

Promoting your work to newspapers

Newspapers can help you to promote and publish your work. It can be very satisfying to see your history or heritage project mentioned in print. This section offers advice on helping journalists to appreciate the value of your work, and discusses the advantages and drawbacks associated with dealing with the press.

Why contact the press?

There are several reasons why you might consider trying to get your work featured in a local newspaper:

- To inform the general public about your project
- To attract volunteers to your project
- To promote particular events
- To generate 'impact' for your project which you can use to demonstrate its importance and value
- To experience the satisfaction of seeing your work mentioned in print
- To help volunteers value their contributions

In recent years, the circulation of many newspapers has dramatically declined, as more and more people choose to get their news from the internet rather than printed sources. Nonetheless, the circulation of local newspapers is still numbered in the tens of thousands, and the people who read these papers may not be regular users of social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. It is also common for newspaper articles to be circulated on these social networking sites, so that the separation between 'old' and 'new' media is not as great as some expect.

The downside of trying to interest newspapers in your work is that you will lose control over how your work is described. While you have complete control over your own publications, and of what you post on the internet, with newspapers a journalist will be writing about you. The journalist might not understand what you are doing, and might fail to write about it in an accurate way.

This is why **it is important to have a clear message**, a topic we will return to shortly.

What are newspapers interested in?

Newspapers want to produce stories which appeal to their audience. With the local press, this audience comprises (unsurprisingly) people from the locality. However, these people may not necessarily be interested in news simply because it is local. Someone from one side of a county, for instance, may have no interest in the activities of someone who lives on the other. This is why stories in the local press often have a ‘human interest’ element that is appealing to everyone. The fact that something is *local* is not in itself sufficient.

If you read a local newspaper you may notice something distinctive. This is that stories can almost entirely be sorted into three groups. The first comprises ‘negative’ stories, typically regarding crime, the misdeeds of local politicians, and national news. The second comprises ‘feel good’ stories which treat local events in a very positive way. The third is ‘official news’ – that is, news about council business, roadworks, changes to public services, etc., delivered in a neutral manner.

It is very likely that your project will fit into the second category – positive news. In this case, journalists are looking for something that will make local people feel good about where they live, and which will catch their interest.

Newspapers also like to use pictures. These catch people’s attention, and make the newspaper look exciting and interesting.

So, to summarise so far, newspapers are looking for a story:

- which catches people’s interest and,
- is illustrated by an engaging picture.

What makes a good story?

How, then, do you go about ensuring that newspapers will be interested in your project?

The first thing is to see your project from the perspective of newspaper readers. Things which are important to you may not be important to them. Consider, for instance, whether the following works as a headline:

Local project recruits 20 volunteer historians.

This might represent very important news to you. After all, finding twenty people who are willing to volunteer their time to a community history project is an impressive achievement. However, this is unlikely to generate much interest amongst members of the general public.

Now consider the following headline

Laser Scanning Reveals Layers of History Behind Church's Walls

This is much better. Why? Let's break it down:

- 'Laser scanning' – this sounds like exciting technology, and creates a curious contrast between the mention of history and a church. One doesn't normally associate churches with laser technology!
- 'reveals layers of history' – this certainly catches one's interest. What did they find? Why is it important? The headline introduces an air of mystery that makes one want to read more
- 'behind church's walls' – provides more detail, and again potentially attracts people's interest. Think of all that history that lay undiscovered for hundreds of years!

It's important to think, therefore, about how you can catch people's attention. What 'angle' are you going to take? What is it about your project that you can emphasise, to catch people's interest?

Here are a few possible things to consider:

- What is surprising about your project? Have you taken any interesting or unusual approaches in your research? Have you solved a problem, or uncovered a mystery?
- Have you discovered anything that speaks to people's everyday concerns and interests?
- Have you discovered something which causes us to view where you live in a new way?

It's also worth thinking about whether your 'angle' can connect your work to important national figures or historical events. For instance:

- Have you found out anything to do with an important historical figure?
- Can you link your research to important historical events?
- Is there an anniversary that you can link in with? 2014, for instance, is the centenary of the start of World War One. Public interest in the war will be considerably increased. Have you found out anything important about the war, or Britain in 1914?
- Can you draw comparisons with modern events?

How is news produced?

