Public relations establishes and maintains a dialogue with your stakeholders to inform, persuade and influence. The written word is at the heart of this dialogue and it pervades every step of the communications chain. The chain extends from deciding what you want to say and how to say it, through to the receipt of your message by consumers or a business audience. The written word is crucial in everything; from an email to a client or a news release that takes your story to the media, to a speech by a CEO to an audience of financial analysts.

Writing in PR is not a literary or academic skill, but one that encompasses journalistic and marketing skills. It is primarily technical and functional and can be taught as a craft. Writing, whether focused on the client or the consumer, is all about packaging up a message and communicating it effectively so that it plays a role in influencing or changing attitudes, perceptions or behaviours.

To be an effective PR professional, you need to understand and deploy the written word effectively. This is as true for digital communications as it is for analogue ones, it is just the medium and some of the tools that may be different. This unit is designed to help you recognise and get to grips with the principal ways in which writing is used in PR.
1 The role of writing in PR

Credibility

What you write affects your credibility. Whether you are stating the facts or giving an opinion, accuracy is important in PR. Communicating using the written word makes what you say a matter of record. Putting words in print, whether online or offline, is an important step for your organisation or your client, so accuracy is a critical factor in protecting your reputation. Making claims that cannot be substantiated or setting out statements that are potentially damaging to a person’s or organisation’s reputation can open you up to prosecution for libel or slander. There are also strict rules that govern the disclosure and timing of certain types of information, for example, those relating to companies listed on the Stock Exchange.

The principle of communication

Communications articulate what you want people to think, feel and say about you and your organisation. You want people to remember your communications and act on them. They lie at the heart, and you could call them the ‘DNA’ of PR.

Messaging, also known as key messaging, is the process or principle of defining precisely what it is you have to communicate to your target audiences and packaging it in such a way that it is memorable and supportable. In other words, the principle of messaging requires you to write for a specific reason and the more the impact of the message can be measured, that it is published in your target media or visible to your target audience, the more effective your communications will be.

The principle of messaging applies to the spoken word, but crucially for Unit 3: Understanding the use of the written word for public relations, it underpins written communications across all PR disciplines.

Checklist

Written communications:
- contain impressions and meanings
- are supportable and provable
- are generally outward looking
- comprise positive impacts, effects and solutions
- mix facts, opinion and people
- are simple and reasonable.
General PR written communication

For most general PR purposes, written communications can be grouped into the following channels and outputs:

- emails: electronic communication between you and your client
- letters: formal written communications in the traditional way
- reports: for example, a monthly progress report to summarise what you have done as part of your PR programme
- proposals: ideas and recommendations for future PR activities
- manuals: technical writing that explains how to do or use something
- newsletters: regularhard copyor electronic summaries of your news developments
- websites: online destinations to promote an organisation or individual
- white papers: research-driven explorations of a topic or issue on which an organisation seeks leadership positioning
- précis: summaries of, for example, news coverage
- marketing materials: for example, advertisements, flyers, brochures, emails, posters, websites, banners.

Media PR written communication

Written communications for print and broadcast media can be grouped into the following channels and outputs:

- emails
- letters
- online newsrooms or press offices: electronic interfaces, often on a client website, where journalists can access information, quotes or images
- news releases: standard vehicles through which to promote your news and developments
- features: for example, case studies and profiles, see page 8 for more information
- advertorials: paid-for space in a newspaper which looks as if it is editorial, but which typically says ‘advertising feature’ above
- promotions, giveaways and competitions: copy that relates to special offers you may have set up typically in national, regional or local newspapers
- tweets: see section calledOnline and digital communicationson pages 11–12
- blogs: see section calledOnline and digital communicationson pages 11–12.

