Navigating Press Releases for Papers

Background:

What are press releases and why do I need one?
- Press releases are quick summaries of research projects that allow other members of the media to write full news stories
- In a study of >1600 medical and life science manuscripts across 11 journals, having a press release increased paper downloads by 65%!
- Most universities have a press office - like The Current for UCSB

How do I get started at NCEAS?
- We have a google form for press releases for NCEAS working groups/ residents
- Responses will be sent to science writers at the Current, who will follow up with you with any additional questions, interview requests, and/or drafts for review
- Simply fill out the form (it takes about 30 minutes to gather files and write responses) as soon as your paper has been accepted

Tips:
1. Put the “news” at the beginning!
   - When we talk about science to other scientists, we often put the results at the end - but that’s the opposite flow of information for a news story about science
   - In the first three sentences of the press release, the work should be put into context, results described, and implications highlighted - then the details!
   - If you are having trouble brainstorming these different aspects of your work, try out this message box worksheet from Compass or even talking to a friend or relative that isn’t a scientist

2. Craft analogies or metaphors
   - Even simple metaphors have powerful effects on science communication
“Taking an image of Sgr A* at 27,000 light-years away from Earth is akin to taking a photo of a single grain of salt in NYC using a camera in LA”

“We were able to measure whales by flying a camera high above them - essentially giving them a health check without them knowing we were there”

3. **Ground numbers in social context**
   - Similar to a metaphor, you can use “social math” to put more abstract quantities into context, for example:
     
     The Saturn V rocket was 363 feet tall, about the height of a 36-story-tall building, and 60 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty.
     
     In the midwest, it’s 7°F warmer in the winter since 1974. That’s the difference between wearing long underwear and not wearing long underwear.
   
   - Check out the [measure of things](#), a search engine for creating numerical comparisons.

4. **Tell a story**
   - Research has shown that people’s brains light up more for narratives than for listings of facts. They also retain the information better and longer!
   - Remember that stories with narrative arcs have a beginning, middle, and end.
   - A few ideas on story types (from AGU's Sharing Science) - these can be used for inspiration, but no need to force your science into any of these schemes, it’s important to sell your science but not over-hype it.
     
     - Journey: traveling to a place to study something, performing fieldwork.
     - Quest: similar to a story, but seeking answers to big questions and covering trials and defeats.
     - Mystery: framing the story around discovery, like insights to past climate from clues in glacial ice.
- Stranger comes to town: someone or something unexpected arrives, similar to a mystery but more specific, like the COVID pandemic
- More storytelling tips and prompts from NPR

5. Avoid jargon
- Remember that the intended audience of press releases is non-scientists (or scientists from other fields). Here are some examples of what the impact of removing jargon can be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jargon-filled</th>
<th>De-jargoned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microvesicle-derived microRNAs are important for intermolecular</td>
<td>Cancer cells communicate through a new molecular messenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>signaling in tumorigenesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We present materials, mechanics, and integration schemes that</td>
<td>New, high-tech digital cameras mimic bug eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afford scalable pathways to working arthropod-inspired cameras</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with nearly full hemispherical shapes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- If you must use jargon, try to only pick one thing to define - you will lose your audience if it becomes a vocabulary lesson
- There are some great web tools to help assess this - a fun exercise is to use XKCD’s UpGoer5 Text Editor, which forces you to type with only the 1000 most common words - another option is the de-jargonizer, an online grading tool that analyzes the amount of jargon in your text

6. Send additional materials
- When sending an email to set up a press release, include additional photos, videos, headshots, or even graphical figures, especially when these components help tell your story

7. Respond quickly to follow up emails
- News cycles are very fast - try to respond on timescales of minutes and hours, not days or weeks
References:

AGU Sharing Science. “A Scientist’s Guide to Working with the Media”


“Tips for Scientists Communicating with the Press | American Association for the Advancement of Science.”

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0016782.