It's important to understand how news is produced. Many people's idea of a journalist is of the classic investigative reporter, who spends many hours investigating an important story before writing it up. This sort of journalist is very rare indeed.

Much of the content in newspapers is sourced from elsewhere. A study by Cardiff University in 2008 found that 60% of articles in newspapers are derived from 'pre-packaged sources' such as press releases, promotional material and 'wire news' services.¹ A phrase has been coined for this: 'churnalism', meaning the churning out by journalists of vast amounts of content.

There are two things to understand here:

- journalists are unlikely to have very much time to devote to reporting on your project
- if you provide 'ready to use' content for journalists, they are likely to turn this into an article in their newspaper

This affects how you might go about approaching a newspaper.

In short: **the easier you can make it for them to complete a story about your group, the better.** This means that you need to provide materials which are informative, well-written, factually accurate, and carefully structured.

On this last point, it's worth thinking about how newspapers are laid out. When writing an essay, book or letter, it's common to structure a piece of writing as follows:

Introduction

Background information

Crucial information

Conclusion

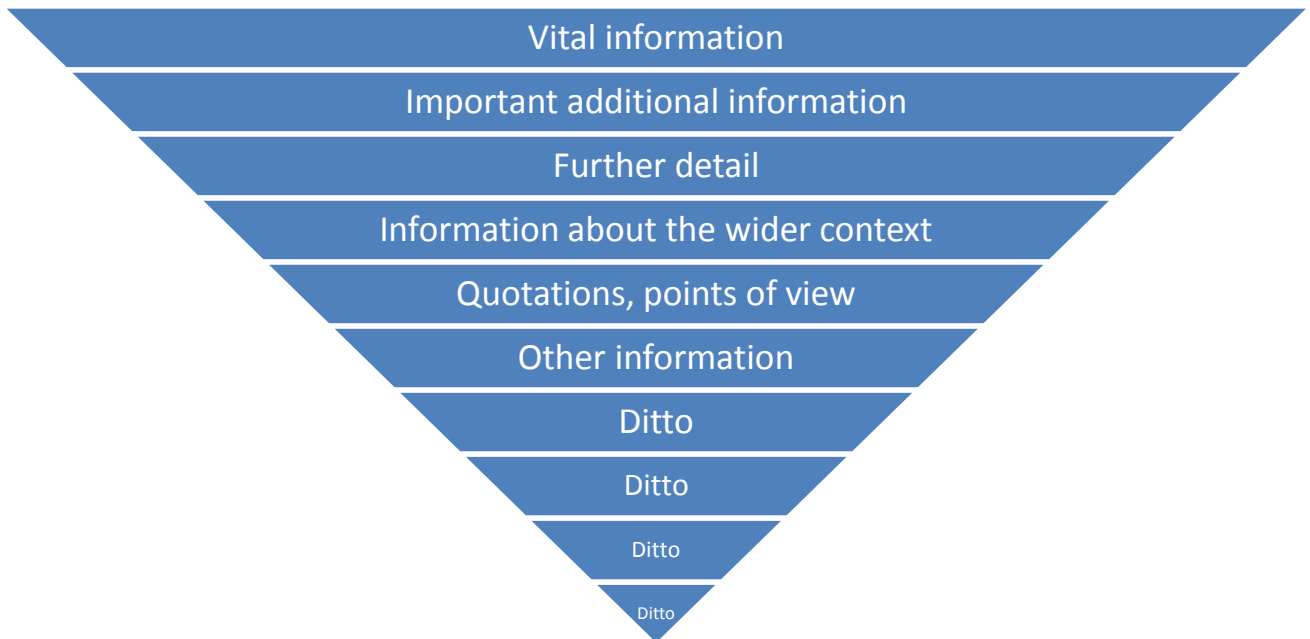
In other words, the text sets the scene, rises to a crescendo, and then concludes.

Newspapers often use a different approach. This is called the 'pyramid technique', in which the most important information is placed at the start of the article, important background information then follows, and the rest of the article is devoted to less important detail.

¹ J. Lewis, A. Williams, B. Franklin, J. Thomas and N. Mosdell, *The Quality and Independence of British Journalism: Tracking the changes over 20 years* (Cardiff, 2008).

