

WRITING FOR THE NEWS MEDIA

While a school psychologist is most likely to write for school publications, it's advantageous to consider submitting an article to your local newspaper. In this section we'll look at two types of articles for newspapers.

WHY NEWSPAPERS

In developing a list of your target audiences, school psychologists should consider that many might not receive or read school publications. Involved parents and school staff will, but elected officials, business leaders, community leaders, and others aren't likely to receive publications from the school. Plus, newspapers are one more way to create awareness for those who do read school information.

Many communities are served by a major daily newspaper and one or more local daily or weekly newspapers. You may not be able to be published in *The New York Times*, but local papers tend to be interested in education and could be your best opportunity.

Every community has a local newspaper, many times freely distributed, that is widely read and contains the local pizza and other fast food coupons, in addition to local births, deaths, marriages, and courthouse news. These are widely read and have high impact. Use them.

TIPS TO ASSURE SUCCESS

There are ways to save work and help assure success as you work with the news media:

- Determine whether there is a school public relations professional on the district office staff. He/she will work with the news media and can provide names of reporters and editors, phone numbers, deadline information, and solid advice.
- Work as a team with other school psychologists in your school district or area. It doesn't make sense for three school psychologists to each submit a news release on the opening of school to the same newspaper. Divide responsibilities to save everyone time.
- Don't be disappointed if your first release is not published. It happens to people who earn their full-time living as PR pros. Try again. Even better, call the reporter or editor and ask how you can improve. Stay positive, don't demand or complain. Instead, indicate that you believe you have an important message and want to know if there are better ways to work with that paper.

NEWS RELEASES

School psychologists can consider sending news releases to local newspapers at appropriate times, such as the start of the school year. This is one more time to provide to the community the quality advice on youth and education that school psychologists have available. Another time is when a local school psychologist receives an honor or during any local celebration of school psychology. In that case consider developing a quote or quotes that communicate the key message(s) you are trying to communicate in your PR campaign on the importance of school psychology.

Writing the News Release

News releases should be sent only when you have information that reporters want to receive. If you earn a reputation of filling their mailboxes with inappropriate information, your releases quickly will be filling their wastebaskets and your credibility will suffer. When you have a newsworthy topic, remember the rules of journalistic writing — keep it short, use action words, and edit out everything that is not necessary.

Also, the strategic communicator sees how even basic news releases can be used to achieve the organization's communication objectives. For example, a typical release is one announcing an association's newly elected president and other officers. In addition to listing the names, consider including a quote from the president, which describes an important stance of the organization.

Most news articles are written in what's called the "inverted pyramid style." This simply means the most important information is at the start of the story and the least at the bottom. That way, if there is limited space, the material at the bottom can be eliminated. Journalists also talk about the five Ws and the H being included early in the story. That's who, what, where, why, when, and how. With that approach you deliver the key information quickly.

The sample news release in this section will provide an idea of style. Plus, keep these general guidelines in mind:

- News releases should express fact not opinion. The expression of opinion is called "editorializing" and should appear on the editorial pages. That's where op-ed articles come into play. In a release, report the facts and stay away from adjectives such as "wonderful teacher," or "outstanding program." Show that programs are outstanding by reporting their achievements.
- Make sure the facts are accurate. There's nothing that will kill your credibility more quickly than sending out incorrect information. Always verify your facts.
- Newspapers have a unique style. For example, months are abbreviated when used in a complete date, but spelled out when standing alone. Titles are capitalized if used before a person's name and lower case if following a name. Find a copy of the Associated Press Stylebook to learn news style. Many libraries have this, or it can be purchased through many college bookstores that teach news writing.
- Be sure to have a contact name and phone number for further information. If a reporter loves your story but has one question, having this information could mean the difference between publication and the trash can. Usually the contact information appears at the top of the release.
- Releases should be doubled-spaced. This allows reporters to make changes and notes on the release, plus it's easier to read.
- Use an individual's first and last names (middle initial if desired) the first time that individual is mentioned and only the last name with each subsequent mention.
- If the release is more than one page, each page except the last one should have "more" centered at the bottom. This indicates there's more to the release.
- Use any of the following symbols at the end of the story: ### -30- XXX

When delivering the news release, there are also guidelines to keep in mind. Most importantly, treat all media equally. Don't deliver the release personally to one reporter and mail it third class to others. Remember that media are competitive.

Know reporters' deadlines. If a weekly newspaper has a deadline of Tuesday noon, don't deliver your release Wednesday morning and expect to see it printed.

