

Activity 1C: Getting the Word Out: Writing Press Releases



Students explore the content of press releases, analyze examples of professional press releases, and conclude by writing, reviewing, and revising their own press release.

Sequence

1C.1: <i>What Is a Press Release?</i>	Students role-play to discover the information that must be included in a press release.
1C.2: <i>Analyzing Press Releases</i>	Student pairs analyze examples of professional press releases for structure, content, and voice.
1C.3: <i>Writing Your Own Press Release</i>	Students draft, review, and revise their own press releases.

Understandings

- Press releases have a structure and format that includes a title, a lead paragraph, supporting paragraphs, and contact information.
- A press release answers *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* questions for a targeted audience.
- A press release must be persuasive, including details, quotations, or descriptions that make an event sound special, exciting, or engaging, and often a hook that captures the reader's interest.
- Creating a press release involves the steps of the writing process—brainstorm, outline, draft, review, and revise.



Materials

- **Handout 4: What Is a Press Release?** (1 per student)
- **Handout 5: Analyzing Press Releases** (1 per student pair)
- **Handout 6: Sample Press Releases** (1 per student pair)
- Different-colored highlighting markers (6 per student pair)
- **Handout 7: Writing a Press Release**



Handout 4: What Is a Press Release

Artists, artistic directors, and curators promote events in a wide variety of ways. They may use paid advertising, such as direct mail, or advertisements in newspapers or on the Web, the radio, TV, or billboards. But whether or not they pay for advertising, all promoters seek publicity for their events through free media outlets, including trade journals, newspapers, print and online event calendars, e-mail lists, blogs, and social networking sites. One of the most common ways to initiate contact with the media is by creating and distributing press releases.

A *press release* is a short article that conveys essential information to an editor of a newspaper, journal, radio or television station, or other type of media. Because a press release is often the first contact between an arts promoter and an editor, it must provide a lot of information in relatively few words. Press releases are direct, clear, and to the point, but they must also convey excitement—they must make editors want to publicize the event in their media.

Upon receiving a press release, an editor or publisher has a number of options:

- Publish it in its entirety
- Use the information to create a listing for a local calendar
- Assign a reporter to write a longer article or interview
- Pass it over for other, more interesting events

Your job as a promoter is to make sure the editor doesn't choose the last option!

Perform a short role play with your partner to brainstorm the information you need to cover in your press release.

1. Imagine that you and your partner have just heard about an event this weekend called "Waging Art." You are both artists and are considering attending, but you know nothing about the event other than the title.
2. Role-play a conversation in which you discuss what you would need to know in order to decide whether to attend. This information falls into two categories:
 - Information to let you know why you might want to attend the event
 - Information about how you would attend once you decide to go

Record each bit of information you need in the form of a question, using a two-column format as shown in the example below:

Why would I want to attend?	How would I attend?
What will happen at the event?	What is the date of the event?



1C.2: Analyzing Press Releases

Student partners analyze two examples of professional press releases for structure, content, and voice. They look for answers to the questions they identified in the previous activity, and for other important features of a successful press release.

1. Have student pairs analyze press releases.

Pass out copies of **Handout 5: Analyzing Press Releases**, **Handout 6: Sample Press Releases**, and six different-colored highlighting markers to each pair.

Have student pairs do the following:

- Read each press release and highlight and label the answers to the questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *why*.
- Highlight and list on the handout any other important components of each press release

2. Discuss content and structure.

Discuss as a class the content and structure of each press release. Point out that the answers to the questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* questions are often found in the first paragraph, which is known as the lead.

Ask students to talk about any additional components they found and what value they add, if any, to the press release.

Possible answers: *Contact information, title, quotation from someone involved in the event, bio of the artist, other background, the phrase “for immediate release”*

3. Introduce the vocabulary term *hook*.

Tell students that a successful press release often includes a *hook*—a detail, quote, or description that captures the reader’s interest. Much like a fishing hook is used to catch fish, a hook in a press release is used to catch a reader’s attention. The hook is often at the beginning of the press release. Ask students:

- Did you find any hooks in the press releases you just read? If so, what are they?

Explain that not all press releases have hooks. Most, however, do include a memorable phrase or quotation that makes the event sound special, exciting, or interesting. Ask:

- Did you find any memorable phrases or quotations in the press releases you just read?

4. Discuss voice, tone, and language.

Have students think about the style of writing in the press releases they read.

Ask students:

- Who do you think the audience is for each press release?
- How would you describe the tone and language of these press releases—formal, informal, or colloquial? Why do you think they are written in that style?
- What voice is the press release written in? Why?

Guide students to understand that press releases are formal written pieces that should clearly convey information and be appropriate for a wide variety of audiences. Ask students:

- If you were directing either of these press releases to an audience that consisted only of high school students, would you change the tone or language at all? How?

