

Media Guide

If you have questions about contact information for specific media outlets or reporters in your area, please contact Tanja (tanja@greenway.org) at the ECGA main office. She has access to a database of reporters that can make your search easier.

This guide was developed with materials from the Green Media Toolshed.

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Writing a Media Advisory

A media advisory, also called a press advisory, is used to announce an event, such as a press conference, which you would like the media to attend.

How do I write a media advisory?

- A media advisory is designed to bring an event to the media's attention and entice journalists to attend. It should be written in a simple form, including all pertinent information - the what/topic, where, when, and who/speakers for the event - without getting bogged down in extraneous details.
- Keep it short! A media advisory should NEVER be more than one page. Include a catchy headline and lead sentence. Identify the newsworthiness of the event: Will you release new research findings? Announce a new trail opening or signing? Encourage local government action?
- Be clear about what journalists can expect to take place. Give one fact or nugget of information to make them want more, but do not include all the facts of the story. Reporters are advised about an event or happening with the expectation that they will come and cover the story in person.
- A contact name and number for questions should be posted clearly at the top. Advisories are printed on the sponsoring group's letterhead.
- Special TV tip: broadcasters need to know if there will be good visual opportunities. For instance, if you are holding a press conference at a playground with 50 kids, write that at the bottom of the advisory.

Where to send the media advisory

Beat reporters - they cover a specific issue or organization at daily and weekly papers, TV stations, radio stations, magazines, and wire services.

Assignment editors - they determine whether a television or radio station (radio stations sometimes call them "news directors") will call a story and also decide which journalist to send. Alert the assignment editor to next day or same day news.

Futures editors - They look at news events for the upcoming week and determine whether a television station is likely to cover them.

City/metro editor, bureau chief, or national editor - they determine whether a newspaper will likely cover an upcoming event and may decide who to send or pass the information on to the appropriate beat reporter.

Daybooks - these are calendars compiled by news wires such as AP, UPI, and Reuters. Newspapers and other services also sometimes have these. Check daily papers for daybooks as well.

How to send your advisory

Faxing is still the best way to send your advisory or release to the newsroom. It is best to include the name and title of the reporter you are trying to reach. The title can be important, since reporters often change beats. The person who distributes the faxes will pass the information to the appropriate person if he/she has the correct title as a guide. E-mail is another option, though only if a reporter requests this.

Try not to send more than two advisories to the same fax number. This is unnecessary and clogs the machine for other uses. If there are more than two reporters at an outlet or fax number whom you wish to reach, do them a favor and address only one piece of paper to all of them.

Always follow up with a phone call.

Writing a Press Release

Press releases are used to let the media know about breaking news from a press briefing, the release of a report or other newsworthy event. The idea is to provide reporters with a story containing enough information for them to write stories of their own.

How to write a release

- Include all the facts necessary for a reporter to file a story, understanding that most reporters will also be making some follow-up calls before finalizing any story.
- Write it in an inverted pyramid format: Conclusion first, then supporting facts, with the least interesting information at the end. The lead is used to grab a reporter's attention but should also concisely summarize your news. Often a quote from a spokesperson is also included, although most newspapers rarely print quotes used in press releases. The last sentence or two should reiterate the mission statement of the organization announcing the news.

- Releases should end with ### at the end as a signal to reporters that they have the entire document. Releases that are more than one page in length should state -more- or -continued- on the bottom of the first page so that reporters look for the next page.
- At the top of the second page, use a one-word "slug" to indicate it is the second page of the release. For example, "greenway/page 2." This is helpful should the two pages become separated at the fax machine.
- Releases are sent on the sponsoring organization's letterhead with a date of release and a contact person's name clearly listed at the top, along with a phone number where journalists can reach the contact.
- Releases can be embargoed until a specific date and time. This means that the information is restricted and that reporters can use it to prepare a story, but cannot publish it until the specified time. Embargoing news allows the media to get a report or announcement early enough that they can evaluate it, use some of its information to write a story, and still file it in a timely fashion. Broken embargoes are not common, but can happen.

