

## AMA-MSS CTUW Modules

### #6 – Articles, Letters to the Editor, and Press Releases

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Whatever your chapter decides to do for Cover the Uninsured Week – whether an informational session or health fair, whether for your school or in your community – an important part of achieving success is *increasing awareness* of the issue of the uninsured and underinsured in our country. To spread your message, you need to be comfortable drafting articles, letters, editorials, and press releases. These are best submitted to local newspapers, television stations, as well as school newsletters and alumni magazines.

This section of the module contains general information on how to write an article, op-ed, letter to the editor, and press release. Follow the guidelines, add your details, and you're golden. If you still have questions, don't be afraid to ask those who do PR for your school or medical society...it's their job and they're pros. GOOD LUCK, and get to work!

First, keep in mind the following:

- **Identify yourself and the issues.** In any communication to the media, point out the fact that you are medical students and are concerned about access to care. Give specific examples and stories about what you did.
- **Keep it brief:** only a few hundred words for an editorial, and two pages double spaced for a news release. For a letter to the editor, it should be even shorter. If you are a resident of the paper you are submitting to, you will have a greater chance of getting published. Push your local connection in the piece or discuss a local situation.
- **Don't forget to take pictures.** You might not have enough space in every circumstance, but they can draw the reader's attention, leave a lasting impression, and accentuate the human element. High-resolution digital photos submitted electronically work well. If you use film, slides are often preferred, but check with the media representative you are in contact with.
- **Faxing and e-mail are both perfectly appropriate.** It's easier and faster. Be sure to give your phone number and address so they can verify that you actually submitted the letter, etc.

Get your facts straight!

For nice, quick facts regarding the uninsured, visit:

<http://covertheuninsuredweek.org/factsheets/>

## **How to Write an Article**

Article writing generally allows more space to more fully express yourself and share stories of your CTUW events and experiences with the uninsured. Try submitting to your school's alumni magazine since alumni often appreciate hearing the perspectives of current students.

1. **Do Your Research.** Read a few copies of your target publication to get a feel for the commonly used styles, article lengths, and topics. Find facts in other reputable sources to back up whatever you are going to say.
2. **Discuss the Idea with the Editor First.** Start by sending an email to the editor. Make sure the editor agrees that your article topic is appropriate for the publication. If the proposal is rejected, ask why...was the idea appropriate, had they reached a quota for your style of article?
3. **Listen to the Editor's Advice.** Often your article only needs a small amount of re-working, and the editor will ask your permission before making any permanent (even if minor) changes.
4. **Interviewing.** Prepare open-ended questions ahead of the event. Gather opinions from those running the event and those attending. Ask what went well as well as what could be improved.
5. **Grab the Reader.** The leading paragraph of a feature article is the most important, and the lead sentence of that paragraph is the most important. You should be able to sum up the point of your entire article in the last sentence of the paragraph. Of course, you already know that from grade school English class, right?
6. **Show and Tell.** Be able to both tell readers why your subject is important using facts and show readers the urgency of the subject by story and example.
7. **Provide Good Photography.** Never underestimate the importance of good images. Don't forget to clearly label each picture. Provide captions for each picture, indicating who is there and what they are doing.

Sources: <http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/jun03/bell.htm>  
<http://freelancewrite.about.com/od/writingrewritingstyle/qt/outlining.htm>

## **How to Write an Op-Ed** *(From the CTUW website)*

The op-ed section of a newspaper allows readers to share their opinions. If you have direct experience with or knowledge of the uninsured issue (for example, if you are a doctor or nurse who treats people without health insurance), and you have insights to share on this topic, you should consider writing one.

The following pointers will help you get your op-ed piece published:

1. **Have a news hook.** Tying your piece to an event, new research study findings, or a legislative debate will increase your chance of getting published. For example, a newspaper report on new research about health coverage in America would be an excellent hook.
2. **Keep it brief.** Newspapers have limited space and editors don't have the time to cut your piece down to size. In general, 750 to 800 words will do.
3. **Make a single point.** You only have 750-800 words. Make one point clearly and persuasively.
4. **Avoid jargon.** Simple language ensures that all readers, even non-experts, can understand your point. For example, don't use acronyms or technical language.
5. **Use examples.** Illustrations, anecdotes or personal stories are persuasive tools. They help explain and bring to life complicated issues.
6. **Make a specific recommendation.** This is an opinion piece. State your opinion on how to improve matters.
7. **Draw the reader in.** Your first paragraph should draw in the reader by using a dramatic vignette or a well-stated argument.
8. **End with a bang.** Your final paragraph is as important as your opening paragraph. Be sure to summarize your argument in one strong final paragraph.
9. **Follow-up.** Most op-ed editors will respond to you within a week. If you haven't heard in that time frame or if your piece is particularly time sensitive, you can make one follow-up phone call to be sure it was received.

