

Doug Newsom
Bob Carrell

Public Relations Writing

form
& style

Fifth Edition



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Form and Style

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Texas Christian University

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care about communicating clearly and effectively**

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PREFACE

Since the last edition, a whole new medium has arrived on the public relations scene—in-time media or multimedia—old term, new application. The electronic delivery of and access to information is changing the way we communicate.

You have to accept the pervasiveness of cybermedia when you get a computer disk with your airline snack. Right? Or when the magazines people are talking about as “important” have names like *Wired* and *Internet World*. Or when you go into the library and the card files have been replaced with computers that list major references on CD-ROMs. Or when most business cards have e-mail addresses. We can remember when we added e-mail to this book and some responded that e-mail was the esoteric reserve of academics. Right now the Internet is the electronic superhighway that everyone is trying to get on. But even by the time this book is published, you may be working with some interactive electronic delivery on your television sets rather than your computer screens. Who knows?

For this new edition, then, besides responding to reviewers’ comments and students’ observations, we had to look at the technological leap institutions and individuals have taken in the past few years. You’ll find the influence of the new technologies all through the text—from more information on electronic research and fuller coverage of e-mail, to a discussion of Web pages and the place of CD-ROMs in media kits.

The influence of technology combined with social and economic trends created a need for major changes in some chapters, such as those on newsletters and annual reports. Some examples from the previous edition had to be scrapped because they are

passé. Others were retained because they are not only good examples, but also still timely.

One problem that we've had before regarding reproduction of examples actually grew worse. We often need examples taken directly from the computer screen. That's not new. (We can remember years ago when a reviewer challenged the term "computer graphics" and we had to include an illustration. Sounds rather quaint now.) What hasn't gotten much easier is taking "screen shots," that is, actually taking pictures from the screen.

The book's focus remains the same: to make its users competent wordsmiths, who will always find themselves employable because they can turn a phrase that tells a story for any medium, for any audience.

Their messages must survive all challenges both from official editors and from unofficial, self-appointed editors. These wordsmiths must be able to prove to employers and clients that their messages were effective, that they created awareness, changed perceptions and increased understanding.

Part One provides the background for all public relations writing tasks by explaining how this kind of writing is unique and by exploring the profession's legal and ethical obligations. It also examines the role of persuasion and emphasizes the need for research, the underpinning of all good writing.

Part Two, a review of basic writing principles, is getting more attention than we ever imagined when we first put it in the book. Students and teachers tell us it is critical. Students have said that they are exposed to so much "bad" writing that it's refreshing to find out there are ways to be clear and interesting. Some students have brought us some amazing examples of doublespeak that we'd like to include but, not surprisingly, getting permission seems to be a problem. A recent e-mail message from some colleagues, which asks that we include grammar, spelling and punctuation tests because their universities are just now putting such tests in place, is indicative that writing correctly remains a problem.

In Part Three students get their first exposure to the kinds of writing they will be doing on the job. Most of the writing they will do falls in the first category: memos, letters, reports and proposals. These make up the area they are most familiar with, so it's a good place to start. Students find out in the chapter on backgrounders and position papers that they will not put research papers behind them when they leave the university.

Part Four begins where some students imagine all public relations writing begins, with news releases. That is less and less the case, but knowing how to write news for print and broadcasting is essential whether or not you do it every day. The public relations writer has to do a better job of both reporting and writing than a media staff writer because what they are preparing competes with staff-generated copy. That's especially true of features. Having information immediately available electronically means you can write not only effectively but more efficiently and quickly.

Although some public relations people still prefer to have nothing to do with ad-

vertising, students had better learn the field. Increasingly the lines between advertising and editorial matter are blurred. That's especially true in cyberspace. Sometimes on a Web page it's difficult to figure out what's not advertising. The advantage of advertising is the control over the message's form, content and audience.

When you have a crisis, knowing what to do when and in which medium is essential. The message itself can become part of the crisis. Although many instructors believe students are not likely to get involved in crises, that's not been our experience. Some have had their first such experience in an internship when the organization they were working for had a crisis. It's an "all hands on deck" situation, and students wear their battle medals proudly.