Keep the fax machine in mind. Sending your release by fax adds a sense of urgency to it. However, if you fax every release or less important releases, credibility becomes an issue. In major cities for very timely, important events, delivery services can also add this sense of importance. Overnight mail is one more way to attract attention.

Sample news releases are included following this section. Please add to them when you see worthy news from school psychologists and feel free to template them to show off your own achievements.

OP-ED ARTICLES

A second way to deliver your message(s) through newspapers is in an op-ed (opinion-editorial) article. Many newspapers throughout the country print these articles, which are opinion pieces written by individuals not on the newspaper's staff.

Op-ed articles do not have to be major policy statements such as those that appear in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. School psychologists should consider approaching small local newspapers about a monthly column of advice to parents on dealing with young people. Using the information in *Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts From Your School Psychologist* provides a wealth of

usable information. Start with a paragraph explaining the importance of the topic, include several suggestions from a handout, and conclude by explaining how parents can obtain more information from their local school psychologist. When this important information comes from school psychologists, people will see that you are valuable to the development of youth and a key part of the educational system.

Op-eds also provide the chance to explain your role and contributions to the local school system although they may be harder to interest the newspaper in publishing.

PLACING AN OP-ED ARTICLE

What Is an Op-Ed Article?

An Op-Ed or Opinion Article is an opinion piece published in a newspaper but written by someone who is not on that newspaper's staff. Many large dailies, smaller dailies, and weekly newspapers use op-eds somewhere in their editorial section. On many large newspapers, that paper's editorials, the editorial cartoon and columns by staff writers will appear on one editorial page. Opposite that page, the op-ed articles will be run, and that's where the term "op-ed" comes from — it's opposite the editorial page.

The important point is that these articles provide anyone with the chance to publish his or her opinion. You don't have to convince a reporter to come and cover something; you can express your opinion. You may see that the president of the chamber of commerce or taxpayers association is published in the op-ed columns. **This opportunity is available to you, too.**

So What Do I Do?

First, determine whether newspapers in your area use op-ed articles. You can do this simply by reading the editorial pages. See if national columnists or local officials are published. Read these articles. Become familiar with style, length, format, messages, and anything else that makes them stand out.

Second, decide roughly what you would like to write. Sample topics for school psychologists might include:

- How parents can help students learn
- Dealing with anger
- Organizational skills for children
- Divorce and children
- Depression in children
- What is a school psychologist?

Third, determine the newspaper where you would like to submit your op-ed article and find out who makes decisions about those articles at the paper. It's typical to select the largest newspaper in your community and offer the article to that paper on an exclusive basis, meaning you will not submit it elsewhere until that newspaper decides whether it will use the piece. If that paper publishes the article, you cannot later give it to another paper. If the first newspaper does not use your article, you are free to send it elsewhere once the decision to reject is made.

To find out the name of the person in charge of op-ed articles, simply phone the newspaper and ask. On large papers, there will probably be one editor of the op-ed page. On smaller papers, the editorial page editor will make the decision; on weeklies it will probably be the editor or publisher. Give that individual a call and let him or her know your interest in writing an op-ed article and the topic. Focus on why your article is important to the community. Let the editor know you'll offer this exclusively. The editor will hopefully express an interest in looking at your article. Do not expect to be told that your article will be printed. If the editor is interested, ask about length, deadlines, and any other details.

Now You're Ready To Write

Once the editor has said he or she will consider your article, it's time to write. Write in a crisp, clear style. It's essential to forget educational jargon. Include local examples — that will make the article much stronger.

After writing and editing the article, send or deliver it to the op-ed editor. The sooner you can get this done after your phone conversation the better, because your proposal will be fresh in the editor's mind. If you mail your article, it's okay to phone the editor a few days later to confirm that the article has been received and inquire when a decision might be made. Frequent phone calls, however, will bug the editor, hurt your chances of publication, and are inappropriate.

About Yourself

It's important to include a few sentences about yourself since some newspapers identify the writer of op-ed articles. You want readers to know that a school psychologist has provided this information. This should not be your resume, but one or two sentences. For example:

John Smith has been a school psychologist at Sunnyside Middle School since 1988.

Afterwards

If your article is used, it would be appropriate to write a thank you note to the person who made the decision. You should develop a relationship with this individual for the future.

If there are key people in your community who should see the message in your op-ed article, send copies of it to them. Having your message published adds credibility to it— make use of that. Appropriate people to see your message might be state legislators, locally elected officials, business leaders, parent group leaders, etc.

