NEWS RELEASES

NEWS RELEASES translate knowledge from technical reports into language that lay people can understand. They also announce anything newsworthy for which the Survey is the logical outlet. They are directed toward a broader readership than most Survey reports, and the style of writing is far less formal. To reach that readership, you as author must adapt your writing style to different ground rules. Formal publication makes the results of your research available to your scientific colleagues, but what about the general public? Interest in your subject may extend beyond the scientific community. Would your results be useful to people who normally do not read scientific reports and journal articles? After months or years of effort in putting your research into words, should you spend a few more hours preparing a news release?

You, as the author, are in a good position to know if your work ought to reach a wider readership of community leaders, government officials, planners, managers, business people, students, teachers, and homeowners. You can help decide if your report is one that deserves telling to the rest of the world through a news release.

The Survey issues news releases through Division representatives and public affairs specialists at headquarters and regional offices. These releases help fulfill our mandate to publish and disseminate information about the Nation's natural resources and natural hazards. About half the releases issued each year concern current earth-science events, the start of major new projects, speeches and talks, and major appointments and awards. In addition to written news releases, more than 100 stories are telephoned in each year to the news wire services to describe such current events as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and floods. For timeliness, increasing numbers of releases are sent to the news media by electronic mail. Each year, information in Survey news releases reaches millions of citizens through newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. For many citizens, news releases are the only link to the research activities of the Survey, and they can go a long way toward explaining the wide range of our good work.

Writing the first draft of a news release is not easy. The sample news release that follows contains

(your Survey address here)
(your name here)

PHONE: (your office phone number here)

For release: (Put a date at least 3 to 5 days after mailing)

or

For release: UPON RECEIPT (Prepared: Put here date of mailing)

SHORT, NEWSY HEADLINE

Again, short and newsy--catch and hold the editors' attention with the first paragraph. Give the editors the gist of the story: why this news release will interest their readers, listeners, or viewers and why the information is timely. Use facts, not adjectives. Catch editors with the first 10 to 15 words of the first sentence, and then finish the paragraph by giving credit to the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior.

Now that you have the editors' attention, expand on the news given in the first paragraph. Start filling in the who, why, what, when, where, or how that will show why the readers, listeners, or viewers will want to and need to know the hard news.

The second or third paragraph is a good place to acknowledge your cooperators, but don't lose an editor with a lot of backscratching.

According to most news-release writers, by the fourth paragraph, the editor is looking for some single identified authority to quote. Someone who can give the facts in a short, pithy way as if talking directly to the reader. Someone who can add a human element to the release. Someone who can give the editor quotable--and believable--quotes.

(more)

2

The release should be understandable to a teenager or the nonscientist next door. Read the release aloud to yourself or to a nonscientist to see if it's understandable. Write in short paragraphs. Write in short sentences. Use familiar words. Write to be read.

By now you have given the editors the heart of the story. Expand on the hard news in the remaining paragraphs, but don't save any vital facts until last. From here on the paragraphs are more and more expendable and may be sacrificed to fit the space available.

To help prevent errors in rekeyboarding, complete your paragraphs on a page and don't split words at the end of a line. Double space the first paragraphs to allow the editor room to edit and rewrite.

If appropriate at this point, you should list the title, authors, series, number, price, and availability of any covering report: Copies of the _____ page report, "Title of the Report," by (Author's Name) and published as U.S. Geological Survey (report series and no.), are available from the USGS (office that distributes the report).

If you have a collection of interesting facts to cram into the release, run them as separate filler items at the end:

- Be professional. Avoid technical jargon, but don't insult the intelligence of your readers. Include illustrations. Photographs of scientists at work and simplified maps showing key localities are possibilities.
- A release needs to reach the right editors or desks. Do not send it just to your favorite reporter; you will lose more news media friends than you will make. Work with the USGS Public Affairs Office to develop a good mailing list.
- You need not announce at the beginning that this is a NEWS RELEASE. The release date and the format will convey that to the editor. Similarly, you don't need a covering memorandum announcing that you are attaching a news release.
- If a page is to be followed by another page, type "(more)" at the bottom of the page. And finally, end the release with a mark that lets the editor know that you are done:

3

* * * USGS * * *

(Note to editors: Sometimes, in this space between parentheses, a "Note to Editors" might advise of the availability of a photograph or a special contact for additional information. For more information, call the Public Affairs Office.)

detailed information on how to proceed. Your first draft should lay out the most interesting and important scientific facts. Reviewers in the Public Affairs Office (Reston) will help add polish, ensure necessary clearance, and provide wide distribution to news media.

