

Preferred ways of writing things in press releases

Boosting business communication teaching and learning material with DDL activities

Sylvie De Cock



Setting the scene

- Two-year MA in Multilingual Communication (UCLouvain, Belgium)
 - two major languages (Dutch, English, French, German)
 - business language / communication
 - economic, legal, social and political issues in Dutch/English/...-speaking countries
 - corporate communication and economics
- Internship: at least three months in year 2 (term 2)
 - In Belgium or abroad
 - Internship reports
 - Languages used
 - Tasks, projects

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 - **Tasks, projects**
 - **Press releases**
 - widely used business communication genre

Press releases

- ‘relatively short texts resembling news stories and containing what is considered by the issuer to be newsworthy information’
- ‘with the purpose of having them picked up by the press and turned into actual news stories’
- ‘thus generating publicity, in the conviction that third-party endorsement is the best way to promote a company’s image and reputation.’

Catenaccio (2008: 11)

Press releases

- External communication, PR
- Targeted at:
 - journalists, investors, general public (Catenaccio 2008)
- Multipurpose, complex hybrid genre (Bremner 2014, Catenaccio 2008)
 - Aim to inform, persuade, promote
- Preformulated to resemble news reports (Jacobs 2006):
 - third person self-reference
 - self-quotation

This paper

- Treatment of press releases in **business communication textbooks/guidebooks** ?
 - + a peek into **general business English textbooks**
- **corpus-driven research** into the language of press releases → **learning/teaching business communication materials** ?

Business (communication) textbooks/guidebooks

- An **exploration**...
- **Caveat:** convenience sample
 - 'relatively' recent
 - A mixed bag
 - ~~Comprehensive examination~~ – **12 titles in all**

Business communication textbooks/guidebooks

- **Business English Writing Skills. A Writing Survival Kit.**
 - Byrne (2014) - Acco
- **Business Writing for Dummies.**
 - Canavor, N. (2021) - John Wiley & Sons
- **English for Business Communication.**
 - Chan (2020) - Routledge
- **Excellence in business communication.**
 - Thill & Bovée (2022) - Pearson Education Limited
- **Writing for strategic communication industries.**
 - Roberts (n.d.) - Columbus: Ohio State University Pressbooks
<https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/stratcommwriting/>
- **Beginner's Guide to Writing Powerful Press Releases.**
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General Business English textbooks (B2-C2 levels)

- **Business Advantage. Student's Book Upper-intermediate. Cambridge English Corpus**
 - Handford, Lisboa, Koester & Pitt (2011) - CUP
- **Business Advantage. Student's Book Advanced. Cambridge English Corpus**
 - Lisboa & Handford (2012) - CUP
- **In Company. Upper-intermediate Student's book.**
 - Powell (2011) - Macmillan
- **Intelligent Business. Coursebook with Style Guide – Upper Intermediate.**
 - Trappe & Tullis (2006) - Pearson
- **Intelligent Business. Coursebook with Style Guide – Advanced.**
 - Trappe & Tullis (2011) - Pearson

Coverage

Business communication textbooks/guidebooks	6/7
General Business English textbooks (B2-C2 levels)	2/5

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2 / 5 → 1 / 4 (same!)

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Press releases = pretty specific!

What?

A word cloud of NLP-related terms. The words are arranged in a roughly circular pattern. The largest word is 'purpose', followed by 'context', 'target', 'length', 'quote', 'preformulation', 'structure', 'inverted_pyramid', 'example', 'wh-questions', and 'lexico-grammatical_features'.

length
purpose
context
quote target preformulation
lexico-grammatical_features
example structure
wh-questions inverted_pyramid

In a nutshell

What?	
Context/purpose/target	+ + +
Example/structure/format/layout (elements)	+ +
Information management	+
‘Preformulation’	-
Lexico-grammatical features	- -

Lexico-grammatical features

- ‘Use of the **passive voice** is recommended (a classic formal, factual, distance-taking device)’ (Byrne 2014: 76)
- ‘written in the **third person (he/she/it/they)**, using the **first person (I)** only for quotes, and completely omitting the **second person (you)**’ (Kennedy 2014: 28)
- ‘Limit the use of **adjectives** and **adverbs** as much as possible.’ → ‘not ad copy’ (Kennedy 2014: 43)

Corpora?

- preferred ways of writing things in press releases
- → learning/teaching business communication materials ?

Corpus-driven research into the language of press releases

- To what extent do **press releases and business news reports differ** in their **use of lexical bundles** ?
 - starting point to access and identify the preferred ways of writing things
 - do any differences reflect the **specific communicative purposes** of each genre (Biber and Barbieri 2007) ?

