

Book Review

The Public Relations Writer's Handbook

Reviewed by
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The Public Relations Writer's Handbook

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<https://www.routledge.com/The-Public-Relations-Writers-Handbook/Lehmann/p/book/9780815365280?source=igodigital>

The Public Relations Writer's Handbook is an informative and practical guide on how to write the main types of materials used by PR practitioners. The book works well as a textbook for students, and as a resource for those new to the field. Lehmann and book contributors take a conversational approach that engages the reader by delivering detailed instruction while sharing real-world experiences. Thorough, yet concise, this book is packed with solid fundamentals and professional insights to help students learn not only how to write PR materials but how they are used.

Structure and Organization

The book is organized into six sections: What is Public Relations Writing, Media Relations, Storytelling, Writing for Digital Media, Business and Executive Communications, and Writing for Events.

Chapters within the sections go into detail on writing related materials. The opening section, “What Is Public Relations Writing,” provides background and context by describing the role of and general guidelines for PR writing in an aptly titled chapter, “Purpose, Process, Style, Form and Tone.” Though definitions of public relations may be familiar to most PR students, the inclusion of different examples is a helpful reminder and sets the stage for discussing what PR writing is – and what it is not. Lehmann highlights how public relations and PR writing are different from marketing and advertising. This distinction is important for students to understand because it influences their overall approach and tone when writing PR materials. The section also lists the variety of documents PR people use, outlines the writing process, introduces the inverted pyramid concept and offers general tips for effective PR writing.

What follows are five sections containing a total of 17 chapters, each focused on a particular document or aspect of PR writing. Chapters under the Media Relations section instruct on News Releases and Other Types of Releases, Media Pitches, Media Advisories/Alerts, Public Service Announcements and Media Kits. The Storytelling chapter covers Interviewing, Background Materials and Backgrounders, Fact Sheets, Bio Sketches, News Writing and Feature Writing. The Writing for Digital Media section has two chapters, “Email and Writing for the Web” and “Writing for Social Media.” Grouped under Business and Executive Communications are two chapters, “Letters and Memos” and “Speechwriting.” The section on Writing for Events includes two chapters, “Talking Points and Run of Show” and “Shot Lists and and Photo Captions.”

Chapters open with a brief explanation of the purpose of the document – how it is used and how it relates to other written tools in the practice of public relations. The authors then take a “hands on,” often step-by-step approach, to preparing and writing the respective PR tools. The

use of examples (e.g., right and wrong punctuation for quotations) is an effective way to convey the details of PR writing.

Each chapter includes at least one exercise that can be used as a class assignment. Some exercises include taking information provided in the instructions (e.g., Exercise 2.1 – News Release). Others ask students to first gather and then use information from external sources (materials or interviews) to write the assigned piece (e.g., Exercise 8.1 – Crafting a Backgrounder). Several chapters also have an AP Style Skill Drill for students to identify and correct AP style errors in a sample document. Though AP style is covered in the first chapter, “Purpose, Process, Style, Form and Tone,” it’s always helpful to reinforce AP style points in various PR materials.

Throughout the text, public relations professionals offer insights that show how aspects of PR writing are applied in the “real world.” These brief essays, “Perspectives from the Pros,” are written in a personal, conversational style, often reflecting on the writer’s own experiences. Students, perhaps more than ever, want to know the “why” behind what they are asked to do. Discussing the use of PR materials in this way helps them see the bigger picture and understand why things are written the way they are.

Contributions to Public Relations Education

Presented as a handbook, as opposed to a traditional textbook, this book is designed and written to provide direct and detailed guidance on how to write a variety of materials used by PR practitioners. The book is ideal for use in PR classes taught with a sharp focus on the practical and professional aspects of writing for public relations. The content gets straight to the point of describing, giving instruction and offering examples of the different PR materials. Instructor resources, available on the publisher’s website (registration required), include digital versions of templates and answer keys for the AP style exercises.

The author and contributors write in a conversational style that engages readers by talking “to them,” rather than “at them.” Their personal stories are relatable and add perspectives based on professional experience. Information and instructions are easy to follow through the use of both narrative and bullet-point formats. Subheads facilitate quick reference to specific details when working on an assignment. The provided examples and templates give students a framework for content and format.

Strengths

A strength of this textbook is its sharp focus on the fundamentals of writing a wide range of PR materials, while still providing insights on the actual practice of public relations. The book also pays great attention to the details and nuances of good PR writing. Public relations professionals – and professors – may have personal preferences for writing and formatting; nonetheless, this book reflects commonly accepted practices for preparing PR documents. Most chapters open with a purpose section that concisely describes the specific PR document and explains how it is used in ways that are authentic to the practice of public relations. Detailed instructions and explanations are organized under headings, such as Format, Structure, Process and Template, that help guide the reader. Since much of PR writing is formulaic, the clear, straightforward examples and templates are helpful and adaptable to different applications.

One thing that stands out when reading this textbook is its highly personal tone and presentation of content. You get the sense that the authors are talking to students in a professional, yet approachable, way that keeps them engaged while teaching them about writing. Most chapters are written by Lehmann, but including other authors’ chapters and sidebar commentaries adds diversity in voice and allows for input by those with expertise in a particular type of writing.

Opportunities

Since 2019, when this book was published, digital communication and social media have evolved, expanded to new platforms and grown in usage by organizations. While the book content remains highly relevant, a future edition would benefit from updated guidance on writing for the web and social media. A separate chapter on general scriptwriting for video and audio could include public service announcements. Connecting similar types of writing that are used in different ways, such as writing photo captions and Instagram posts, may be an approach to consider. Though PR planning is discussed briefly in the opening section, a separate chapter on how to write a PR plan, including an example, is a possible addition. Finally, the overall layout of the book makes good use of headings, subheads, different fonts and design elements given the constraints of page size. However, a further enhancement, though likely a matter for the publisher not the author, would be using larger pages to better display the examples, templates and sidebars.

Conclusion

Lehmann and her contributors deftly combine their experiences as educators and PR professionals to create a practical guide for learning about writing for public relations. This book is a “how to” in many respects; however, the informative chapters and by-lined sidebars broaden its usefulness. So much of learning to write well must come from practice, along with instruction. Effectively covering the essentials of writing a variety of PR materials in an informative, engaging way makes *The Public Relations Writer’s Handbook* a good option for PR writing classes. Thorough, yet concise, this book is packed with solid writing fundamentals and professional insights. Knowing what makes good PR writing and understanding the strategic use of different materials will continue to be essential in the emerging era of generative artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT.