

# How to write great Press Releases for Theatre



## 1. The Golden Rules

- (i) **The point of a press release is to make journalists aware that your play exists, and to make them want to write about it.**
- (ii) **The people that read your PR will NOT be interested in buying tickets.**
- (iii) **Your PR will be competing with others for the journalist's attention.**

A really good press release and accompanying press photo(s) are a vital part of your show's marketing strategy, *whatever* the show. A press release (PR) is *NOT* a direct means of selling tickets, but it *will* increase your ticket sales if written and used correctly (by encouraging preview features/articles, listings, and review articles). To get noticed, it's crucial to clearly emphasise in the PR why *your* show is unique (known as the show's 'hook'). Keep these Golden Rules of Press Marketing in mind, and it's hard to go wrong!

## 2. What should the PR look like?

Journalists should *want* to read it! So aim for something visually **striking**, with **clear text**.

Your visual design should always be appropriate for the style of the production. It doesn't have to be in colour, or include images within the PR itself. If your show is a serious drama, a plain black-and-white text-only PR will instantly tell journalists what they're dealing with. For a comedy, lots of colour, images, and a snazzy layout may be more appropriate. You should be sent examples of both types of PR with this guide – if not, do ask Claire for them. These are only *examples*: as with publicity material, the only limit is your imagination! If visual design isn't your forte, why not ask your publicity designer for some help with the layout? You could often base the PR design on your publicity design, in terms of fonts and colour schemes.

Ideally, you should typeset the PR yourself, using *desktop publishing* (DTP) software such as Adobe InDesign (found on the ADC's production office workstations, highly recommended), Quark Xpress, Microsoft Publisher, Serif PagePlus, or Scribus (which is free online, but a little less user-friendly). Many people around the theatre will be able to help you learn to use InDesign if you wish: ask Claire for pointers! You can use striking fonts for headlines/titles, and smaller distinct blocks of text – but your main copy should be in a simple easy-to-read font. We recommend Gill Sans MT (standard on Windows machines), which is what you're looking at right now!

If you're really stuck, then write your copy in either plain text (.txt) or MS Word (.doc) format. We will then typeset the PR ourselves using a (fairly plain) ADC template.

## 3. Writing good copy for PR

Your *copy* is the actual text of the PR, aside from visual elements like logos and images. Getting your copy right is crucial, and it is here that keeping the Golden Rule in mind becomes really worthwhile. Writing good press copy is hard, and takes practise – you really do want it to be perfect, so take plenty of time over it. You're aiming for around 200-350 words, each of which should be there for a reason! Print journalists will often lift sections of text straight from your PR into their articles, if it's suitable, because it fills space in their paper with less effort on their part. This means that **the more you write "like a journalist", the more likely you'll be featured.**

To get the hang of journalistic writing style, the very best thing to do is to pick up a few of the papers that you'll be targeting with your PR, and/or standard nationals. Read not just the front page (how likely is your show to be on the front of the *Times*?) but all the inside "detail" pages, especially any Arts or Media sections. As well as appreciating journalistic style, try to make your style fit in with the style of the production, e.g., a press release for a comedy should be light-hearted! That said; never make your copy too highbrow, even if the show is quite intellectual. Vary your language, but note that newspapers never use words that most people won't know.

What you should *never* do is just tweak the show blurb you provided for the ADC brochure. Remember the Golden Rule: the aim of the brochure copy (selling tickets) is not the same as the aim of the PR copy (encouraging journalists). In any case, since the brochure went to print, you'll have gathered so much more information about the production, though casting, rehearsals, production meetings, technical planning, etc. Your PR can give a much more accurate glimpse into the insight and mood of your production if you write it from scratch.

### 3.1. Planning your copy

Before you start, consider what information can be included as logos or as 'header' text: instead of writing "This production of Hamlet, produced by the Amateur Dramatic Club..." you could just include the CUADC logo somewhere on the page. The same goes for the venue, and sometime for other things: professional PR often has a string of logos at the top and/or bottom!

Make sure that the core information about the show (dates, times, prices, venue details, booking information, and contact details so a journalist can follow the story up) is included somewhere. This could be a little italicised paragraph at the bottom, or a block of "subheading" text at the top or to the side of the main copy. It's best not to lose this information in the main copy, though.