Where to Send Your Release

- Beat reporters who cover your issue, e.g. environment, education, etc.
- Assignment editors at television or radio stations.
- Radio and TV producers or bookers who schedule for shows that may cover your issue
- In the case of a release that follows a press event, the release should be sent out to the same list of reporters who received the advisory. You may also want to add others if new angles develop.
- You should also include the release in press kits handed out at your media event or mailed to journalists who express interest.

Do not follow up a press release with a phone call – reporters often find this annoying. The release should contain enough information on its own.

Writing a Pitch Letter

A pitch letter is necessary if you are planning to mail or fax information to journalists or editors encouraging them to write about your issue. A letter is different from a press release, and should address the journalist directly. If you're not sure which reporter would most likely be interested in your story, call the newspaper's news desk and ask. Remember that this letter may be replacing your phone pitch, so it is important to illustrate the newsworthiness of your issue and why you think a media outlet's readers or viewers will be interested.

Press Releases vs. Press Letters

Press releases are the best format when an organization is releasing news. However, everything an organization does or advocates for isn't necessarily breaking news. For non-breaking news communication with the media, consider sending a letter. This can introduce information for a "feature" story. Letters also serve to credential the organization and to pave the way for inclusion

in future articles on issues that the organization works on. The lists below should help you decide which is the better vehicle:

Press Releases

- Releases breaking news
- In specified format – the inverted pyramid (starts with the conclusion, then supports the conclusion.) Begins with an attention-grabbing lead. Tells the media who, what, when, where, why, and how, and often includes quotes from appropriate spokespeople.
- Contains timely information.
- Solicits immediate coverage.
- Included in the release are enough facts for an immediate story to be written with little or no legwork.
- It is essential to include a contact name and phone number.
- You shouldn't phone a reporter after sending a release. Reporters find this annoying. The release contains all they need if they want to follow-up.

Press Letters

- Introduces an organization, an idea, an opportunity for future coverage.
- Written for an individual, personalized to their interests or an outlet's interests.
- May be sent to 1 or 100 outlets with minor changes.
- Establishes a relationship between the organization and the outlet.
- Identifies good spokespeople on specific subjects.
- Introduces something that is upcoming, giving media a heads-up.
- Serves to "credential" an organization by identifying it as a good source of information on an issue.
- May be in response to a story covered by a specific reporter that contained some inaccuracies, or left out a vitally important point.
- Tends to focus less on generating immediate coverage and more on educating reporters.
- Information in the letter presents an opportunity to cover a feature or trend story. Encourages reporter to invest time to discover the facts.

Pitching a Story to the Local Media

There are many reasons you may want to pitch a story to the media. These include:

- You have an upcoming event
- There is an important local issue that community residents need to be aware of
- You want more people to know about the ECG
- You are seeking action from people on a vote or issue

Before developing your pitch, consider the following:

- Is your event or issue newsworthy?
- Is your event different from other local events? How?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- Why should people care about your event or issue?

Who to pitch to

If your story is local, you may pitch your story to a local, regional or state paper, a television or radio station, or magazine. Take time to research the website to find out who has written or covered stories on greenways, cycling, walking, etc in the past. You can also call the news desk and ask to speak to an editorial assistant. The editorial assistant should be able to help you figure out who will be most interested in covering your story. If you absolutely can't find a specific reporter to pitch your story to, you can always send your press release directly to the newsroom. Often they will pass it on to the most appropriate reporter.

Press Release or Advisory

If you have a press release or advisory, send this to the reporter after calling them if they request it. If you can't get hold of the reporter, send the release anyway. If you can, find out ahead of time if the reporter prefers email or fax. Most reporters will not open email attachments, so be sure to put the press release in the body of the email.

When to pitch

Make sure to give them at least a day or two lead time before your event. 3 or 4 days is better. It is best to call reporters in the morning or early afternoon, as they are usually on location or writing in the late afternoon and evening. Television media has assignment editors who staff newsroom phones during the day; schedule your calls to avoid the morning and evening newscasts. Reporters are generally on strict deadlines. When you call, ask them if it is a good time to talk. If not, find out when is the best time to call back.

