

## How-to-Do-It Stories Rank High with Editors in South Carolina

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## How-to-Do-It Stories Rank High with Editors in South Carolina

### **Abstract**

All of the 19 daily (AMs and PMs) and the more than 100 weekly newspaper editors in South Carolina were sent questionnaires.

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

Includes explanations of practical communication, training media methods, and equipment use (1-2 typed pages). Send briefs to Robert Hays or James F. Evans, Office of Agricultural Communications, College of Agriculture, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801.

## How-to-Do-It Stories Rank High with Editors in South Carolina

All of the 19 daily (AMs and PMs) and the more than 100 weekly newspaper editors in South Carolina were sent questionnaires. In addition, the lifestyle editors (or women's editors) of the morning newspapers (AMs) and afternoon newspapers (PMs) also received it.

There were 13 responses from the dailies (5 AMs and 8 PMs), 47 responses from the weeklies, and 11 responses from the lifestyle editors.

Results are given for the four subgroups, AMs, PMs, weeklies, and lifestyle editors. Occasionally, only results for all dailies and for all weeklies are presented. Comments to those questions requiring more than a coded response are included. They appear virtually as they were written on the questionnaires.

1. How many news releases do you estimate you receive in an average week from all colleges and universities in South Carolina?

Both weekly and daily editors responded they received about 19 releases a week. The question asked only about releases from college operations. Extrapolating from these figures, we can begin to estimate the enormous competition our operation faces from PR departments of all sorts in the state.

2. Approximately what percentage of these do you use in one or more editions of your paper each week?

The answers indicate that both weekly and daily editors use only about 6 out of 19 college releases they receive per week.

3. In order of importance, what are the criteria you use in deciding which college and university news releases will appear in your paper (rate in numerical order)?

Dailies and weeklies were consistent in their ranking:

1. Local interest in story
2. Importance or relevance of story
3. Readability
4. Physical appearance of release
5. Size, reputation of college or university

The only variation among the subgroups was that the AMs ranked "size, reputation" No. 4 and "physical appearance" No. 5. All respondents indicated that, by far, local interest and importance or relevance are the major factors in deciding whether to use a news release. The notable difference among the subgroups is that weeklies, as expected, place a higher value on local interest (about 32 percent more than the dailies). The implication for the news operation is clear: find every way possible to put local angles into releases, especially weekly papers, but also for the daily press.

4. Generally speaking, are the releases you receive from South Carolina colleges and universities too long? Too short? Of acceptable length?

More than 70 percent of the weeklies and nearly two-thirds of the dailies said the releases were "of acceptable length." The others said the releases were "too long."

5. Generally speaking, are the releases you receive good? Average? Poor? Unacceptable?

More than one-fourth of the dailies said the releases are "good," 70 percent said "average" and 4 percent said "poor." More than 40 percent of the weeklies said "good," 55 percent said "average" and 2 percent said "poor." These results are expected, based on the common belief that daily newspapers are generally more demanding in their standards.

6. Generally speaking, are the editing, grammar and spelling in South Carolina college and university news releases good? Average? Poor? Unacceptable?

More than 40 percent of the dailies said "good," 54 percent said "average" and 4 percent said "poor." Among the weeklies, two-thirds said "good" and one-third said "average." Again, the daily papers' standards seem to be higher.

7. When asked how much they edit releases from a South Carolina college or university, editors were given these four response categories:

TABLE 1  
NEWSPAPER'S EDITING OF RELEASES

	Daily responses	Weekly responses
"Edit for style but not heavily rewrite"	42%	45%
"Rewrite it entirely"	35%	6%
"Rewrite only the lead or selected portions"	19%	28%
"Run it as you receive it"	4%	21%

Again, it is obvious that daily papers do more rewriting than weeklies and that weeklies are far more likely to run a news release exactly as it is sent to them. The responses seem to confirm general experience with the media.

8. Which of the following best describes your feelings about the news releases you receive from colleges and universities?

TABLE 2  
EDITOR ATTITUDES TOWARD USEFULNESS OF RELEASES

	Daily responses	Weekly responses
"Generally useful"	33%	54%
"More useful than useless"	50%	37%
"A waste of time and money"	17%	9%

A welcomed result, as fully 83 percent of the dailies and 91 percent of the weeklies indicate that college press releases are useful in one way or another.

9. What, in your opinion, is the primary purpose of the news releases you receive from South Carolina colleges and universities?

TABLE 3  
PURPOSE OF NEWS RELEASES

	Daily Responses	Weekly Responses
"Mainly to promote the reputation or stature of the institution"	87.5%	76%
"Mainly to recruit students or generate financial contributions"	12.5%	24%

One editor's response was a pithy "good question." Although the editors were given an "other (please specify)" choice of response, none chose to do so. And none selected the response "Mainly to quell or moderate adverse or unfavorable publicity."

The remainder of the questionnaire dealt specifically with Clemson University's news releases. Generally they were better received by editors in all categories. Some results may be of general interest.

Regarding the types of stories they want from Clemson University, editors in all categories stress the hometown interest, or local angle, but as expected, weeklies placed the most importance on this factor in relation to the others. While local interest in a story is the primary consideration given by a paper in deciding whether to use a press release, the AMs give equal emphasis in the responses to timely feature stories and to news stories of general interest. As expected, lifestyle editors (including women's editors) place more emphasis on hometown and feature stories than on general news stories, as their pages are usually laid out days in advance of publication. Weeklies show less interest in Clemson's two- and three-part series of articles, perhaps because of space limitations and the time lag between publication days. All of the responses, incidentally, reflect fairly closely the actual breakdown of Clemson's news output by the categories listed.