You do not need to become expert in producing all these written communications, but you do need to be able to recognise them and understand their primary functions.
2 The role and function of style

Writing in PR, just like writing in an occupation such as journalism, is driven by method. Depending on the nature of the audience you are communicating with, your editorial copy, combining your messages, facts and opinions, needs to be packaged in a style and format that is recognisable, and thus useful, to your target audience. The more effectively you can harness a style and form that is suitable and relevant to your audience, the better the result your written output will produce, whether a news release targeting journalists and their readers or a research report directed at analysts. Remember though, that style and form cannot replace content.

Style guides

Many organisations will have a style guide. The guide is the agreed approach to written outputs. Style guides cover everything from word count and format on the page, through to more contentious aspects of grammar and punctuation. Brand guidelines may also feed in to the writing style, tone and formatting of text, logos and images in written communications. Ask to access your own organisation’s style guide to get to grips with the details that define your own house style.

In general, style guides are used:
• to ensure that communications from an organisation or on behalf of an organisation are consistent and coherent
• as a framework to establish a stronger, more consistent connection with the audience
• to get messages across more effectively, foster dialogue and increase interaction
• to make an organisation and its services more accessible and relevant
• to help all of an organisation’s employees, or people speaking on behalf of an organisation, to speak in one voice: to explain, show and tell.

Take it further

1 Most daily newspapers publish their style guides online. It can be very helpful to take a look to see how a publication’s style is set out in one of these documents. As a starting point, take a look at The Guardian and The Observer newspapers’ style (for more information see Further reading on page 14).

2 Many companies have brand guidelines that specify details such as how logos should be used, the tone of voice communications should take, what types of photos are appropriate and the fonts and colours that are permitted. Read through Oxfam’s brand guidelines to get a feel for the types of details that may be important to a company and its brand. The Plain English Campaign also provides fact sheets, which can be a very helpful resource. (For more information see Further reading on page 14.)
While every organisation may have their own style guide, there are certain rules that all outputs used in PR should follow. It is useful to know what these are so that you can get to grips with the different types of writing you will need to recognise and may be asked to reproduce.

**Using the right voice**

As a general rule of thumb in both journalistic and PR copywriting, the active, rather than the passive, voice is used. This has the effect of making copy more readable and accessible.

It is better to use the active and say ‘man bites dog’ than use the passive ‘dog is bitten by man’.

When using the written word in PR, we need to understand the different ways in which audiences can be addressed, as shown in **Table 3.1.1**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Writer’s action</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Common uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First person</td>
<td>Writer expresses his/her views</td>
<td>‘I have a new product’ or ‘We have a new product’</td>
<td>Used in emails, newsletters, features, brochures and blogs and is more personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person</td>
<td>Writer talks directly to the reader</td>
<td>‘You will love the new laptop from JD Computing’</td>
<td>Used in selling and marketing copy (adverts; promotions; sales flyers and so on)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Person</td>
<td>Writer speaks about another person</td>
<td>‘JD Computing has launched a new laptop’</td>
<td>Used most often in news releases, features, brochures, company web pages and newsletters – it is less personal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case study**

A good example of understanding how these voices work in practice is in the writing style used to produce news. Here, you cannot write sales copy as you are not selling anything. News is issued via a publication and is written in the third person to provide objectivity to the content:

**Use the third person**

× ‘We launched…’

✓ ‘JD Computing launched…’

**Don’t talk directly to the reader**

× ‘You will now benefit from faster web access…’

✓ ‘Users will now benefit from faster web access…’

**Sentences should be short and active**

× ‘The laptop was developed by a team of US programmers over a period…’

✓ ‘A team of US programmers developed the laptop over a period of…’

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**Checklist**

All PR outputs should:

✓ use the right voice

✓ use appropriate language.

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**Table 3.1.1: Addressing audiences**
Appropriate language

The language you use in written communications needs to be appropriate for your audience and for the purpose of the communication.

News copy, for example, should:
- be stylistically simple
- use short paragraphs
- use short sentences
- use simple language and straightforward ideas
- contain one message only per paragraph.