How to pitch

- When you call a reporter, identify yourself and the organization you are representing.
- Ask if it is a good time or ask if they are on "deadline." If it is not a good time to call, ask when a better time would be and make sure you follow-up.
- Leave a message if they don't answer, then try again later or the next day. Don't leave more than two messages.
- Be direct and to the point!
 - o You may only have 30 seconds to get them interested. Before you call, think of how you can get the reporter's attention and how to appeal to them. Focus on regional angles.
 - o Tie your story to something currently making headlines on a local or national level.
 - o Briefly explain what it is you are calling about and that you would like them to consider covering/writing a story on it.
- Be prepared to give answers to the reporter's questions, so learn your subject. If you do not have the answer, tell them you will find out and call them back as soon as you do.
- Let the reporter know about opportunities to speak to an authority figure or get a first-hand experience, such as coming out to see your volunteers in action.
- If you haven't already, ask if you can fax or e-mail additional information to them, such as a news release, fact sheet, or media kit.
- Give them your contact information and let them know they can call you with additional questions.
- Thank them for their time.

Sample pitch call script

Example: you are planning to participate in a local greenway event.

“Hello, my name is _____, and I’m with the East Coast Greenway Alliance. Is this a good time to talk?”

[**If not**...ask when to call back]

“I understand you are busy, when would be a better time to call back and discuss the East Coast Greenway?”

[**If so**... continue the conversation]

I wanted to let you know about a great event we are participating in on Thursday to promote the East Coast Greenway route through Rhode Island. Dozens of cyclists, walkers, and other greenway enthusiasts from the area will gather right outside Providence to celebrate the East Coast Greenway and National Trails Day by cleaning up the Cranston Greenway, having a group ride/walk, and then a BBQ to thank the volunteers. In addition, (notable official) will make an appearance and make short speech as well. We’d like to invite you to cover this event, and if you’d like, join us on our celebratory ride and BBQ.

(Here, you may be asked to elaborate more on the event and you can include data and stats)

I have additional information I’d like to send to you. Would you prefer me to fax or e-mail it?

Also, you can reach me at (phone number) with any questions.

Thanks very much for your time and consideration!”

Preparing for a Media Interview

If you know in advance that a reporter may call or approach you for an interview, be prepared! Usually reporters are on a deadline, so you will need to be ready to give answer questions at a moment’s notice.

Be prepared

Know your key phrases and the two or three messages you want to get across. If you don’t have a clear idea of what you want to say in the interview or how you want your message portrayed, chances are you won’t be happy with the results. What is your goal with this interview? What are the two or three key points you want to get across? Make sure you have facts and figures ready to back up your points.

Use the three C’s

- **Concise** - Your comments will likely be cut down to 5- 15 second clips or short sentences. Avoid lengthy explanations or run on sentences. Avoid using “like” “uh” or “um”. Feel free

to pause for a moment to gather your thoughts into a clear and concise statement. Keep your answers to no more than 20 seconds.

- **Conversational** - Avoid insider jargon. Use words and phrases that the average reader would understand. For example, when describing the condition of the greenway through your community:
 - o **No**- "The surface of the trail, which is primarily bituminous concrete and aggregate stone, was not damaged by this month's heavy rains and is still open for use."
 - o **Yes**- "Thankfully, the paved trail was not damaged by this month's heavy rains and is still open for use."
- **Catchy** - The reporter is primarily looking for a catchy phrase or sound bite. Be sure to provide her with many to choose from. If you feel you have made your point in an unclear or rambling manner, rephrase it and make your point again.