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, newspaper articles need to catch readers' attention quickly. Secondly, journalists' articles need to be fitted into the newspaper, among all the other stories and advertising. It is often the case that articles which have been written need to be cut down if an important news story happens at the last minute. This is why journalists put all the important information at the start, to make sure that it does not get deleted during the editing process.

As a consequence, newspaper articles often look like this:



Which piece of writing would be easier to shorten? The rectangle, or the inverted pyramid?

How do I write a press release?

Now we know how newspaper articles work, we come to the important question – how do I get journalists to notice what I'm doing? **The answer is to send them a press release.**

A press release is a short document which provides a journalist with everything they need to write an article about a particular subject. For the reasons mentioned above, this means that it usually needs to resemble an article itself. Most press releases conform to the inverted pyramid technique, include an interesting headline, and are written in a professional style.

Press releases are generally around 1-2 sides of A4, although they are often presented as a web page rather than as a printed document.

What do I put in my press release?

A good press release will normally contain most of the following:

- Eye-catching headline
- Date, name of your organisation, and clarification of when the story can be released

- Key information: Who? What? When? Where?
- An explanation of importance: Why? So what?
- Important contextual information
- Quotations
- Additional information and background detail
- Contact information
- Links to media that can be used (e.g. photographs)

This information should allow a journalist to write most, if not all, of an article about your project. If the journalist wants to find out more, then the 'Contact' section will easily allow them to do that.

You will see that the press release is structured in a very similar way to the pyramid technique, with the most important information at the start.

Eye-catching headline

Your press release should begin with a short headline, formatted in a larger/bolder font than the main text. The purpose of the headline is to catch the reader's eye, and immediately stimulate their interest. Remember that journalists will see many press releases each day – how is yours going to stand out from the crowd?

It's a good idea to keep the headline as short as possible. This allows you to use the headline in tweets and as the title of emails. It will also help the journalist to visualise how the story will look in the newspaper.

Date, name of your organisation, and clarification of when the story can be released

Next, write the date and the name of your organisation, so it's clear who the press release is from. If you're happy for a story to be written about your group at any time, write 'For immediate release'. This is necessary because sometimes press releases request that stories not appear until a certain date (e.g. the release date of a film).

Key information: What? Who? When? Where?

This should be a brief paragraph containing all the crucial information about your activities. Keep it concise.

An explanation of importance: Why? So what?

This paragraph also contains crucial information. In this case, the task is to communicate *why* you are doing something. Also try to give a very clear statement of why this is interesting or important, or why people should be interested in it.

Important contextual information

Here you can start to give a greater amount of background information about your project. This should be interesting and important, but is perhaps not quite of crucial importance for readers to understand the story.

Quotation(s)

Most newspaper articles contain quotations. These give the article an appearance of authenticity, and can also be used to highlight ways in which your project is important or interesting. Journalists may choose to seek out these quotations themselves – but it is common practice to provide quotations that they can use.

Remember that you need to gain the consent of anyone quoted, and ensure that all quotations are accurate.

Aiming for 2-3 quotations would be ideal. Your first quotation will likely be from someone involved in your project. It is a good idea to try to get a quotation from someone who is not involved in your project, but who is otherwise well known. This might be a renowned historian, local political figure, etc.

Additional information and background detail

This section can provide non-essential detail about your project. Remember that the journalist is working to the 'pyramid technique', and is thus looking to write a reasonably long article that can easily be cut down. It's important to make sure that this section is as well-written and interesting as the others. But it also provides an opportunity to be a little more expansive in your discussion of your project.

It's a good idea to include any useful background information here. If your project examines medieval Norwich, for instance, then you could provide some interesting facts about this subject, or about medieval England in general. This is to help journalists, and perhaps also readers, to understand the wider context of the story.

Contact information

This section is of crucial importance, and constitutes the main way that press releases depart from the pyramid technique. If journalists want to find out more about your group, they need to know who to contact.

There are two issues to consider here. Firstly, you need to ensure that you have a system in place to ensure that any queries are dealt with in a timely manner. This may involve nominating an individual to deal with any messages received.

Secondly, you need to consider carefully who is the best person for journalists to contact. The leader of your community project may very well be excellent at running the project, motivating volunteers, conducting research, and so on. But it does not necessarily follow that they will be good explaining the project in simple terms to a journalist, or communicating exactly why it is interesting and important.

