

Unit 2 Homework—Risk Communication and Press Releases

Case Study: Students' local community hazard mitigation plan

General Purpose: To encourage and promote data management, data visualization, data analysis, systems thinking, and writing skills for students in a real-world context.

Specific Aims: To have students critically evaluate and translate geoscience data into a risk communication instrument for a general audience. In this exercise, students will read weather-related press releases from government entities. Using these examples as a model, students will critically assess their local community's hazard mitigation plan (HMP) for a specific event—hurricanes, winter storms, or another relevant, local storm type—and develop a press release to communicate risk related to their assigned storm and timeline stage. The opportunity to revise the press release after a peer review session and instructor feedback also helps students understand risk communication as an iterative process involving several actors.

Assessment:

Instructors will assess the first draft of student press releases using the rubric (separate file). Students will also be peer-reviewed using the same rubric. After receiving feedback from both the instructor and a peer, students will revise and resubmit their press releases. The instructor will assess the new submission using a slightly revised rubric to determine whether students have appropriately improved their work based on the feedback.

Assignment Guidelines

Background

Press releases are an effective way for government to get messages out. They allow any level of government to create its own news stories and to circulate them to the public through the media.

A good press release is a clear, focused, and readable account of specific information that a government office or agency wants the public to know. Press releases are similar to news stories and well-written ones will often be reprinted with few changes by newspapers and other media outlets, ensuring the message gets passed on to the public. Thus, it is important that the press release presents the message *carefully* and *clearly*.

Assignment

Students must review the hazard mitigation plan (HMP) for their community, with careful consideration of their assigned major storm type (hurricane or winter storm). Students must prepare a one-page (500 words) press release to communicate risk for their assigned storm type and timeline phase (pre-storm preparedness, during storm, and post-storm response) based on the community's current HMP.

Parts of a Standard Press Release

Press releases usually have eight parts, presented in the following order (although there may be slight variations):

- 1) Letterhead or logo of the government organization

- 2) Release time (either “For Immediate Release” or for release on a specific date)
- 3) Date
- 4) Headline that highlights the message (e.g., Mayor Menino Announces Continued Blizzard Preparedness Efforts Underway) in uppercase letters, boldface, or both;
- 5) Location (e.g., Boston, Massachusetts)
- 6) Body copy (5–7 short paragraphs)
- 7) Contact name for further information
- 8) End: marked by #### centered under the copy

Tips for Structuring the Press Release

- Start with a strong headline.
- Decide what the most important element of your message is, the part you most want your readers to remember. State it in 10 words or less. *Ask yourself if what you wrote would make sense to someone not familiar with the subject.*
- Start your first paragraph with a strong lead, something that will catch readers’ attention and lead them into the rest of the piece.
- The lead paragraph should cover who, what, where, when and how, as applicable. This paragraph conveys all the important information.
- Then present the details of the story, starting with the most interesting or pertinent information, followed by the rest of the details in order of decreasing importance.

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Keep the length to 1 page, approximately 4-5 paragraphs, with no more than 3 sentences per paragraph.

To figure out what to include:

- Ask yourself what you want the story to do. How do you want the public to respond? Do you want support? Attention? Awareness? Action? Write your piece with that purpose in mind.
- Put the points you want noticed ahead of other details.
 - Weak example: *A blizzard means that residents must take precautions.*
 - Revised: *A Blizzard Warning is in effect until 1 p.m. Saturday. The National Weather Service is advising people not to travel after noon on Friday.*
- The remaining paragraphs should give more details, explain as necessary, and emphasize your key points.

- Support your message with data: statistics, quotes, etc.
- Consider the stakeholders who need to be involved in appropriately responding to the risks of this hazard. How should they be addressed?
- Take a systems thinking approach to the risk to ensure you are considering all elements that need to be addressed.
- Keep each statement and paragraph short and focused. Get to each point as quickly as possible.
- If you are including an important announcement (advisories, warnings, a policy change) make sure it is clear, accurate, complete, and easily found in the text (usually in its own paragraph).

Remember: the aim of the press release is to have the greatest impact with the fewest words.

Examples of Press Releases:

City of Boston Takes Steps to Prepare for Nor'easter

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=5847>

Mayor Menino Announces Preparedness Plans for the Arrival of Hurricane Sandy

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=5826>

Mayor Menino Announces Comprehensive Actions to Better Prepare Boston for Storms like Sandy

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=5959>

Mayor Menino Announces Continued Blizzard Preparedness Efforts Underway

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=5968>

Mayor Walsh Announces South Boston Emergency Transportation Reconfiguration

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=18997>

Mayor Walsh Gives Update on City of Boston Storm Operations

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=18965>

****City of Boston Storm Update****

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=6467>

Mayor Walsh Launches Boston Snow Stats

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/news/Default.aspx?id=18976>