

Teaching press release as a hybrid genre in the Academic Writing course (English language, science majors)

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Science media discourse is dynamically developing in the 21st century, and the genre of a press release is gaining its popularity in the modern context of mediatization of science. Despite that, a press release remains to be underestimated both in media linguistics and in applied linguistics, English for specific purposes (ESP), and academic writing. The purpose of the article is to describe the process of teaching a press release within the framework of genre pedagogy. The first objective is to explore the hybrid nature of a press release by addressing the headline-secondary headline-lead structure in English and Russian in the deconstruction stage. In the independent construction stage, the English-language press releases of Russian students are analyzed with a special emphasis on framing elements structure. The results showed the following trends. Students ignored secondary headlines, avoided hedges, and chose the favorite expressive means of the Russian tradition — alliteration and personification, thus demonstrating the influence of the Russian language and culture. In the process of writing leads, students used two major strategies. The first strategy was in telling a story of a research event and “forgetting” the scientific component. Another strategy was a different one — foregrounding the scientific component of the text. Students overexplained the topic and problem, making a lead similar to the Introduction of the research article. In both cases, hybridization of a press release seemed to be lost. The research has proven the fact of the significant role of a press release for the Academic Writing course. Undoubtedly, it is a good way to introduce the modern sociocultural context of mediatization of science as well as the variety of genres and their interdiscursive nature. In practice, however, the student writing demonstrates an influence of the Russian tradition in headlines and neglecting the hybrid nature of the genre in leads.

Keywords: press release, hybrid genre, academic writing, headline, lead.

Problem statement

The 21st century began as the time of “information explosion” practically in all fields of research; the process of digitalization of science with the Internet being the main transmitter of knowledge, contributed to changing audiences, formats, and text genres of academic writing.

Mediatization of science (N. Fairclough) helped change dramatically science news journalism created by the efforts of the well-known English-speaking scholars in the 20th century [van Dijk 1988; Bell 1991; Bell, Garrett 1996; Fairclough 1989, 1995]. In Russia, the process of integration into the global science media discourse is going slowly as “in

this country journalism remains a key theory-based field with predominantly Russian scholars doing their research” [Vyrkovsky, Smirnov 2018: 44]¹. This research is mainly in the field of the humanities (i. e., the newly born field of media linguistics) and is not much interested in joining efforts with the technical sciences.

This article aims to integrate the major achievements of the global and national trends in journalism and address one of the most popular genres of the modern science media discourse — online science news stories, and to be more specific — a press release. While considering the genre of a press release, we have a dual perspective- to define the main features of a press release as a hybrid genre in the system of science media discourse and then to put a press release into the teaching context of the genre-based pedagogy. Thus, the purpose of the article is primarily pedagogical — to see the value of writing a press release for students — attendees of the Academic Writing course in the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology.

The structure of the article meets the set purpose. A press release is addressed in the genre-based perspective and then as a classroom genre and a pedagogical tool in the Academic Writing course (Section 2). Section 3 provides the essence of the experiment and the methodology. The process of working on a press release is described in several stages with a particular focus on the deconstruction stage (Section 4) and the independent construction stage (Section 5). In both stages, the genre-specific structural parts of a press release — headline-secondary headline-lead — are foregrounded.

Press release: Scientific context

Genre analysis has shown that genres do not exist in isolation. On the one hand, they develop and evolve (dynamic, fluid genres); on the other hand, they are in constant dialogue with each other (interdiscursivity).

In science media discourse, the most common form of reporting events of the day is a news report [Bhatia 2004]. However, “Genres rarely work alone to accomplish the community’s goals, and we often respond to one genre with another genre” [Bray 2018: 157]. Reporting genres within the science media discourse also form a “colony” where there is an interaction between a scientific report (research article) and a news report. Thus, a press release holds an “intermediary position” [Tachino 2012: 455] whose main purpose is to mediate the news event and a news report genre. A press release is “a news item designed to communicate the essence of a story, making it obvious that it is news” [Blum et al. 2005: 61]. In the context of this article, a press release is considered a public statement of usually one page long about some aspect of the writer’s organization that is interesting, exciting, or noteworthy. This news event could be a preprint of a scientific research article, and the target audience is the discourse community members of a college or university as well as a hungry, busy reporter who often posts the chosen text on the leading websites of science news with minor changes. Thus, the main functions of a press release are to inform, advertise, explain, and entertain.

This rhetorical complexity is accounted for the “hybridization” (N. Fairclough) when the macro-structure of a research article is integrated into a press release and then into a

¹ Translated from Russian by the author — T. A.

media news story. According to Geert Jacobs, “What makes press releases so special is that they are told only to be retold” [Jacobs 1999: 1].