You might want to write an actual headline for the PR, especially if there is a truly newsworthy angle for your production. Examples of newsworthy angles from recent times are: significant anniversaries; visits to your show by famous names or Royals; professional direction of the production; a show with a link to current news themes. If you do this, write the headline *after* you've written the copy, trying out a few possibilities to see what sounds best. Normally, make the 'headline' the name of your show, with the author just underneath. For student authors, consider having "A new drama by Joe Bloggs" rather than just "by Joe Bloggs".

Now you can plan out how the main copy will flow: what things need including, and what order to write them in. If you write essays for your degree, this should come fairly naturally – if not, look out for any essay-writing sessions or seminars that your college or faculty might organise. They'll be well worth it, more often than you might think.

Your copy should generally start by briefly setting out the plot and/or premise of the piece - without giving away the ending! Include enough information that reviewers want to come and find out what happens next. Of course, if an Arts journalist can definitely be expected to know the plot (e.g. the more popular Shakespeare texts), you won't need to go into much plot detail at all.

The rest of the plan depends very much on the production. The press are interested in any show that is different, in some way. Remember the corollary to the Golden Rule? This is where a clearly identified 'hook' makes your job a **lot** easier! Identify why the play, the playwright, or your specific production of it are *special*. Give some history on the play or playwright; explain why people should see it, and what it will leave the audience feeling. Has it won awards or featured famous actors? Is it a premiere, first amateur production, or new translation? Is it experimental, controversial, or shocking in some way? If the writer is a student, are they "bound for greater things", or already have an impressive writing portfolio? Avoid mentioning student names if the

press won't have already heard of them (and remember hearing about them), unless the writer is a student. Very rarely do student performers or crew make a big enough impression to merit this!

You should also include, generally at the end of the PR copy, a little on the merits of the production company and their previous production successes (especially easy with, e.g., Footlights). Mention impressive reviews, and quote from them, provided they can be seen to provide some measure of prediction of the quality of *this* production! Be sparing with TCS and Varsity quotations, though, as they don't count for very much outside the student bubble.

#### 4. Press Photography

You should always supply at least one high-quality (at least 300dpi, and at least 8"x4" in size) press image as a separate file, in .jpeg or .tif format. (If you use jpeg, ensure it is saved at the highest possible quality). This image is one that you'd want to see in print, next to an article about your show. (Again, look at what your target papers use next to reviews/Arts features.) Ideally it should be an "action shot" of cast members in costume: if you haven't got costumes yet, then you can "lie" about what your costume will be! It doesn't matter if the photo isn't the same as what people see when they turn up – anything that looks like it could be costume is better than jeans and a t-shirt. Find someone that knows how to use a (digital) camera, and find an appropriate setting for your photo. Record the names of the subjects, their in-play characters, and the photographer – these should be included as a separate file or within the email to Claire.

A really engaging, well-lit photo could make the difference between a one-line listing, and an entire editorial. That said; once a journalist is interested, you can often persuade them to send a photographer over to get more accurate photos nearer the opening night.

#### 5. What do I do with it?

For shows at the ADC Theatre, you must supply a *finished* press release and photo to Claire (claire@adctheatre.com) by the Tuesday **two weeks before your show week** – at latest! We will then pass it on to a large number of local and national press outlets (as appropriate). A fortnight is very last-minute to many press outlets: the earlier the better. High-profile or longer-run shows should aim to deliver the PR more than a month in advance, to maximise coverage.

You should allow a few days in the schedule for drafting and corrections: Claire will be very happy to make suggestions on how to improve it. If you're typesetting the PR yourself, send the draft (and final version) as pdf files – all typesetting packages will be able to "Save As" or "Export" to pdf. If you're writing in MS Word or plain text, just send that file to Claire. If you want an image or two included as part of the PR, make sure to send them too!

If you wish to contact certain press outlets with your PR yourselves, that's absolutely fine – in fact, we encourage it, as talking directly to journalists will give you a good idea of how press relations works. Ask Claire for contact details, then introduce yourself clearly, and be enthusiastic!

Do let Claire know who you're talking to, and if they've agreed to give you column inches – the ADC likes to keep an archive of press features, and it avoids us harrying them separately.