Discuss any additions or changes students might make to each press release.

5. Summarize the activity.

Relate what students have just learned to the process of writing their own press releases. Discuss the lead and possible hooks. Remind students to write their press releases in an engaging but formal tone and use the third-person voice.



Handout 5: Analyzing Press Releases

1. Read the press release on **Handout 6: Sample Press Releases** labeled Sample 1.
2. Locate the answers to the questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*. Mark and label them with your highlighters, using a different-colored highlighter for each category of “w” question. For example, use a yellow highlighter for any information that answers questions about *who*, a blue highlighter for answers to questions about *what*, green for answers to questions about *when*, and so on.
3. Use the sixth marker to highlight any other important components of the press release. List these components below.
4. Repeat these steps for Sample 2.

Sample 1: Additional Components

Sample 2: Additional Components





Handout 6: Sample Press Releases

Sample 1

MEDIA CONTACTS: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Project Administrator
Tel 555/800-8199

November 25, 2008

Press Coordinator
Tel 555/600-5390

Finishing School Presents *Finding Joy*
The Collective's Final Engagement Party Event at MOCA
Thursday, December 4, 7–10pm
MOCA Grand Avenue, Sculpture Plaza
250 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012

Los Angeles—As the final event of their three-month Engagement Party residency, the Finishing School collective presents *Finding Joy*, a public intervention taking place at MOCA Grand Avenue's Sculpture Plaza, on Thursday, December 4, from 7 to 10pm. Engagement Party is the dynamic new initiative developed by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), to engage innovative Los Angeles-based artist collectives.

Inspired by the military term “finding joy” (which refers to the successful establishment of radio contact on the battlefield), Finishing School will lead a workshop in which participants build small DIY radios that will be used to detect prerecorded transmissions located throughout the museum. To generate audio content prior to the event, Finishing School will interview members of the MOCA community about what brings them joy. The public is also welcome to share their thoughts by phone; to participate, please call the Finding Joy Hotline at 213/455-2926 and follow the instructions. Hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar will be available. This event is FREE and open to the public. No reservations are required.

Engagement Party is made possible by a grant from The James Irvine Foundation. For further information, please visit moca.org/party or contact 555/600-1745.

Parking for MOCA Grand Avenue

Parking is recommended at the Walt Disney Concert Hall garage; \$8 flat rate after 4pm. California Plaza parking garage is also available; use the entrance nearest the Omni Hotel on Olive Street. Public lots are located on Kosciusko Way between Hope and Lower Grand Avenue, and on Olive Street between 1st Street and 2nd Street.

Adapted from the Press Room of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Web site (November 25, 2008), *Engagement Party: Finishing School Presents Finding Joy*.





Sample 2

**FIRST MUSEUM SURVEY OF INFLUENTIAL STREET ARTIST SHEPARD FAIREY
OPENS AT THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART/BOSTON
EXHIBITION INCLUDES NOW ICONIC OBAMA POSTER**

**SHEPARD FAIREY: SUPPLY & DEMAND
FEB. 6–AUG. 16, 2009**



Boston, MA - Shepard Fairey, the Los Angeles-based street artist behind the red, white, and blue Obama campaign image that swept the globe, is the subject of an exciting new exhibition organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (ICA). The 20-year retrospective, the first solo show of the artist's work, explores the breadth of Fairey's career. In addition to the now iconic Obama poster, the exhibition includes about 250 works, ranging from Fairey's renowned Obey Giant stencil to screen prints of political revolutionaries and rock stars, to recent mixed-media works and a major new commission for the ICA. Pedro H. Alonzo, a longtime champion of Fairey's work in the U.S. and Europe, is the ICA's guest curator of the exhibition. In complement to the exhibition, Fairey will create public art works at sites around Boston. *Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand* opens Feb. 6 and runs through Aug. 16, 2009. The exhibition is accompanied by an expanded, special edition of *Supply & Demand*, the retrospective publication of the artist's work.

"Shepard Fairey's powerful and varied body of work has reached into all aspects of our visual culture, from political posters to T-shirts and album covers, and now museum installations," says Jill Medvedow, director of the ICA/Boston. "His integration of design, popular culture, and politics places him in the current of artistic and cultural forces that shape our world today."

"The content of Fairey's work is a call to action about hierarchies and abuses of power, politics, and the commodification of culture," says exhibition curator Pedro Alonzo. "Fairey is committed to creating work that has meaning for his audience—by using familiar cultural iconography that people can relate to and by constantly bringing his work into the public sphere."