This complex nature of a press release as a hybrid genre has made different scholars address the issue of a press release in the process of online scholarly communication [Lassen 2006; Luzón 2017]. Russian scholars are keeping an ongoing conversation on the role of a press release in the global digital environment. The communicative aspect as well as the linguistic one has made an integrated approach to the analysis of a press release to be more complex [Ivchenkov 2019; Bykova 2022]. L. V. Ukhova defined a press release as a “promoting text”, the text that functions well in the communicative space of marketing discourse and expands its borders to the scientific discourse [Ukhova 2018]. Linguistically, this interdiscursivity is realized in the inter-stylistic features of the journalistic, formal business, artistic, and scientific style [Tikhomirova 2009]. This hybridization is also traditionally a source of multiple errors of Russian students in both language and content.

Genre approach has been the key element in the modern pedagogical paradigm of teaching English as a second language (L2) with its interconnection of text linguistics and academic discipline. While this principle of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is realized in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, this integration process occurs more vividly in the writing-based courses, such as the Academic Writing course, which is gaining its popularity in many Russian universities.

Genre pedagogy is not only present in an academic writing classroom; it has been recently the focus of attention of many scholars worldwide [Grabe, Kaplan 1996; Hyland 2002; Tardy 2011]. Genre pedagogy underpins writing as a social activity while acknowledging the significance of learning to use language in academic and professional contexts. It uses the approaches of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) framework that comprises the approach of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Sydney School) and Rhetorical Genre Studies (North American School).

The term “genre” first came into the field of ESP in the 1980s and developed well into nowadays, with the research of John Swales [Swales 1981; 1990], Ken Hyland [Hyland 2004; 2006], John Flowerdew [Flowerdew 2015; 2016], among others. The authors argued the necessity to go beyond the mere prescriptive concern about lexicogrammatical features (SFL) to rhetorical “moves” and to a rhetorical context [Artemeva 2004; Bawarshi, Reiff 2010; Bhatia 2017]. This approach known as the Rhetorical Genre Studies takes into account the writer’s identity as well as the audience and context.

Our hypothesis is that integrating the ESP approach, with its emphasis on the source text, and Genre Analysis focused on the social dimension of writing provides the models of the Anglo-American rhetoric and improves the quality of the student writing.

Experiment and methodology

Participants are 25 Master’s students of the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MIPT) whose major ranges from Theoretical Physics to Machine Learning and who have chosen the course *Academic Writing in the Sciences: Theory and Practice* to be essential for their career needs.

The assignment was to write the text of a press release (approximately 1 page long) while making the following steps:

1. Find a field of interest important for you at present and for the future, think of its topic and problem that might be interesting for the academic community of MIPT.
2. Consider the newsworthiness of the research event.
3. Find a RA you should base your press release. One of the RA authors should be a faculty member of MIPT.
4. Interview a faculty member of MIPT — your text should include at least two direct quotations.
5. Be aware of the language choices you make in your work. Follow the format of the genre of a press release.
6. Find an appropriate picture to fit the context of your press release.
7. Edit your work.

Within the genre-based approach, the process of genre analysis is described. The method of cross-cultural analysis is used while addressing the English and Russian press releases. While focusing on the headline-lead structure of the student works (the independent construction stage), we used a mixed approach: the qualitative method with some elements of the quantitative method.

Deconstruction stage

In the deconstruction stage, each student had to choose a text of a press release within his own discipline in English and in Russian (the so-called mentor texts) and provide his own genre analysis in the presentation format in class. In order to do that, students were given an option to address the website of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) <https://www.eurekalert.org/> and the leading search engine in Russia *Open Science* <https://openscience.news/>. In the process of genre analysis, special attention was paid to the intercultural differences in the text construction across disciplines and cultures. Students gave their own answer to the question which linguistic, structural, and stylistic choices could lead to the rhetorical success.

In the process of dealing with presentations, specific attention was paid to the headline — secondary headline — lead and the science component of the text, i. e., hybridization of the press release.

Headline: Style and structure

Being a promoting text, the communicative task of a press release is maintaining communication with the target audience. From the communicative perspective, headlines are known to be the core part of the news event; besides, for the readers they serve as attention-grabbers in shaping the reader's judgment whether to read the whole text or not.