**TABLE 4**  
**TYPES OF STORIES PREFERRED**

<b>Weekly Responses</b>	
1. Hometown stories	39%
2. Feature stories, timely	19%
3. News stories of general interest	18%
4. Feature stories, timeless	15%
5. 2-, 3-part interpretive articles	9%
<b>AM Responses</b>	
1. Hometown stories (tie)	23%
Feature stories, timely (tie)	23%
News stories of general interest (tie)	23%
2. Feature stories, timeless	17%
3. 2-, 3-part interpretive articles	13%
<b>PM Responses</b>	
1. Hometown stories	29%
2. Feature stories, timely	22%
3. News stories of general interest	20%
4. 2-, 3-part interpretive articles	16%

5. Feature stories, timeless Lifestyle Editor Responses	13%
1. Hometown stories	26%
2. Feature stories, timeless	24%
3. Feature stories, timely	19%
4. New stories of general interest	18%
5. 2-, 3-part interpretive articles	13%

Consumer advice scores well among all groups, a finding borne out by our success with such articles. Also interesting is the high level of interest in outdoor/recreation stories. An implication is that we should do more articles in both areas. Perhaps most significantly, we may be able to get more usage for stories about all colleges and programs if we can find some way to present them in the context of consumer interest writing, which is as much a matter of style and approach as of story substance.

Both weeklies and AM dailies rank agriculture first, reflecting their rural constituencies. PM dailies do not stress agricultural news, not unexpected since most are urban papers.

There seems to be little interest in science/technology as a category of information output. However, some of these stories are Clemson's most successful. But these are generally feature stories with fairly high "entertainment" value. Clemson's experience indicates straight science and technical news fares poorly and that the use ratio of announcements about technical meetings and programs is extremely low. An obvious improvement would be to incorporate more of the consumer advice and local interest factors into science writing.

Nobody seems much interested in psychology/sociology stories, except lifestyle editors. This result is not too surprising, as this kind of story fits well into the lifestyle (or women's) pages. Clemson has had great success with them. But in retrospect, many of them went to lifestyle editors, not the regular news desk, in the first place, and many of these stories had the "consumer advice" angle. We suspect that the respondents may be telling us, "We don't like stories **about** psychology and sociology, but we don't mind stories in which psychologists and sociologists tell us something interesting and useful about people's problems." This attitude may be equally true for other categories of stories that do not fare well in this survey—science and technology, politics and government, and economics—but which often seem to generate a lot of newspaper coverage.

A good market seems to exist for medical/health stories. This has

implications for nursing, bioengineering, OSHA and some basic research areas, and presumably, for teaching and research areas concerned with mental health.

In general, textile news is interesting only to PMs and AMs. Individual responses indicate that, as expected, textile news is of primary importance to papers in areas that have a strong local textile industry. Textiles is the most "local interest specific" category among the ten listed.

Education is the most perplexing category because, with hindsight, the word itself is too all-encompassing. Clemson has a College of Education, it is involved in higher education, its editors write about all sorts of education, and newspapers report on all levels of education. More so than with the other categories, about all we can say about the response for this category is that the editors are interested in "education" as they perceive that word. But we hesitate to suggest just what that perception is.

TABLE 5  
TOPICS PREFERRED IN RELEASES

Weekly Responses	
1. Agriculture	16%
2. Consumer advice	15%
3. Education	15%
4. Outdoor/recreation	12%
5. Economics	9%
6. Medical/health	9%
7. Politics/government	8%
8. Textiles	6%
9. Science and technology	6%
10. Psychology/sociology	5%
Lifestyle Editors Responses	
1. Consumer advice	17%
2. Medical/health	16%
3. Education	13%
4. Psychology/sociology	13%
5. Outdoor/recreation	11%
6. Economics	7%
7. Agriculture (tie)	6%
Science and technology(tie)	6%
8. Politics/government	5%
9. Textiles	5%



**AM Responses**

1. Agriculture	20%
2. Consumer advice	16%
3. Medical/health	12%
4. Textiles	10%
5. Science and technology	10%
6. Economics	9%
7. Outdoor/recreation	8%
8. Education	8%
9. Politics/government	4%
10. Psychology/sociology	2%

**PM Responses**

1. Consumer advice	17%
2. Economics	13%
3. Education	12%
4. Politics/government	10%
5. Textiles	10%
6. Outdoor/recreation (tie)	9%
Agriculture (tie)	9%
7. Medical/health	8%
8. Science and technology	6%
9. Psychology/sociology	5%

AMs, PMs and lifestyle editors like, by far, consumer-benefit stories. "How-to-do-it" stories also score high, especially with weekly editors, who rate it tops. "Research of benefit to farmers" ranked high with AMs and Weeklies, reflecting again their rural constituencies, but was of little interest to PMs and lifestyle editors.

**TABLE 6  
PUBLIC SERVICE INFORMATION PREFERRED**

	Weekly	AM	PM	Lifestyle
How-to-do-it stories for gardeners/homeowners	40%	29%	36%	38%
Research of benefit to consumers	29%	42%	43%	43%
Research of benefit to farmers	31%	29%	21%	19%

*—Anne Bellissimo, Associate Agricultural Editor and Educational Radio Producer, Clemson University, South Carolina*