Fairey gained international recognition in the early 1990s with his Obey Giant campaign, seen on streets around the world on countless stickers and posters that Fairey produced and disseminated. Since then, Fairey has created works of art of all types—on the street, as part of commercial collaborations, and, increasingly, for gallery presentation. Fairey has broken many of the spoken and unspoken rules of contemporary art and culture. Working as a "fine" artist, commercial artist, graphic designer, and businessman, Fairey actively resists categorization. Through the Obey project, he has created a cultural phenomenon, but more importantly, a new model of art making and production. He builds off precedents set by artists such as Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, as he disrupts expectations about art and business and muddies the distinctions between fine art and commercial art.

Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand features work in a wide variety of media: screen prints, stencils, stickers, rubylith illustrations, collages, and works on wood, metal, and canvas. These works reflect the diversity of Fairey's aesthetic, displaying a variety of influences and references such as Soviet propaganda, psychedelic rock posters, images of Americana, and the layering and weathering of street art. While his





provocative imagery draws in his audience, Fairey uses his work as a platform to make statements on social issues important to him. The artist explains his driving motivation: “The real message behind most of my work is ‘question everything.’”

This landmark exhibition, co-curated by guest curator Pedro Alonzo and Emily Moore Bouillet, former assistant curator at the ICA, examines prevailing themes in Fairey’s work. “Propaganda,” “Portraiture,” and “Hierarchies of Power” look at the many ways the artist urges critical thinking about the images that surround us, whether advertising, portraits of heroes, or symbols of wealth and power. In the works grouped under “War and Peace,” Fairey, responding to recent U.S. military operations, reveals the many faces of conflict. “Stylized” investigates Fairey’s Warhol-like blurring of popular culture and fine art, while “Music” illustrates some of the artist’s earliest cultural influences. “Question Everything” presents the myriad forms and vehicles for the artist’s work, whether stickers, large-scale murals, or framed work on gallery walls.

Shepard Fairey was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1970 and currently lives and works in Los Angeles, California. He received a BA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992. He has had recent solo exhibitions at White Walls Gallery, San Francisco (2008); Merry Karnowsky Gallery, Los Angeles (2007); Jonathan Levine Gallery, New York (2007); Stolen Space, London (2007); and Galerie Magda Danysz, Paris (2006). His work is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; and the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. Fairey is also the founder of Studio Number One, a graphic design company.

Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand is sponsored by Levi Strauss & Co., Boston Phoenix, and Renaissance Waterfront Hotels, Boston.

About the ICA

An influential forum for multi-disciplinary arts, The Institute of Contemporary Art has been at the leading edge of art in Boston for seventy years. Like its iconic building on Boston’s waterfront, the ICA offers new ways of engaging with the world around us. Its exhibitions and programs provide access to contemporary art, artists, and the creative process, inviting audiences of all ages and backgrounds to participate in the excitement of new art and ideas. The Institute of Contemporary Art, located at 100 Northern Avenue, is open Tuesday and Wednesday, 10 am–5 pm; Thursday and Friday, 10 am–9 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10 am–5 pm. Admission is \$15 adults, \$10 seniors and students, and free for members and children 17 and under. Free admission on Target Free Thursday Nights, 5–9 pm. For more information, call 555-400-3100 or visit our Web site at www.icaboston.org.

Adapted from Press Releases on The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston Web site, *Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand*.



1C.3: Writing Your Own Press Release



Note: This activity offers a good opportunity for formative assessment. Check students' work after they complete steps 1 through 3 of **Handout 7: Writing a Press Release** and before they begin the draft.

1. Introduce the activity.

Distribute **Handout 7: Writing a Press Release**. Explain that Handout 7 will guide students through the steps of preparing an outline and then writing, reviewing, and revising their press releases.

Provide the following guidance for the information required in step 1:

- **Contact Information:** Talk to students about the information they should use. You may wish to provide a school or classroom e-mail address and phone.
- **"For Immediate Release" Date:** This is the date by which they should send the press release to the media (not today's date). If they have not researched deadlines for specific media outlets, emphasize that four weeks before the event is a useful target date.
- **Title:** Encourage students to consider what would make an attention-grabbing title. A successful title makes it clear what the event is about.

2. Discuss researching information.

Direct students to steps 2 and 3 on the handout, and ask:

- How might you obtain the information needed to answer the *what*, *who*, *where*, *when*, and *why* questions about your event?

Possible answers: Ask participants in the event, including visual arts teachers, student artists, or other event organizers.

Encourage students to conduct short interviews with the visual arts teacher or with participating student artists to gather their perspectives. Remind students that they can use what the teacher or artists say about the exhibition as quotes in their press releases. (The same procedures apply to students who are promoting non-arts events.)

Note: Review fundamentals of interviewing, including thanking the interviewee, preparing questions in advance, quoting accurately, and taking careful notes. Refer to **Handout 5: Interviewing Techniques** in *Foundations in Visual Arts, Unit 3: Community Storytelling*, for tips on interviewing.