News copy is more effective when factual and unbiased. In particular, news copy functions on the concept of third-party endorsement, which underpins all PR. That is to say, an expert opinion expressed about your product or service carries more weight than your own.

It is better to give a statement qualified by third party, for example, ‘JD Computing’s engineers have won many awards and accolades from information technology bodies’ than it is to simply state an opinion such as ‘JD Computing engineers are the absolute best’.

Checklist

- Copy should be plain English and jargon free.
- Concepts should be concise and simply explained; sentence structure should reflect the need for accessibility.
- A communication should not require a second reading in order to understand it.
- Grammar should not be complex.
- Copy should be accurate and consistent.
- A spellchecker should be used.
- Someone else should read your copy for sense and mistakes – it’s difficult to proofread your own work.
- Copy should be written with the audience in mind – the language should be at a level they will understand.

Take it further

Source and read the target publications relevant to your organisation or your client’s organisation. The publications may be trade magazines, national newspapers or particular websites that are popular with your audience. Deconstruct each publication’s editorial style. Are there any tips or tricks you could use in your written communications?
### 3 Principal genres of PR writing

It is helpful to break down the use of the written word into the principal genres used in PR. With variations and, of course, exceptions these genres could usefully be broken down as shown in Figure 3.1.1.

Each of the genres shown in Figure 3.1.1 are characterised by particular types of written communication and writing styles. Information about each genre is set out in the following pages.

#### Media relations

Writing for media relations requires you to target outputs at your end audience by using the media as the filter and carrier of the information. The principal written outputs used in media relations include: news releases; features; press packs; briefing notes; questions and answers (Q&As); and positioning statements.

Writing for the media is still at the heart of most PR practice. It is widely accepted in the industry that up to 80 per cent of the work of the typical annual PR programme is still focused on media relations. It therefore follows that knowing how the media works, what journalists want from PR and how to deliver a polished and relevant written product are intrinsic to getting a result.

To make that happen, it helps to think like a journalist and write like a journalist. The principles and practice of journalism underpin the expertise that PR practitioners need to develop right across media relations.

If media relations are still the bread and butter of most PR campaigns, then the news release remains the workhorse of most media relations programmes. This tried and tested way of generating column inches is still the first port of call for the public relations officer (PRO) or consultancy team intent on winning coverage for his or her clients. Create the story, put it in a release and put it out there to score some quick wins.

A news release is still the principal tool used for getting your news to market and differentiating you from the competition. Ask the question: What makes you new, improved or exciting? The news release tells the story. It:
- is multi-purpose
- forces you to find and exploit news
- acts as a vehicle for key messages

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**Key term**

**News release** – a primary vehicle used by organisations and individuals to set out their news. Written in a formulaic way, answering the ‘five Ws’: who; what; when; why; and where in the first two paragraphs, also answering how; and always in the context of a headline that indicates what the story is about. News releases are sent to journalists and bloggers on a media list, with the aim of reaching a target audience through the press.
• aids your sell-in
• can be tailored to different audiences
• is low cost
• can start a dialogue
• keeps your name at the forefront
• generates coverage.

The news release writing style is a good discipline to master because it sums up a story in as few words as possible, and it is relatively quick and easy to write. News releases are very versatile, in that they can be tailored for different audiences. Media generally like news releases as they are less intrusive than telephone calls and are a good starting point for a conversation or deeper coverage.

Features

Features are usually topical and derived from a current issue or developed from yesterday’s headline. We often read them after we have read the main news. Every substantial publication runs features because they are a staple of the media diet and expected by readers. Whether highbrow or lowbrow, business or consumer, we all read features because that is where so much of our information – and thus our conversation – comes from.

Features give access to insights, information, background and personalities that people would not otherwise know about. While feature stories can contain in-depth analysis, opinion and polemic, they are neither columns nor leaders. Features are news and issue driven.

The feature assumes many guises. It may be a profile of a person, for example an athlete, performer, politician or a group, for example a team, choir, organisation or army unit. It could also be an in-depth look at a social issue, such as violence in schools or eating disorders. In a business context, it could include subjects as diverse as corporate governance or the impact of computer viruses. If you can think of it, you can probably write a feature about it.

In terms of style, a feature is usually longer than a news story, but a specific length is not a requirement. What is more important is the form the story takes. Think of the feature as the journalistic equivalent of an essay, which often explores several points of view even if it is focused on one individual.

Checklist

Features are:

✓ less hard-sell than news release or email, so more likely to be used
✓ more effective (long term) in building reputation
✓ more impactful than news release coverage
✓ an opportunity to go wider and deeper, influencing opinion.

They can also be:

✓ general or specialist
✓ syndicated to numerous other publications.
3.1: Written communications

**Marketing**

In this style of PR writing, we use the written word to formulate outputs where the direct purpose is to sell. This could be in the form of advertising and promotional copy, sales flyers or leaflets, web copy, or even membership benefits or award entries.

Marketing copy sells directly to an audience and usually uses the second person (writer talks directly to the reader) in order to make that direct appeal. For example ‘You will love the new laptop from JD Computing’.

More than in any other style of writing, we directly address the reader, attempting to persuade him or her into making a purchasing decision or commitment. This copy generally employs the rules of selling, packaging up features and benefits around a compelling sales proposition and a number of unique selling points (USPs).

In order to be effective, sales and marketing copy needs to be direct and in addition you need to:

- define the proposition and USPs
- understand the differences between features and benefits. Features comprise what a product does, while benefits set out the advantage those features deliver
- give a clear call to action: what are you asking readers to do, think or feel?
- make it easy for dialogue – build in a response mechanism
- show, don’t tell – the first rule of selling.

**Internal communications**

Internal communications is a specialist branch of PR. Most PR outputs are external communications, aimed at and sent out to an audience beyond your own, or your client’s, organisation. Internal communications are different and are produced by, or on behalf of, an organisation for consumption by their employees only.

Internal communications are an intrinsic part of employee engagement. The style used to write internal communications establishes and maintains a dialogue between an organisation’s management and its employees. Sometimes, internal communications are the responsibility of the human resources department, but it increasingly falls under the responsibility of the PR team.

Internal communications use a variety of tools and outputs. Some of these deploy the written word; they include newsletters, newspapers, magazines, e-bulletins, intranets and information leaflets.

Take an organisation’s intranet as an example. This is perhaps now the primary tool for employees to talk to each other and through which a dialogue with management can be ongoing. Intranets are interactive, evolutionary and dynamic. Clear guidelines and policies help employees make sure the content they put on the intranet is consistent, relevant and appropriate. Consistency of communications make it easier for others to search and find useful information and guidelines on relevance and appropriateness ensure that employees communicate and feed back in a constructive manner.

**Key terms**

*Sales proposition* – this is a reference to the main purpose of your business and encapsulates the principal reason for your position in the marketplace. It is a marketing term that uses the science of differentiation to summarise the distinctiveness of your offer compared to that of your competitors.

*Unique Selling Points (USPs)* – usually abbreviated to ‘USPs’ these are a series of features or benefits which, taken together, amplify your proposition to differentiate yourself from others in the marketplace against whose products or services yours will be judged. In a PR context, it is essential to understand a client’s USPs so that promotional activity plays to the strengths and downplays the weaknesses.

*Intranet* – an electronic hub that acts as a mechanism for displaying and communicating information internally within an organisation, thus making corporate information accessible to an entire workforce simultaneously.
Contributing to the content of an intranet could mean drafting questionnaires and surveys, setting out factual information in step-by-step guides, profiling individuals, running interviews or setting up chat rooms and feedback mechanisms so that employees can engage with each other and with management at the same time.

