your issue
- To raise your issue when a publication has consistently ignored it (only write these letters if you can demonstrate that you’ve consistently and persistently pitched your story to the publication)

Most publications will publish their requirements for letter submission or post them on their website, but

the following are general guidelines for effective letters to the editor:

- Short and concise (150-200 words)
- Three or four short paragraphs, three lines per paragraph maximum
- Respond to coverage of a specific issue, and reference the article, series, or column you're reacting to
- Personalize it! Tell a personal story or offer a perspective that only someone in your unique position could offer
- Include your name, date, and location
- Follow up to ensure publication

### **Your Message, Uncut:**

#### **The Op Ed**

Op Ed pieces appear on the page opposite the Editorials page. These 500- to 800-word essays are tremendous opportunities because they allow you almost total control over the message. Unlike advertisements, the other communications tools that allow for high message control, op eds won't break your budget and they offer enough space to tell a story and explain an issue. Follow these steps to craft a powerful op ed:

- Pitch to opinions or op ed editor before sending (major outlets require exclusivity in using the piece; smaller outlets may only ask you don't pitch anyone else in their area)
- Keep it concise; the shorter the better
- First person, second person
- State specific point of view clearly and at the beginning of the piece
- Tell personal stories; they're the most powerful communications tool you have
- Tie your issue to current big news

Finally, choose a signatory (the person who claims to have written the piece) whose identity powerfully frames your issue. The identity of the spokesperson can be more important than the words of their message.