Some Final Points

And three final suggestions:

1. Do not ask for a guarantee that your article will be used— only for the chance to submit it and have it reviewed.
2. Submit your article typed doubled spaced.
3. Include a cover letter on your school letterhead, thanking the editor for this opportunity.

SAMPLE NEWS RELEASES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For Further Information Contact:
Your Name, phone

Date

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CALL PARENTS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AS SCHOOL OPENS

Parents have always been a child's first teacher, and they continue to be an important part of all students' learning, according to Sam Smith, school psychologist at Sunnyside Middle School.

"As we look to providing the best learning opportunities for all students, educators and parents can provide a powerful team," said Smith as school is opening for the 1,300 students in the Sunnyside School District. "There are many effective ways that parents can support learning in the home."

Smith offered five specific tips:

- One
- Two
- Three PULL TIPS FROM ONE OF YOUR HANDOUTS
- Four
- Five

"It's also important that parents get to know the educators working with their children," Smith said. "School psychologists, teachers and principals urge parents to phone their school whenever they have questions."

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Date

LOCAL EDUCATOR NAMED PSYCHOLOGIST OF THE YEAR

Sally Kennedy, a school psychologist at Sunnyside Elementary School, has been named School Psychologist of the Year by the Sunnyside Kiwanis Club, according Fred Upshaw, Kiwanis Club president.

Kennedy has been a school psychologist at Sunnyside Elementary for 12 years and estimates that during that time she has worked with more than 1,200 students.

“Many students need just a little extra help at the start of their education to get them on the right path,” Kennedy reported. “When we provide that help early, the student is less frustrated, parents can give support at home, and the school system doesn’t have to provide additional services in future years.”

Kennedy has started a homework club after school, worked with numerous parent groups and has written a parent support column for the local newspapers for the past three years. She is a graduate of Northeastern University and has worked in the Sunnyside School District for 10 years.

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Toys and Holidays

By _____, School Psychologist

Parents, don't get sucked in.

It is Christmas time and millions of dollars are going to be spent for all types of toys. Much of the commercial patter accompanying advertising attests to the "educational value" of many of these toys.

Parents are motivated by good, sound reason for buying toys for their youngsters during the Christmas season. However, all consumers should beware of false claims that the manufacturer's products are "educational" or will bolster a youngster's intelligence.

Creative Playthings, a company that makes imaginative and sturdy products for pre-schoolers, had a commercial message that a "planned environment can affect intelligence in the first four years of life by about 2.5 IQ points every year." It went on to say that "parents must examine carefully everything they introduce into the child's environment. They must know the moment of readiness. You can help your children achieve their full potential." No doubt, is the implication, only Creative Playthings can reach this potential. Not so.

There are many other toy producers who directly state or gently hint that a child's development will be maximized if the child is exposed to particular toys. Despite these claims, there is absolutely no evidence to support the notion that certain toys advance development greater than the experiences parents can provide for free.

What greater toy for a one year old than cooking pans and wooden spoons? In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that common household objects are as sound for a child's development as special products that are advertised.

The rise of preschoolers in childcare is related to the growing percentage of mothers of preschoolers in the workforce. The interest by parents to provide appropriate early experiences for their children feeds the aggressive campaign by most toy manufacturers to capture a sizeable share of this lucrative market. This produces advertising campaigns which distort and exaggerate the developmental benefits of certain toys. And it is not only with preschoolers but also with the advertising campaigns extolling the learning benefits of computers for school age children.

The most creatively designed toy or the user-friendliest computer will be useless without accompanying time and effort on the part of the parent. There is no short cut. It is the parental interest and involvement that can accentuate product's usefulness, not the product itself.

Most people would agree that the criterion for buying a toy or technological gadget should be the amount of fun and enjoyment the youngster receives when using it. There is no evidence to suggest that these products, however "educational," can facilitate development more than a caring parent can.

Buy the toy or gadget because it gives you and your child pleasure, not because of any educational edge. The educational edge comes from spending time with your child, with or without toys.

Definitely buy these toys if you are inclined to, but be aware there is little, if any, evidence to show that buying certain types of toys increases a child's learning potential.

Alex Thomas wrote this for the Port Clinton Beacon. Feel free to use your byline, adapt, or otherwise alter this article to meet your purpose.

TV Should be Viewed Cautiously

By _____, School Psychologist

Both the Surgeon General and the National Institute of Mental Health have cautioned us about the influence of television. Most parents today have no memory of a childhood without television and today children spend as much as 30 hours a week watching television. By the time they graduate from high school most students have spent about 12,000 hours with the school and about 18,000 hours with the TV.

