

How to Write a PSA

Writing PSAs

A public service announcement (PSA) or public service advertisement is messaging that informs the public about an issue or cause and generally tries to raise awareness or change the public’s attitude or behaviour towards a social issue. A PSA is distributed through the media either in print, online or broadcast (radio or television) format. The media will often donate space or air time on behalf of the organizations or causes they believe will benefit their target audience.

In general, PSAs are sent to the media “ready to air” in either audio or video formats or for print as an image file. Sometimes radio stations, especially community or university campus stations, prefer the PSAs to be sent in a script format so their announcers can read them on air.

Developing your PSA

A PSA should include a hook, essentially something to grab the listener or viewer’s attention. Sometimes this might be a shocking statistic, something comedic or using something with an emotional appeal. Think about the message(s) you want your target audience to hear and select only the most important points. In the same style as key message development, keep your PSA clear, complete, concise and correct. PSAs should also answer the 5Ws – who, what, where, when and why. One other critical piece is that PSAs should end with a specific ask and/or answer what you want the reader/listener/viewer to do after they’ve heard your message (call to action). PSAs should be persuasive and capture the audiences’ attention.

Format:

PSAs can be anywhere from 10 to 60 seconds in length. Generally the length and word count follow the pattern below:

Length of PSA	10 seconds	15 seconds	20 seconds	30 seconds
Number of words	20-25 words	30-35 words	40-50 words	60-75 words

Guidelines to follow when formatting:

- Double or triple space the copy
- At the beginning of your PSA, include dates when the PSA should run
- Include the PSA’s length in seconds and the word count
- List the group (target audience) the PSA is for

- Include the title of the PSA
- The first line should aim to grab the audience’s attention quickly
- Include a call to action
- Put contact information at the end of your PSA

Broadcast PSAs should arrive two weeks before an event and magazine PSAs should arrive before the copy deadline, which is usually one to three months or more in advance.

Make sure to call ahead and find out who handles PSAs, so that you can forward your package to the right person or department. There are also PSA distribution services that you can pay to use for a mass distribution. Generally, PSAs should be sent to one of the following contacts:

- Public service managers
- Advertising Sales
- Promotion Managers

Tips for Writing a PSA

- Avoid clichés such as, “this is an announcement...” or “we are holding an event...”
- Use repetition in a radio PSA to make sure your message is heard, but don’t use it in close proximity
- Emphasize and maintain a narrow focus
- Use the inverted pyramid technique from news writing (most important points to least important points)
- Use present tense and the active voice
- Use a conversational style
- Avoid unfamiliar or difficult words to pronounce
- Break up complex sentences
- Avoid long lists, colons, semicolons, brackets
- Avoid too many pronouns
- Use conjunctions and prepositions sparingly
- Vary sentence length to give rhythm
- Watch for confusion over abbreviations and numbers
- Test your script before you send it out

Getting Your PSA Aired or Printed

Make sure you find out what a radio or TV station's policies are regarding PSAs before you submit one. Print publications will also have specific guidelines to follow that you should become familiar with. Sometimes stations require the PSA script while others require a fully produced, ready-to-air version. Stations will vary on their PSA requirements, so make sure to call ahead and find out their rules. Stations will also have different stipulations around PSA length and how much advance notice they need. The more you practice and follow their guidelines, the more likely your PSA will be used.