In the contrastive analysis, it was discovered that syntactically, in the English language in 90 % of headlines the verb in the Present tense prevails, whereas in the Russian headlines the Past tense dominates:

- (1) *Scientists **find evidence** Mercury has a solid inner core (American Geophysical Union)*
- (2) *Ученые **реконструировали** атмосферу над Атлантикой*

The Russian headlines tend to focus on the very news event, whereas the English ones on the science component:

- (3) *New study identifies trigger that turns dormant cancer cells into active ones*
- (4) *Designer peptides show potential for blocking viruses, **encourage future study***
- (5) *Съедобные лягушки научились «управлять» своим геномом*
- (6) *Компактный электронный нос позволил определить заболевания легких человека*

Hedging is one more element of the scientific discourse that expresses the degree of certainty of the author in the events. Hedges are considered to be the most frequently used stance markers of a scientific discourse [Hyland 2014]. In the English language such verbs are **may, might, could**, whereas in the Russian headlines the most frequent verb is «**МОЖЕТ**»:

(7) *COVID-19 **may have consequences** for mental health (University of Copenhagen, the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences)*

(8) *Maryland offshore wind farm **could become** stop-over for migrating sturgeon, striped bass (University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science)*

(9) *РНК-секвенирование **может стать** альтернативой иммуногистохимии в онкодиагностике*

Rhetorically, the English headlines use questions to be in the dialogue with readers. In these cases, the secondary headline is used. In the Russian headlines the language of definitions is the most frequent.

(10) *Want to catch a photon? Start by silencing the sun*

Quantum breakthrough uses light's quirky properties to boost 3D imaging, paving the way for enhanced performance in self-driving cars, medical imaging and deep-sea communications (Stevens Institute of Technology)

(11) *Найдено «временное окно» — **период, когда химиотерапия эффективнее уничтожает злокачественные опухоли***

As a way of introducing the information for the reader and making it readable, different stylistic choices are made: in the English headlines, repetitions and puns, whereas in the Russian headlines — metaphors and personifications:

(12) ***Swing** voters, **swing** stocks, **swing** users (Santa Fe Institute)*

Scientists develop a general technique for identifying swing components

(13) *Researchers **take a bloody good look** at the medicinal leech genome (Royal Ontario University)*

Study offers new insights into the powerful anticoagulants contained in the saliva of leeches most often used in medical practice

(14) *Риск быть унесенным в **страну Оз** оказался выше, чем считалось*

(15) *Шепот земли рассказал ученым о приближающемся землетрясении*

The cross-cultural survey of press releases headlines helped Russian students better see the typical features of the English texts: syntactical patterns, research-based writing (hedges) together with the expressive means of the English headlines (repetitions, puns, rhetorical questions), thus illustrating the hybrid nature of a press release.

Lead: Making structural choices

The lead of the news is a “brief and encompassing statement that foregrounds the core of the story” [Zhang 2018: 249]. It is the lead that makes a press release an event-oriented genre, while it gives answers to the major questions — What? Who? Why? Where? How?

The hybrid nature of press releases is seen in the structure of the lead. Using the schematic structure of a genre, the main component of which is a “move” (John Swales), we have adopted the following move structure suggested in the article of Yiqiong Zhang (2018):

Move 1: Anchoring the news point;

Move 2: Evaluating the research event;

Move 3: Announcing the research event;

Move 4: Contextualizing the research event;

Move 5: Providing the methodological information;

Move 6: Explaining the outcome of the research event;

Move 7: Extending the research event;

Move 8: Acknowledging support [Zhang 2018: 248].

Based on the analysis of the corpus, Move 1: *Anchoring the news point* along with Move 3: *Announcing the research event* and Move 2: *Evaluating the research event* are present in many leads:

(16) Move 1: *Making everyday decisions seems easy enough. People know basic information about health and finances that they can use to inform their decision making.* Move 3 *But new research from Stevens Institute of Technology suggests that too much knowledge can lead people to make worse decisions,* Move 2: *pointing to a critical gap in our understanding of how new information interacts with prior knowledge and beliefs.*

However, in technical press releases, the lead has the trend to start with Move 4: *Contextualizing the research event*, followed by Move 2: *Evaluating the research event*:

(17) Move 4: *High-energy X-ray beams and a clever experimental setup allowed researchers to watch a high-pressure, high-temperature chemical reaction to determine for the first time what controls formation of two different nanoscale crystalline structures in the metal cobalt.* Move 2: *The technique allowed continuous study of cobalt nanoparticles as they grew from clusters including tens of atoms to crystals as large as five nanometers.*

Based on the data obtained from the English-language leads, we can argue that real cases synthesize several moves in the semantic space of the lead paragraph. Despite the fact that traditional press releases begin with Move 1 as the lead of the news, the corpora combine Move 2: *Evaluating the research event*, Move 3: *Announcing the research event*, and Move 4: *Contextualizing the research event*.

Independent construction stage

In the post-writing stage of the student work analysis, we see the following trends regarding headlines, secondary headlines, and leads that can demonstrate the student understanding of the hybrid nature of press releases.

Headline: Structural and language choices

In the analysis of student works, we have come to the following findings, which are shown in Table 1.