Say What You Want to Say

- *Don't Repeat the Reporter's Words.* You don't want to be baited into saying something you don't mean or want to say, and a question may be phrased in a negative manner. The question won't appear in the final version, but your answer will, so don't repeat it.
- *Don't Lose Your Cool.* A reporter may play devil's advocate just to get a colorful response. Don't give an angry or defensive response -- simply redirect your answer to one of your main points. *There is No Such Thing as "Off the Record."* If you don't want something reported, don't tell the reporter.
- *Don't Be Led Into Hypothetical Situations.* If the reporter says, "Assume that..." or "What if..." and you don't like the direction being taken, respond with something like: "I can't speculate on the unknown, however..." and restate one of your main points.
- *Don't Fill (Awkward) Silent Pauses.* Often a reporter will pause after you have responded to a question, waiting for you to elaborate. Don't feel the need to fill in the silent pauses (sometimes reporters are using this awkward pause to get you to say something you otherwise wouldn't); simply wait for the next question and insert one of your key points.

Be Friendly, Honest, and Yourself

Never lie. If you don't know the answer, say so, and then say you'll try to find out the information and get it to the reporter as soon as possible. Never respond to a question with "no comment." It sounds like you're hiding something. Rather, generously describe why you cannot specifically answer that question and direct the conversation back to one of your main points.

Reporters aren't your primary audience

Remember that reporters aren't your primary audience; the audience is your audience! Reporters are only conduits for your message. Use every opportunity to make your key points. You have more control over the interview than you think.

After the Interview

Give thanks. Write a note to the person who interviewed you, thanking them for their time and attention. Regardless of how the story comes out, you want them to know you appreciate the opportunity to talk the East Coast Greenway.

Writing a Letter to the Editor

The letters section of newspapers and magazines is one of the most-read sections of the publications. The high readership offers you a cost-effective solution to spread your message and to reach your target audiences.

- *Outlet Policies.* Outlets have rules that are important to consider when writing a letter to the editor. Common length restrictions are 250 to 300 words. Most require you to provide your name, address and telephone number so that you may be contacted to verify the letter before it is printed.
 - *Timing.* The chances your letter will be published increases if you coordinate your letter to refute, contribute to, or correct recently published pieces from the outlet. You can also write your letter in conjunction with current anniversaries, events and other news.
 - *Proper Reference.* If your letter is a response to a piece or in relation to a specific event, make note of this in your letter. Quote referenced headlines and date of publication near the beginning of your letter.
 - *Be concise.* Make sure the letter complements the broader strategy to move your target audience. How does the letter fit in your communications plan? Make your point.
 - *Know Your Facts.* You need to be able to verify any statistics or other facts if the outlet inquires.
 - *Control Outrage.* You may care to express outrage or dissatisfaction in your letter. This is acceptable as long as you maintain comprehensibility. If you are extreme, you will sacrifice credibility.
 - *Write in Good Times and Bad.* You do not have to limit your letter writing to times of adversity. If an outlet or event positively covers your issue, write a letter praising or thanking this coverage or support.
 - *Formatting.* The letter should be typed and double spaced.
 - *Write More Than One Letter.* Don't limit yourself to one outlet. Change the content of your letter to match the perceived audience of an outlet, the scope of the outlet, and the location or regional characteristics of the outlet.
 - *Many Angles.* Try writing your letter from different angles. Different angles reach different audiences and strike different chords on the same people. Diversify your approach to get through barriers while maintaining your objectives.
 - *Follow Up.* Clip published letters and send them to people that can pass them on to your target audience in case they missed them.
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Writing an Op-Ed

When your cause fails to find a supporting voice from your paper's editorial page, or if the editors have taken to denouncing your cause, you can write an Op-Ed to establish your message and explain the worthiness of your mission. It is a direct way to combat a negative message when your side of the story fails to be told. Many op-eds are written by syndicated columnists or the paper's own columnists; however, they are also written by local citizens, experts, leaders of organizations - people like you.

An op-ed, abbreviated from “opposite editorial” due to the tradition of newspapers placing such materials on the page opposite the editorial page, is similar in form and content to an editorial, but represents the opinion of an individual contributor, who is sometimes but not always affiliated with the publication.