Clearing a news release can be difficult and frustrating. Why? One explanation is that people in high places read more news releases than scientific reports, especially releases picked up by a wire service, a large newspaper, or the TV evening news. News releases are also sent directly to members of Congress and other key officials, and because of such high-level distribution, they often receive detailed high-level review and clearance, particularly any news release that deals with sensitive or national issues. Each Survey Division has a liaison officer who works with the USGS Public Affairs Office in clearing news releases. Some regional offices also have special liaisons. Check with your supervisor or the Public Affairs Office in the Office of the Director for further information.

Some news releases are issued by field offices—usually releases dealing with basic data reports or new reports or maps of local interest. Procedural guidelines are spelled out in the Survey Manual and the Department of the Interior Manual. When in doubt, call the Public Affairs Office. That office can help you with official clearance and can also provide practical advice on mailing lists, release dates, and other details that could make or break a story no matter how good the words or subject.

When the USGS celebrated its 100th anniversary, it adopted the slogan "Earth Science in the Public Service." That slogan

reflects the justifiable pride of the Survey in the quality of the earth science we have provided since 1879 and also our rededication to continue to serve the public.

Writing a News Release

Before you begin to write, scan some past news releases to see what has worked before. Much of what you have done to produce a technical report or a scientific talk will not work. You are writing now for the news media and for a different readership.

The release date at the top of the front page is part of the recognized news-release format. Most news editors appreciate a set date of release and will honor it. The set date lets reporters know how much time they have to expand on your story before the news will break. There may be a reason to set a release date in the future. If the story is too hot to allow lead time, or there is no reason to set a release date in the future, give the date of preparation so that editors know how old the story is. If the story is even hotter, you probably should telephone it in.

The preceding example in news-release format outlines some of the needs, mechanics, and reasons for writing news releases.

Talking to the News Media

An advantage of a news release is that facts as you see them are set down on paper. Chances of mistakes and misinterpretations between you and the reporter are minimized.

Interviews with reporters and broadcasters also provide opportunities to communicate with the public, but the risks of error and misunderstanding are heightened. A suggestion: Bosses don't like surprises; let them know you have been interviewed before they read it in the morning paper or before their own boss calls. Handle questions discreetly, and check with your boss before the interview if possible. Additional guidelines: (1) stick to your own field of expertise; (2) avoid discussions of programs and budgets; (3) if you are uncomfortable with the way a question has been asked, have the interviewer restate the question, and then answer it.

Letters to Editors

Letters to editors, including letters to forums in scholarly journals, can be useful and sometimes entertaining, and they help relieve stress. They also can backfire or produce stories we would rather not read about. As private citizens, we have the right to write, but as employees of the Survey, we have a responsibility not to involve the Bureau in our private fights. The higher one rises in the organization, the harder it is to separate the public role from the private and the harder it is to disclaim the mantle of writing as an official spokesman. The Survey has a proprietary interest in any such communication involving information and views gathered directly or indirectly as a result of your employment with the USGS. These communications, therefore, require formal Division and Bureau approval through the "Director's approval" process. It is then appropriate for your communication to show affiliation with the USGS. Given these conditions, it is *not* appropriate to use your home address or to use your home address to circumvent formal approval.

Letters and similar communications to journals, magazines, newspapers, and other media do not require technical review, Branch approval, or Survey editorial scrutiny, but for Division and Bureau approval, submit your draft directly to the Associate Chief, Office of Scientific Publications, at the National Center, Reston, VA 22092.