Make sure your article is double-spaced with wide margins. List your name, address, phone, fax, and e-mail contact information at the top of the opinion piece. Find out from your local paper the best way to send an op-ed. Instructions for submitting an op-ed are usually at the bottom of the page where they appear or on the paper's web site. Some papers like them mailed; others prefer faxes, while others favor e-mails.

Source: <http://covertheuninsuredweek.org/docs/index.php?DocID=6>

## **How to Write a Letter to the Editor** *(From the CTUW website)*

*Letters to the Editor* is one of the most widely read sections in a newspaper. Responding to an editorial or article that's published in your local paper is a good way to express yourself about the issue of the uninsured.

These tips will help:

1. **Link to current news.** Editors are interested in printing feedback from stories recently published in their papers.
2. **Make one clear argument.** The piece should be in favor of or critical of a particular position taken by a paper or described in an article.
3. **Be specific.** The letter should focus on a specific issue that was raised in an article or opinion piece.
4. **Cite the article.** Be sure to mention the title and date of the article you're responding to in one of your first two sentences. For example "Dear Editor, Your recent coverage of the uninsured (Healthcare in America, May 13th) was a thoughtful piece..."
5. **Stay calm.** One exclamation point per letter. Don't attack anyone personally, stick to the facts, and keep the letter respectful.
6. **Be brief.** Generally, four-to-six paragraphs are ideal. If you can't contain the piece to that length, consider [writing an op-ed](#) instead.
7. **Follow-up.** If you have sent your letter to the editor and haven't heard anything within a week, make a follow-up call to check on its status. Be aware that editors receive hundreds of letters and may not immediately respond to you.

Remember, you must include your name, address, and daytime phone number in your letter. Instructions for submitting a letter to the editor are usually at the bottom of the page where they appear or on the paper's website. Find out from your local paper the best way to send a letter. Some papers like them mailed; others prefer faxes, while others favor e-mails.

Source: <http://covertheuninsuredweek.org/docs/index.php?DocID=7>

## **How to Write a Press Release**

A press release is a document intended to convey the essential facts of your CTUW event to your local media. If you make your points clear and concise, and if you provide extensive contact information, you make it easy for media representatives to do their job. If you make their job easy, they'll keep working with you.

There are seven basic elements that every press release should have:

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** These words should appear in the upper left-hand margin, just under your letterhead. You should capitalize every letter.

**Contact Information:** Skip a line or two after release statement and list your name, title, telephone, and fax numbers. It is important to give your home and/or cell phone number since reporters often work on deadlines and may not be available until after hours.

**Headline:** Skip two lines after your contact information and use a boldface type.

**Dateline:** This should be the city your press release is issued from and the date you are mailing your release.

**Lead Paragraph:** The first paragraph needs to grasp the reader's attention and should contain the relevant information to your message such as the five W's (who, what, when, where, why).

**Text:** The main body of your press release where your message should fully develop.

**Recap:** At the lower left hand corner of your last page restate your product's specifications, highlight a product release date.

### *Press Release Template*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact Information

#### **Headline**

City, State, Date — Opening Paragraph (should contain: who, what, when, where, why)

Remainder of body text - Should include any relevant information to your products or services. Include benefits, why your product or service is unique. Also, include pertinent quotes.

If there is more than 1 page use:

-more-

(The top of the next page)

#### **Abbreviated headline (page 2)**

Remainder of text.

(Restate Contact information after your last paragraph):

For additional information or a sample copy, Contact: (all Contact information)

Your Organization's History (try to do this in one short paragraph)

### (centered on page, indicates Press Release is finished)

Source: <http://www.press-release-writing.com>