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[Mike](#)

[The first rule of public relations, part 2](#)

You now know the first rule of public relations. (For those needing a refresher, see [The first rule of public relations.](#))

But why does a professor need to know this? After all, don't those of us working in media relations (public information officers, or PIOs, as we're also commonly known) write the news releases and stories?

Yes, but professors typically approve our drafts prior to release or publication. It's a common public relations practice since they're the subject experts. We have just one request: Please don't ask us to rewrite a release or story as though they're meant for the [Journal of Atmospheric and Solar-Terrestrial Physics](#) (or some other scholarly—but arcane—journal).

You see, [News & Events](#), the [Democrat and Chronicle](#) and most daily newspapers—from the [Peoria Times](#) to [The New York Times](#)—don't target the same audience as the [Journal of Analytical and Applied Pyrolysis](#). Rather, the mainstream, *general-interest* media that we frequently target reach *diverse* audiences.

Note that a *diverse* audience can be your target—it need not always be narrow. And, while engineers and scientists may comprise *part of* a diverse audience, it may also include bakers, bean counters, starving artists and student dishwashers. Our news stories, therefore, must be written in a style that's *clear, relatable and understandable* to a range of readers. Or, as I emphasized to my Public Relations Writing students (from our text, *Public Relations Writing*, by Thomas Bivins):

One of the most important jobs of public relations is to explain complex issues in simple terms (that's such a crucial point that it was an exam question).

John Wilford, science reporter for *The New York Times*, also put it well:

“Mostly, I write for an audience of one—the layperson.”

Similarly, from *Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go* (a book that I touted in my class so often it's a wonder my students didn't think I had been paid to plug it):

“When you write to John Q. Public, have something concrete to say; say it concretely, then quit.”

Mind you, writing in a *clear, relatable and understandable* style need *not* mean “dumbed down.” So, when writing about 193-nanometer liquid immersion nanolithography, for example, I argued against including such a mouthful in the headline or lead of my news release—because, while a microelectronics engineer would know what it means, a staff assistant, sociologist, sign-language interpreter or any one of [News & Events](#)' other 7,500 readers might not. So, when a reporter picked up the story, it was gratifying to read the headline in the morning newspaper:

[Teensy technology](#)

Á°Á°Á°Yes! The reporter (and copydesk editor—they're the ones who write the headlines) got it!Á°Á°Á°

To the layperson, the news *isn't* 193-nanometer liquid immersion nanolithography. The news is *teensy technology* (like what's inside your iPod).

Now you know why professors, too, should know the first rule of public relations.

1. [The Tiger Beat](#) Jun05

The first rule of public relations

One afternoon last fall, I stood before my Public Relations Writing students a couple days after we had a guest speaker and I offered a confession that went something like this: “In case you were wondering, I inform our guest...

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