The chapters on newsletters and brochures had to undergo some major changes. The people putting out newsletters now are the ones getting paid by subscribers to produce them, and it's a good field for beginners with desktop publishing skills. Brochures are still common, but their electronic manifestation is the Web page. Interactive media are much more interesting than brochures, but present a challenge for writers, who now have to work within a larger team and learn to think visually, at a minimum. Some Web pages even have sound.

Technology has affected organizational magazines, too, and all kinds of presentations. Presentations are getting a great deal more emphasis because technology has made them easier and because face-to-face encounters are still the most effective communication tools.

A major change has come in the function of annual reports, which are now first and foremost public relations tools, especially the new summary reports. Furthermore, many are available electronically, and why not since the SEC insists on getting them that way? There's been an increase in attention given the annual reports, but fewer public interest reports are being produced, perhaps because of budget cuts and new technology.

The CD-ROM would be a good way to offer a public interest report, but we haven't found any examples. Not yet. What we did find are media kits on CD-ROMs. Of course, the traditional packets of information are still around too, probably because of the cost and time involved in producing a CD-ROM.

However, using every medium at your disposal is important in planning a comprehensive campaign. What counts even more than when we first talked about it in previous editions is strategic planning for a campaign and message unity for maintaining credibility. We've left this chapter last because some instructors believe students are unlikely to get involved in a campaign, but that's not been our experience. Admittedly most of our students haven't been involved in international campaigns, but a Main Street arts festival or a library bond issue are local campaigns of some significance. It's good to know what to do and how to do it.

This edition, like all previous ones, has an exercise book so students can master the different writing tasks of public relations. The exercise book has some scenarios set in a fictional town to make writing easier for the students and grading simpler for the

instructor. Additionally, for instructors, there is a supplement that offers resource material and some suggested tests. What we don't include are "solutions" to the writing tasks because these can vary.

We do appreciate the graciousness of clients, business associates and friends who have allowed us to share examples with you our readers by granting permissions. We would like to thank Lewis DeSimone, project development editor, for his contributions to the new edition. We also wish to thank the reviewers who read carefully and offered constructive comments: R. John DeSanto, Ed.D., APR, Texas Tech University; Kathy R. Fitzpatrick, Southern Methodist University; Bruce L. Plopper, University of Arkansas at Little Rock; Michael Smith, La Salle University; and Rebecca Ann Wyatt, University of Michigan-Dearborn. We are grateful for our copyeditor, Madeleine Clarke, and our production coordinator, Julie Kranhold at Ex Libris.

D.N. & B.C.

CONTENTS

PART ONE

PR Writing: Role and Responsibility 1

CHAPTER 1 *Public Relations and the Writer 3*

- Defining Public Relations 4
 - Analyzing, Predicting and Counseling 5
 - Advertising, Publicity and PR 6
 - The Two-Way Street 7
- Publics, Channels and the Role of the Writer 7
 - The Public in Public Relations 8
 - Priority Publics 13
 - Channels 13
 - The Role of the Writer 14
- Conclusions 15
- Exercises 16
- Notes 16
- Selected Bibliography 17

CHAPTER 2 *Ethical and Legal Responsibilities of the PR Writer 18*

- Circles of Influence 20
 - Dynamics 20
 - Values 22

Influence of Personal Standards	22
Educating	22
Refusing	23
Requesting Reassignment	24
Taking the Assignment	25
Influence of Organization and Industry Standards	25
Perceptions	25
Organizational Culture and Values	27
Automatic Responses	27
Influence of Public Relations Standards of Practice	28
Accuracy	28
Honesty, Truth and Fairness	29
False or Misleading Information	29
Influence of Laws and Regulations	30
Negative Laws	30
Contracts	31
Contempt	32
Libel Laws and Privacy Issues	32
Copyrights and Other Rights	35
Government Regulators	35
Influence of Primary Publics	36
Shared Values	36
Adversarial Groups	36
Conclusions	37
Exercises	39
Notes	39
Selected Bibliography	40