The guiding principles for all internal communications fall broadly under the following:
- Publication content should meet the needs of the readership.
- It should be relevant, well constructed and accessible.
- There should be clarity and jargon-free English throughout.
- There should be a visual dimension – readers need to look at good design, pictures and graphics alongside words.
- Content and forums should be monitored.
- Information should be accurate and up to date.
- Feedback should be encouraged.

**Client communications**

As a PRO, you will be required to flex your writing skills by producing outputs for consumption by your own organisation or, if you are in a consultancy, by your clients. These will range widely from routine communications, such as a monthly progress report, to the highly complex and demanding, such as a new business proposal.

The ability to write clearly, concisely and without jargon is the common thread across all these outputs and the main enabler of real two-way communication and dialogue. The same principles that define your outputs in the other genres of PR writing should characterise your output with the client.

If you want to be successful as a professional communicator or PR professional, you need to be aware that your own reputation is at risk if you cannot produce accurate and effective copy to put across your own or an organisation’s ideas, views and recommendations. Thus, accurate and concise copy has an equal job to do internally as well as externally, if it is to be persuasive.

In your organisation, you need to carefully consider the style guide that dictates the form and appearance of recurring outputs, such as monthly progress reports, meeting minutes, media analysis coverage reports, research notes, recommendations and proposals, as seen in Figure 3.1.2.

**Figure 3.1.2:** Common client outputs, many of which are also used internally
Make sure that you follow the guidelines, sometimes set out in templates, so that your outputs are consistent and follow the same style rules. As a rule of thumb, it is sometimes worth considering that less is more. Most of us in a professional environment are swamped with writing we have to digest – if yours can be succinct and to the point, it will be welcomed more than most.

As with every other aspect of the written word in PR, make sure that you use a spell checker to ensure your copy does not contain silly errors which will undercut what you are actually saying. Bear in mind, too, that spell checkers may never be 100 per cent accurate.

**Technical and specialist communications**

Depending on your role as a PR professional, there are certain job roles or client accounts on which you may be asked to display a high degree of technical or specialist knowledge. An example of this might be in the field of investor relations, where you work for a client company which is a quoted stock and deals in communicating highly complex financial information to analysts in the City.

You may not know some of the technical terms or indeed the language used in this context, so it is advisable to make sure that you do not commit to something that you cannot realistically deliver. The PR profession has specialists who have come from other careers and understand a wide range of complex and sometimes obscure issues that need to be communicated in writing. Where this is the case, it is up to you to recognise what you can or cannot realistically deliver.

There are, however, a range of specialist or technical outputs that you may be asked to process in the course of your job. These could include specialist reports, market research and PR surveys and articles which you may be required to ‘ghost’ write for your clients. In these cases it is best to take advice from colleagues and managers before committing to produce copy which you cannot process without the requisite knowledge.

Technical and specialist outputs include:

- research reports
- surveys
- technical articles
- analyses.

**Online and digital communications**

With the advent of the digital age, PR has moved online along with the rest of the world. In fact, the PR profession is playing a major role in developing online channels and technology into effective communications tools, and developing digital solutions as an intrinsic part of strategic communications.
First generation static websites have now been replaced by **Web 2.0**, **Web 3.0** and social media, alongside the rise of **citizen journalism**, user-generated content (UGC), blogs and Twitter as a tool for breaking news and forming opinion.

The written word has a major part to play in this evolution. Traditional, hard-copy formats may have given way to the digital dimension, but the skills inherent in effective communications and PR remain the same. Most people entering the PR profession are now expected to recognise and often manipulate digital tools alongside more traditional ones. It is no coincidence that every daily newspaper in the country has an online version, or that a subscription, username and password will get you access to a wealth of more qualified news on a host of subjects, whether in broadcasting, magazines or dedicated websites.

Reading material comfortably on the web requires a different approach from the printed page. When you examine news, views and features more closely on the web, you can discern a pattern in what works well. Copy written for the web needs to be easy to access, easy to read, modular or bite sized, active and simple, though not dumbed down.