3. Provide time for students to write, review, and revise press releases.

Have students use the handout to prepare their outlines and write their press releases. Have them work in pairs to review and provide feedback on their partners' handouts. Provide guidance, as needed. Have students revise their work based on their partner's comments and create a final draft press release.

4. Comment on final drafts.

When students have completed Handout 7, collect their final press release drafts. Provide written feedback and return the drafts to students.

5. Have students prepare final press releases.

Have students make final revisions and prepare a press release suitable for sending to the media.

6. Distribute press releases.

If you are presenting this activity in conjunction with *Unit 7: Art Show!*, your students will work with public relations teams in the visual arts classes to distribute their press releases to the media.

Otherwise, you may wish to have students create press packets and research media options on their own. Have students send press releases to print media, such as newspapers and magazines, and/or post them online on Web sites and social networking sites. Many schools have Web sites that allow students to post information about events. Students may also send them to a local TV or radio station to be read as public service announcements.

Teacher's Notes: Optional Extensions for Distributing Publicity

The Press Packet

Extend the activity by having students research local media outlets and send their press releases in a press packet. Handouts B2 through B6 in **Appendix B** present ideas for researching and targeting appropriate outlets and assembling press packets. See *Additional Resources for Teachers* for links to some current social networking sites and services.

Creating Additional Materials

If interest and time allow, teams might produce additional promotional materials: flyers, posters, print and audio interviews, feature articles, mini-documentaries . . . the possibilities are endless! **Appendix B** has some suggestions for adapting press releases to other media venues.

1C.1: What Is a Press Release?



In this activity, students role-play to discover the information that must be included in a press release.

Explain to students that event publicity must include certain information regardless of whether it is presented in print, on the Web, or in another media format.

1. Distribute the handout.

Give students **Handout 4: What Is a Press Release?** and have them read the information about press releases. Emphasize that many newspapers with reduced reporting staff will print a press release exactly as written.

2. Pair up students to perform a role play.

Review the information and instructions for the role play in the handout. Provide time for students to carry out the activity.

Note: Clarify the distinction between “*Why* would I want to attend?” questions and “*How* would I attend?” questions. “*Why* would I want to attend?” questions focus on the content of the event—the *who* and *what*. “*How* would I attend?” questions focus on logistics—*where* and *when* the event will take place, and any additional information relating to location and access.

3. Share role-play results.

Reconvene as a class. Ask student pairs to share the questions they came up with. As they share their lists, display or project them for the class to view.

Point out the questions that begin with the words *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*, and underline these key words.

Teacher's Notes: Sample Questions Answered by a Press Release

The following are examples of questions that students might list as a result of their role plays.

Why would I want to attend?

- What kind of event is it?
- What will happen at the event?
- Who will be involved, or who is putting it on?
- Who is the audience for the event, or who is expected to attend?
- Does the event sound fun and/or interesting?

How would I attend?

- Where will it be held? (room, building, street address, town)
- When will it happen? (date, time, and duration)
- Why is it happening now?
- Is there accessible transportation and parking?
- Is it wheelchair-accessible?

4. Summarize the activity.

Relate the questions that students generated to the information included in press releases. Explain that an effective press release answers the questions *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*. It also includes other details that make the event sound special, exciting, or interesting.



Handout 7: Writing a Press Release

Follow the steps below to create your press release.

1. Fill in the information for the press release heading.

Contact Information (name, e-mail, and phone number):

“For Immediate Release” Date (approximately four weeks before the event):

Title: _____

2. Answer *what*, *who*, *where*, *when*, and *why* questions.

What is the event? _____

What will it be like? _____

Who will be involved? _____

Who is invited? _____

Where will it be held? _____

What is the accessibility (wheelchair accessibility, parking, public transportation)? _____

When will it take place? _____

Why is it happening now? _____





3. Research additional information.

What is special and exciting about this event? *Why* would people want to go? (You might use descriptions of the kinds of work that will be exhibited, biographies of the artists, background stories, or quotations from participants.)

4. Write a one- to two-page press release.

Steps 1, 2, and 3 can serve as your outline:

- Step 1 provides information for the heading.
- Step 2 provides information for the lead, as well as the body paragraphs.
- Step 3 provides information for the body paragraphs, including the hook.

Create a draft of your press release.





5. Review your partner's press release.

Exchange papers and review your partner's press release. Make sure that it includes the following:

- Contact information
- A title for the press release
- All necessary information (*what, who, where, when, and why*)
- Information that engages the reader's interest
- The basic structure of a press release, including heading, lead, and body paragraphs
- Clear and concise writing

Write comments on your partner's press release. Is any key information missing? How might your partner make it more engaging or improve the writing?

Meet with your partner to go over your suggestions for revision.

6. Revise your press release.

Revise your press release based on your partner's feedback, and create a final draft.