CHAPTER 3 *Persuasion* 42

Opinion Formation and Change	44
Opinion, Attitude and Belief	44
Models of Attitude Formation	45
The Nature of Persuasion	46
Aspects of Persuasion	46
Steps in the Persuasion Process	49
Typology of Steps of Persuasion	51
Persuasion and Logic	52
Expectations	52
Experience	52
Perceptions	53
Connections	53
Values	53

Persuasion and Communication	54
Source	54
Message	56
Medium	58
Audience	60
Effect	61
An Alternative Theory	61
Conclusions	63
Exercises	64
Notes	65
Selected Bibliography	66

CHAPTER 4 *Research for the Public Relations Writer* 67

Research in Public Relations	68
Categories of Research for the PR Writer	69
Research for Storage and Retrieval	74
Sources for PR Writers and Researchers	75
Secondary Sources for Research	75
Primary Sources for Research	77
Verifying	81
Skepticism—A Requisite for All Research	82
Questions to Ask	82
Answers Prompt Questions	82
Virtual Reality and Research	82
Facts Sheets—Basic PR Tools	83
Conclusions	84
Exercises	85
Notes	85
Selected Bibliography	85

PART TWO *Writing Principles* 87

CHAPTER 5 *Writing for Clarity and Interest* 89

Message, Audience, Medium	90
Message	90
Audience	90
Medium	91

Clarity and Interest: Elements of Style 91

- Readability 91
- Naturalness 95
- Variety 96
- Euphony 97
- Human Interest 98
- Trite Expressions 98
- Eliminating Bias 98

Conclusions 103

Exercises 104

Notes 104

Selected Bibliography 104

CHAPTER 6 *Simplifying the Complex* 106

Know Your Subject 108

Use Plain English 110

Avoid Doublespeak 111

Describe, Don't Define 113

Take One Step at a Time 116

Make the Central Points Clear 117

Explain the Unfamiliar with the Familiar 118

Make the Message Accessible 123

Conclusions 124

Exercises 124

Notes 125

Selected Bibliography 125

CHAPTER 7 *Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation* 126

Ambiguity and Grammar 127

That Versus *Which* 127

Subject-Verb Agreement 128

Myths of Grammar 129

Split Infinitives 130

Sentence-Ending Prepositions 130

Usage Manuals 130

Verbs 132

Emotive and Cognitive Meaning 133

Spelling 133

Punctuation	137
Software Packages for Spelling, Grammar and Style	140
Conclusions	142
Exercises	142
Notes	146
Selected Bibliography	146

PART THREE

Writing for Select Audiences 149

CHAPTER 8 *Memos and Letters, Reports and Proposals 151*

Memos	152
Memo Formats	152
Classifications of Memos	155
Factors Affecting the Use of Memos	159
Electronic Mail: e-Mail	160
Formats and Content	162
Style	162
Letters	163
Business Letter Format	163
Types of Letters	164
Reports and Proposals	169
Organization of Reports and Proposals	169
Readability and Applicability	172
Conclusions	191
Exercises	193
Notes	194
Selected Bibliography	194

CHAPTER 9 *Backgrounders and Position Papers 195*

Backgrounders	197
Research	197
Writing	197
Documentation	202
Position Papers	202
Stating the Issue	204

Background	204
Position	204
Recommendations	205
Format	206
Special Uses	206
Conclusions	207
Exercises	208
Selected Bibliography	208

PART FOUR

Writing for Mass Media Audiences 209

CHAPTER 10 *News Releases for Print Media* 211

News	212
What Is News?	212
Finding News	213
Getting News into Print	214
Writing News Releases	215
Approach	216
Form and Style	220
Electronic Transmission of Releases	225
Types of Releases	225
Preparing and Delivering News Releases	230
Technical Considerations	230
Dealing with the Media	231
Conclusions	233
Exercises	234
Notes	235
Selected Bibliography	235

CHAPTER 11 *News for Broadcasting* 236

Facts, Sights and Sounds	237
Announcements and Special Events	237
News Conferences	240
Crises	242

Talk Shows	242
News on Call	242
News Releases	242
VNRs	243
Broadcast Writing Style	244
Physical Preparation	246
Structural Considerations	250
Supplying Tape (Audio and Video)	251
Conclusions	253
Exercises	259
Notes	259
Selected Bibliography	259

CHAPTER 12 *Features for Print and Broadcasting* 261

Generating and Selling Ideas	262
Discovering Feature Material	262
Finding a Market for the Features	262
Writing the Query Letter and Following Up	263
Working with the Medium	264
Evaluating Topics	265
Reader Interest	265
Reader Consequence	265
Angle	266
Research	267
Background Research	267
Interviewing	268
Writing	269
The Lead	269
Development	270
Verification and Illustration	270
Anecdotes	271
Quotations	272
Humanization	272
Dramatization	272
Description	273
Mini-Docs	273
Conclusions	275
Exercises	276
Notes	276
Selected Bibliography	276

CHAPTER 13 *Writing Advertising Copy* 277

- Advertising as a Persuasive Force 283
 - Appeal 283
 - Positioning 283
 - Behavior 286
- Basic Guidelines for Writing Advertising Copy 286
 - Purpose 287
 - Objective Facts 287
 - The Publics 287
 - Media 287
 - The Creative Approach 288
 - Visualization 289
 - Language 289
 - Repetition 289
- Copywriting for Broadcast and Film Media 291
 - Public Service Announcements 292
 - Copywriting for Television and Film 293
 - Copywriting for Radio 295
- Copywriting for Print Media 298
 - Attention 298
 - Interest 299
 - Desire 299
 - Credibility 300
 - Action 300
 - Copywriting for Newspapers 300
 - Copywriting for Magazines 302
 - Copywriting for Direct Response and Direct Advertising 303
 - Copywriting for Out-of-Home Media 305
 - Copywriting for Sales Promotion 306
- Conclusions 307
- Exercises 308
- Selected Bibliography 308

CHAPTER 14 *Crisis Communication* 309

- Planning 310
 - Corporate Information 311
 - Corporate Plan 311
 - Media Kits 313
- Handling the Crisis 313
 - Constraints 314
 - Continuing Problems 315
 - The Significance of Planning 316

Conclusions	317
Exercises	317
Notes	318
Selected Bibliography	318

PART FIVE

Writing for Special Audiences **321**

CHAPTER 15 *Newsletters* **323**

Criteria for Successful Newsletters	324
Filling Unmet Needs	324
Uniqueness	324
Distribution	325
Knowledge and Skills	325
Frequency	325
Format	326
Types and Functions of Newsletters	326
Employee and Member Newsletters	327
Special-Interest Subscriber Newsletters	329
Technical and Content Considerations	329
Reporting and Writing for Newsletters	331
Reporting	331
Writing Tips for Newsletters	332
Fitting Newsletter Copy and Design	332
Writing and Designing Newsletters on Desktop Systems	334
Expediting Editorial Matter	334
Designing	336
Conclusions	339
Exercises	340
Notes	340
Selected Bibliography	340

CHAPTER 16 *Brochures and Web Pages* **341**

Purpose	342
Persuade	343
Inform and Educate	343

Concept	343
Purpose and Object	344
Using a Desktop Publishing System	348
Giving Shape to Information	349
Rules	349
Accuracy	349
Active Voice	350
Style	350
Tone	350
Visuals	351
Designing Brochures	352
Format	352
Type	353
Paper	355
White Space	356
Color	357
Reproduction	358
Letterpress	358
Offset	359
Gravure	359
Distribution	359
Web Pages	360
Conclusions	361
Exercises	363
Notes	363
Selected Bibliography	363

CHAPTER 17 *Employee/Association/Trade Magazines and Presentations* 364

Magazines	364
Topics	365
Employee Publications	368
Association Publications	372
Trade and Industry Publications	372
Corporate Publications for the Public	375
Speeches	375
Types of Speeches	376
Planning	377
Paring	378
Persuading	378
The Mechanics of Organization	378
Style	379
Setting the Stage and Writing the Finale	380