**Take it further**

For great examples of news and feature writing on the web, go to the websites of the BBC or the Financial Times.

**Writing for the web**

Public relations practitioners want to make sure that websites are accessible to everyone who uses them. Although design, technology and navigation (how easy it is to find your way around a website) are very important, the style of the content is vital to how easily people can use and understand it.

It is harder to read from a screen than it is from a printed page. People read differently on the web. They scan content, relying on headings and subheadings to guide them. They want quick results and are only a click away from leaving the page, or even the site.

When writing content for websites:

- make it easy for people to find information, as they might not be confident using the internet or computers
- make sure you use headings, summaries, captions and links appropriately to signpost content
- avoid block capitals, as they can be seen as ‘shouting’ and are hard to read
- think about navigation – how will the reader move around the site, from page to page or from story to story? Remember that people’s attention span online is short and they may be in a public place, they are easily distracted and are often doing many things at once. Consumers want instant access and very little complication.
Checklist

Writing online, the focus needs to be on making copy accessible and readily digestible through the use of:

- headings
- subheadings
- short sentences (15 words)
- short paragraphs (35–50 words)
- links
- images.

Forms of digital output

**Blogs:** A short form for weblog, sometimes defined as a frequent and chronological publication of comments and thoughts on the web. Blogs usually include philosophical reflections, opinions on the internet and social or political issues. In effect, a blog is information that is instantly published to a website where users post informal journals of their thoughts, comments, and philosophies. They update frequently and normally reflect the views of the blog’s creator. Bloggers have become highly influential in shaping opinion and as a source of expert comment on products, services and issues.

**Twitter:** A short, 140-character format that lets anyone upload to the web anything from an observation about the state of the traffic to a major news headline. In today’s media relations landscape, Twitter has become an increasingly important channel through which to release news to the media, and to generate a following of journalists who have a declared interest in your news.

**RSS feeds:** ‘Really Simple Syndication’, or RSS, is a method of moving the news model from ‘push to pull’. Companies often ‘push’ news out to journalists by emailing, wiring or faxing press releases, or by pitching stories. However, people who are interested in your organisation can subscribe to your RSS feed which automatically delivers news outputs onto their computer or mobile phone. By subscribing, the interested parties are ‘pulling’ information to themselves rather than waiting for it to be ‘pushed’. This format is useful for creating communities of interest who want to listen to what you have to say.

**SMS text messaging:** Another very powerful mechanism for getting simple, clear messages across to a wide variety of audiences, from consumers to specialists. This channel is increasingly used by PR teams when disseminating information.

**Multimedia news releases (MNRs):** Also called social media news releases, this enables you to create three-dimensional news output, comprising a mix of words, video, still images, short chunks of copy and links. This new and developing format allows your news and information to go wider and deeper, playing across all digital platforms, either through hosting on an intermediary site or your own.
Unit 3: Understanding the use of the written word for public relations

Take it further
To find out more about how multimedia news releases work, go to the PR Newswire UK website to see some examples of how other organisations are using the multimedia format in their media relations.

Portfolio activity
1 Identify the major types of written PR communications used in your organisation. For each type of communication evaluate its use. Highlight the advantages and disadvantages of using each type of written communication. Support your evaluation with examples.
2 For a number of scenarios, agreed with or given by your tutor, select types of written communication that would be suitable to use for PR purposes.
3 Identify major styles of writing. Explain why PR professionals use the different styles in different scenarios.
4 Evaluate how appropriate different writing styles would be for various scenarios.
5 For a number of scenarios, agreed with or given by your tutor, select a suitable style, tone of voice, etc. for each type of communication. Justify your choice of style.

Further reading
Books

Websites
The Guardian style guide http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide
The Plain English Campaign www.plainenglish.co.uk/
Oxfam brand information http://www.oxfam.org.uk/~/media/Files/OGB/Media%20centre/Multi%20Media/Oxfam%20Logos/brand-interactive-120613.ashx

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