- *Message.* Identify your reasons for writing an Op-Ed. Do you need to raise voter support for legislation? Are you trying to increase awareness of an issue? Understanding the reasons for writing the Op-Ed will help you hone the message and main points you should stress in the text.
- *Audience.* Knowing your audience (policy makers, seniors, people that fish, etc.) will help you decide which paper to target.
- *Outlet Rules.* Know where you plan to submit your Op-Ed and the requirements of the outlet, including word count, where and when to submit
- *Know the paper.* You should read the paper regularly to understand the editorial direction of the paper. They will not print a guest column that is merely echoing what another columnist has already written or what has already been articulated by the paper in an editorial. In fact, your best bet may be to write a column that takes direct exception to an editorial.
- *Timing.* Timing is the most important factor in submitting an op-ed. Is Congress or the state legislature about to cast a controversial vote? Is there an appropriate holiday or anniversary? Can you tie the op-ed to the release of a new report, a recent article, a popular movie, or event in your community? In many cases, it is best to submit your op-ed well in advance of a timely event, such as a news anniversary or important vote because editors plan their opinion pages a week or more in advance. When reacting to a news event, submit your piece as quickly as possible afterwards.
- *The Ask.* Consider the objective of your Op-Ed. Your piece should provoke discussion, controversy, and response. What do you want your target audience to do?
- *Get it Together.* With your objectives, target audience and purpose in mind, determine what background information is essential for the readers to understand if they are going to follow your argument. Develop a brief paragraph or two that explain this necessary background information. Make sure you know your facts – if you don’t get it right, you may discredit yourself and your organization.
- *Aim!* Focus on one issue in your Op-Ed and one clear action. Support your conclusion with three key points. Devote one paragraph to each supporting point. This paragraph breakdown will help maintain your focus and aid in effective organization of the Op-Ed as a unified piece.
- *Focus.* Identify and discuss the opposing side to your argument. Counter the opposing arguments with facts and point out other weaknesses in the opposing message. Explain why your position is stronger.
- *Fire!* Your opening line should not make your reader turn the page. Importance should be placed on drawing the reader to the article and making the reader review the entire article. The article should end with a bang, not a yawn. Drive the point home and sum up the argument.
- *Defend your position.* Your op-ed will total between 500 and 700 words. Your opening statement will take up about 25 words. Your conclusion will take up another 100 or so. The rest will be devoted to defending your opening statement. Use facts and statistics, but only

those that apply directly to your statement. Don't go off on tangents. You don't have space for that. Stay very, very, very focused. Introduce quotes from third parties. These would include documents, studies, surveys, public statements, white papers, books, articles and the like. And don't forget emotion. Facts provide the reasons to agree with the statement, but emotion provides the impetus to take action. No emotion, no action.

- *Propose a solution.* Wrap up your story by proposing at least one clear, bold solution to the problem you have identified. The proposal is what will brand you as an expert. Sidestep proposing a solution and you will lose your audience.
- *Check and recheck.* Make sure you have no spelling or grammar mistakes. Don't rely on the spell check on your computer; ask someone else to carefully read it. If there are mistakes in your piece, it will never make it past the editors.
- *Formatting.* 1. Use a common typeface, like Arial or Times, in 10 to 12 point type. Double space. 2. Write in short sentences. 3. Speak in a bold, active voice that leans upon nouns and verbs, not adjectives and adverbs. 4. Avoid jargon. 5. Put your name, address and phone number at the top of the page. 6. Suggest a headline based upon your lead paragraph. 7. Include a paragraph at the end that explains your qualifications.
- *Backup Support.* Submit your Op-Ed with a letter that provides your contact information and reasons why your article is timely and relevant to readers. Collaborating with a relevant public figure, policymaker, executive director, or advocate may maximize its impact on the audience. You might consider working with a relevant figure.
- *Follow up.* Call the following morning after submission to make sure they received the piece.
- *Keep Pushing.* Thank the outlet if your piece is run. If your piece is not run, do not give up. Try different angles, different outlets, and different time periods to run your Op-Ed. Keep your information updated with changing events and sentiment.

This section adapted from Green Media Toolshed and "Op-Eds: A Cost-Effective Strategy for Advocacy," by Denice Zeck and Edmund Rennolds. This guide is part of the series, "Strategic Communication for Nonprofits" published by the Benton Foundation and the Center for Strategic Communications.