All in all the Surgeon General should order that all televisions sets sold in the United States be imprinted with: **Warning To Parents: Excessive Television Viewing Is Harmful To Your Children's Health.**

Television has such an important effect on children's lives, particularly young children, and many parents fail to appreciate this. For young children the biggest danger is not what television causes, but what it prevents. When a young child passively sits in front of the TV they are not doing other things: they are not playing with pots and pans in the kitchen cupboard, they are not asking questions, they are not playing make believe, and they are not interacting with other children or adults. Children quickly receive the message that they are encouraged to watch rather than participate, to accept rather than question, and most of all they are passive and much of the time, mindlessly entertained; two behaviors that are not compatible with good school achievement.

There are ten simple rules that families can follow to have a policy regarding television.

1. Don't keep the television on all the time while you are home.
2. Do not eat all family meals in front of the television.
3. Limit the number of hours the television is on.
4. Have your children choose the programs that interest them and talk with your children about the program when it is over.
5. No child should have their bedtime extended so they can watch the "end of something."
6. Under no circumstances should a child in first or second grade stay up past 9:00 if there is school the next morning.
7. Change your own habits of viewing: Subscribe to a magazine, read a book from the library, do a crossword puzzle, yell at your cat, play Uno. Model alternate behavior.
8. Help your child develop an interest or hobby that is more constructive and less passive than TV viewing.
9. Eliminate all unplanned and incidental viewing. Watching TV while doing other activities, at least for children, may teach a subtle habit of not fully attending to anything.
10. If any of your children watch, on the average, more than three hours of television a day, you really do need to think about how they spend their time.

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School's Out

By _____, School Psychologist

Summer vacation has arrived and the kids are all one year older while most of their parents have aged considerably more during the same period. Summer is usually considered a relaxing period where the schedules of the school year are abandoned, kids sleep until ten, go to bed at midnight, and have far more freedom. “No more pencils, no more books” for many is replaced by much more TV, “much more hanging out.” If that can spell ‘trouble’ in River City it spells the same in Port Clinton (*change name to reflect your community wherever it appears below*).

Education isn't something that happens only nine months of the year though. Education is, after all, what is left over after you forget everything that you have learned. Education continues through the summer and the formal part of that process is the responsibility of the parent. To make the summer months for children most productive and enjoyable, here are some guidelines that may be helpful:

1. Know where your children are and what they are doing at all times. Some years ago a message circulated throughout the media saying: “It is ten o'clock do you know where your children are?” As parents we should know the location and activity of your children at all times. Don't let guilt get you. Wanting to know what your children are doing and where they are doing it means parental concern and love, not parental lack of trust.
2. Get your children involved in some regular activity. There is abundance of opportunity for children in this area during the summer. The Port Clinton Recreation Department sponsors a variety of sports and craft activities for children during the entire summer. The Port Clinton Schools have an Enrichment Program during the beginning of summer for elementary age children. The baseball leagues are ready to begin play in another week and many teams still could use some players. The Ida Rupp Library (*use your local community library*) is open every week during the summer and sponsors programs for children.
3. Occasionally, do something spontaneous or not typical of “old fashioned” parents. Go to a movie, walk to an ice cream store, picnic in a park, or go swimming. Anything that you normally don't do but would like to. It can be enlightening how much these unplanned activities can spur communication. Summer, without school deadlines and responsibilities, is a perfect time to just talk about how things are going.
4. Make sure that reading is part of your child's day. For young children, the biggest predictor of eventual school success is how much parents have read to their child. For school age children, one of the biggest predictors of school and life success is the amount of independent reading that they do. A weekly trip to the library, a planned time during the day for reading, a subscription to a magazine the child likes and is appropriate for the age (Jack & Jill, Mad, Seventeen, Sports Illustrated, etc.) are all ways that reading can continue through the year. If you can afford it, buy your child books that are of high interest.
5. Limit television. Television can be harmful to your children's health. Not so much for the activities which it may encourage, but for the activities which it prevents. Give your child twenty hours of TV-watching vouchers per week. Children should not watch any more TV during the summer than they do during the school year.
6. Maintain as close to a regular routine as possible. Although things are looser during the summer months maintaining regular bedtimes, regular waking times, and regular mealtimes establishes a routine and discipline that pays dividends all through the year.

Finally, if you become tired of hearing the children say that “there is nothing to do” when you just want a few moments of peace and quiet, don't ask them to leave. Just say: “Why, when I was your age, during the summer we...” They will leave you alone on their own accord.

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