De Cock & Granger (2021)

Two interconnected business genres

Press releases

- Emanate from companies
- Targeted at: journalists, investors, general public (Catenaccio 2008)
- Aim to inform, persuade, promote (Catenaccio 2008)
- Are preformulated to resemble news reports (Jacobs 2006)

Business news reports

- Emanate from **journalists**
- Targeted at: **general public**
- Aim to **inform, qualify**
- Can be **based on press releases** (Jacobs 2018)

Our students...

Data and method

	BeRel corpus	BeNews corpus
What?	Press releases	News reports
Where from?	Official corporate websites < top 200 American-based companies (2019 Fortune 500 list)	Business sections < mainstream and specialist UK and US newspapers and magazines
Tokens	1,029,183	1,062,240

Key bundle analysis

‘offers researchers a powerful means of gaining access to the meanings and values of **specialized discourse communities**’
(Groom 2010: 73)

DDL boost?

- **Key bundles:** specific communicative purposes, preferred ways of writing things
- An interesting starting point for a **DDL boost**
 - Genre awareness raising & genre acquisition
 - As part of an integrated approach
- Genre teaching = ‘a springboard for students to create their own texts’ (Bremner 2018: 39)
 - genres = products of particular professional communities
 - contextualisation and discourse approach (Hyland 2022)
 - → help students participate in professional communities

A multi-faceted 'springboard'

Business
communication
textbooks/guidebooks

Ethnographic
research
e.g. Van Hout et al.
(2011), Jacobs (2018)

Guest lectures by
professionals

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Exploring whole texts
(and different parts)

Concordances
Typical lexico-
grammatical features
**+ going back to the
text**

Frequency lists

DDL boost

Corpus consultation
(writing)

Top ten key adjectives in BeRel and BeNews

?	?
<i>Excited</i>	<i>Last</i>
<i>Available</i>	<i>Biggest</i>
<i>Innovative</i>	<i>British</i>
<i>Leading</i>	<i>Economic</i>
<i>Proud</i>	<i>Bad</i>
<i>Global</i>	<i>Worst</i>
<i>Unique</i>	<i>Likely</i>
<i>Effective</i>	<i>Big</i>
<i>Committed</i>	<i>European</i>
<i>Strategic</i>	<i>Foreign</i>

+ Hands-on exploration

- *"We are pleased to announce this additional investment in our Houston Ship Channel marine terminals," said A.J. "Jim" Teague, chief executive officer of Enterprise's general partner.*
- *"I am confident that Shefali will position MassMutual as a disrupter and leader in voluntary benefits marketplace as we deliver highly personalized, real-time experiences that customers increasingly expect," said Hassara.*
- *Nimbley continued, "We are excited to increase our geographic diversity with a complex refinery like Torrance in the dynamic West Coast fuels market.*
- *"I am honored and humbled to lead CCNA during a time of great opportunity in our industry," he said.*
- *"At Mondelez International, we are committed to reducing packaging waste and making all our packaging recyclable by 2025. (...)," says Debora Koyama, Chief Marketing Officer, Mondelez Europe.*
- *"We look forward to building on the momentum from Unified Plan 2020 and providing a consistent, reliable service product for our customers," Fritz said.*

- It is not inconceivable that that total could swell to a peak of 1 million
- Its search engine business ranks No.3 in the market and there is no evidence that is going to improve.
- There has been a series of top level moves including the decision last week by Mr Rubin to resign from Citigroup's board
- Investor confidence will only return with an improvement in the macroeconomic situation, and by that time it could be too late for many Aim-listed groups
- The State is likely to end up with a stake of up to 20 per cent in the bank, according to the French press.
- The apparent correction is unlikely to have been caused directly by an institution like Morgan Stanley
- In addition, with interest rates declining, vehicle demand appears to be firming up in India
- In response to the downturn, Angela Merkel's coalition government seems to have abandoned its previous public contempt for "crass" Keynesianism

A DDL boost

- Both genres **inform** but in addition:
 - business news reports: **reporting** function $\Rightarrow$ impersonal framing
 - press releases: **promoting** and **persuasive** functions $\Rightarrow$ personal framing

Curated examples + hands-on exploration

A DDL boost

- **Key bundles → typical features (press releases)**

- *today announced that*
 - *announced today that*
 - *chief executive officer*
 - *senior vice president*
 - *executive vice president*
- it has/is ; the ; a*

Hands-on → exploring the corpus using concordancing

Looking ahead

- Work in progress!
- Trying it out in the classroom
 - Curated examples - worksheets
 - Hands-on exploration (AntConc 4.1.0 ?)
- Not just 'corporate' press releases
 - ALSO: press releases by NGOs, governments,...
 - DIY corpora (Charles 2019)
- 'We're excited about this opportunity'

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