Links to media that can be used (e.g. good resolution photographs)

Almost all news stories are illustrated by a photograph. This needs to be interesting, engaging and informative. It is possible that a newspaper will send a photographer to

generate their own photographs. But it is very much worth making available some images that they can use.

These images might include:

- Pictures of project members
- Pictures of the subject of your project (e.g. a church, a historic building, etc)
- A picture of an historic document associated with your project
- The logo of your group

Images need to be of a relatively high resolution so that they look good in print. To make your images as useful as possible, you should:

- Take photographs/scans at the highest image resolution possible. For a picture in landscape format, a minimum of 3000 pixels along the top edge would be ideal
- Take your photographs/scans in a lossless file format. If you have a mid-range or better camera, you should be able to shoot in RAW format, and convert to TIFF format later. Most scanners will allow you to scan files straight into the TIFF or PNG format. JPG – the commonest image file format, particularly for cheaper digital cameras – is a ‘lossy’ format. This means that every time you save an image, information is discarded to reduce the file size. If you must work with JPG files, try to set your camera/scanner to the highest quality settings possible. Backup your original files and avoid editing them more than once. Save them at very high quality (at least 97% compression or higher). Most picture editors will be able to apply basic editing to your files for you. (Further information about these formats can be found in our ‘Final Steps’ Guide for Community History and Heritage Groups.)

Although this guide has focused on newspapers, press releases can also be sent to radio and television stations. Furthermore, most newspapers also have websites. For this reason, there is no harm in mentioning any videos or audio recordings that you already have available.

Sending your press release to a newspaper

Once you’ve written your press release, how do you bring it to the attention of a journalist?

There are several possible answers to this question:

- most news organisations have a ‘news desk’ which you can contact about stories you think may interest them. The contact details for this can be found on the newspaper’s website.
- many news organisations will allow you to submit ideas for stories through their websites
- many journalists can be contacted by email or telephone
- you can approach journalists through social networks such as Twitter or Facebook

- most large organisations – such as sizeable businesses, councils or universities – will have a press office, or at the least a press officer. If you are working in partnership with such an institution, then you can try promoting your story through them

An unsolicited email to a journalist may be effective, but you may need to be a little canny in your promotional approach. Building a rapport with them on Twitter first might work.

Remember that it's important to stick to your core message about why your project is interesting. Your press release is designed to do this, and you should try to get it into the journalist's hands at the earliest possible opportunity.

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Example of a press release

History enthusiasts discover Roman treasure

Press Release issued by Somewhere Village History Group, 1 April 2013

For immediate release

Approximately 500 coins were uncovered on 20 March in a field near the village of Somewhere by members of the Somewhere Village History Group. The coins are thought to date from the 2nd century AD, and several are made from gold and silver.

The coins were uncovered while the group were digging test trenches in the hope of finding the remains of a lost medieval village. A volunteer historian, Alice Jones, made the discovery.

The coins will now be analysed by experts from the British Museum. If genuine, they will be declared as treasure and will become the property of the crown. The Somewhere Village History Group may be eligible for a reward, to be shared with the owner of the land.

Alice Jones said: "I couldn't believe my eyes when I realised what I'd uncovered. It's amazing to think this treasure lay undisturbed for so long."

Dr A. B. Smith of the British Museum said: "This is a very significant find indeed. We are very pleased that the Somewhere history group has reported this find."

The coins will now be professionally cleaned. It is hoped that they will eventually be put on display at a local museum.

Alan Other, the director of the project, said: "This is an extremely exciting discovery. These are findings of immense significance. Roman coins have great historical value, alongside their intrinsic worth".

The Somewhere Village History Group was founded in 1961 and regularly conducts archaeological research. Previous finds include a Viking burial site and the remains of a medieval castle.

Discoveries of gold and silver are governed by the Treasure Act 1996. This requires that all finds be reported to the authorities. For more information, see: <http://finds.org.uk/>

Some facts about Romans in Leicestershire:

- The Romans established a garrison town in Leicester in the first century AD
- Jewry Wall in Leicester was part of a Roman bath complex, built in about 150AD
- Unlike modern coins, early Roman coins were made of gold and silver

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Media

For media pictures, see: www.somewherevillagehistory.com