First, Russian students almost never used secondary headlines. Only three papers out of twenty-five had the secondary headline that contextualized the research event and provided technical details of this piece of news:

(18) *Submatrices of maximum volume are useful for polynomial approximation*

Numerical algebra technique helps solve Machine Learning tasks

(19) *Chiral interaction*

A type of interaction sensitive to chirality of magnetic system

Second, nominal headlines were used almost as frequently as the verbal ones (10 and 15 headlines, respectively). Students tended to emphasize the advertising component in their papers, thus the most frequently used adjectives were *novel*, *new*, *extraordinary*:

(20) *The **novel** method for fast document quality assessment*

(21) ***New** way of gamma-ray bursts classification*

(22) ***Extraordinary** absorption spectrum of hybrid metal-organic nanoparticles*

Third, English-language headlines tended not to use as many hedges: modal verbs *can* and *may* were found only in two headlines:

(23) *Satellite galaxies **may shed light** on Lorentz variation*

(24) *Molecular-electronic converter **can improve** the quality of seismic sensors and reduce their cost*

Finally, among the rhetorical means were alliteration and personification to be the most favorite:

(25) ***Mathematical models reveal the real value** of companies during the crisis* (the combination of phonemes [r]-[l])

(26) *Artificial Intelligence “**sees**” quantum advantage*

Table 1. Headlines analysis

Structural and stylistic units	Number of units found
Secondary headlines	3
Nominal elements	10
Hedges	2
Expressive means (alliteration and personification)	2
Total	25

Summing up, we claim that the interference that is present in student writing consists in following the Russian cultural tradition: nominal, concise headlines, Russian-specific expressive means, such as alliteration and personification, categorical affirmative statements common for the Russian scientific prose in contrast to softening hedges.

Leads and their types

The leads have turned out to be the most complicated part of Russian student writing as they reflect a hybrid nature of the genre while combining a story about a research event with making this story a news point.

In our analysis, Move 1: *Anchoring the news point* as the text-forming component of the lead was found in only one text:

(27) Move 1: *On the third floor of MIPT Biopharmaceutical cluster, there is a person staring at the monitor with a strange hat connected to the computer. No, that is not the*

Matrix sequel. The researchers at MIPT run their tests and use brain signals and machine learning algorithms to understand what a person can see.

All the rest of the texts do several operations at once in the lead: Move 4: Contextualizing the research event, Move 3: Announcing the research event, or Move 2: Evaluating the research event:

(28) Move 4: *Waters that discharge from the Kerch Strait can strengthen rising of cold seawater or the downward movement of warm seawater near the coast of the Crimean Peninsula.* Move 3: *This research was conducted by a team of scientists from Shirshov Institute of Oceanology (IO) of RAS.*

(29) Move 3: *Researchers from a number of Russian universities, including Moscow State University, MPhI and Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology proposed a new contrast agent for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) based on silicon nanoparticles. This application is possible due to the addition of pores in the structure of the material which significantly change the MRI-signal.* Move 2: *This effect makes it possible to distinguish tissues with accumulated nanoparticles. The results were published in the Journal of Applied Physics in 2018.*

Some lead paragraphs tried to combine Move 4: Contextualizing the research event, Move 3: Announcing the research event, and Move 2: Evaluating the research event:

(30) Move 4: *Scientists have studied a well-known problem of whistler exit to the ground after passing through the magnetospheric trajectory in a two-dimensional case. They numerically obtained the wave packet propagation through the ionosphere of the Earth.*

Move 3: *Physicists from the Space Research Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology improved the theory of wave propagation in near-Earth space.* Move 2: *Using new theoretical assumptions, they made numerical calculations for the 2D wave packet and showed its dynamics in the ionosphere. The research paper was published in the "Journal of Atmospheric and Solar-Terrestrial Physics" in May 2020.*

However, in some cases, students tended to shift the focus of their papers to the very topic and problem, thus neglecting the research event itself:

(31) *Information about a possible violation of Lorentz invariance, which is the statement of the Special Relativity theory, can be obtained from observations of the galaxy evolution, thanks to the current research of the theorists. Lorentz invariance is one of the most important bricks of modern theoretical physics in general and high-energy physics and gravity in particular. Why can we doubt its validity? One may provide at least three arguments. First, violation of Lorentz invariance makes it possible to make a breakthrough in the field of quantum gravity, that is, to obtain finite answers for the answers for corrections following from quantum theory. In the generally accepted theory of gravity, this is still impossible. It's important to note that in this framework the Lorentz violation takes place at all distance scales due to the appearance of new massless degrees of freedom. Secondly, the resolution of observational cosmology problems, which arise on galactic scales and consist of an unusual rotation of galaxies, may require Lorentz violation at these distances. Finally, while Lorentz invariance has been tested to very high precision for the usual matter that we can see in a telescope, one may wonder if it can be observationally verified in the dark sector of the Universe, which, as we expect, consist of the dark matter?*

(32) *Scientists created new superconductors, substances which lose electric resistance below particular temperature, from compounds of hydrogen and rare metal praseodymium; some of obtained substances are impossible according to classical chemistry. Results of the*

research allow finding optimal metals for creating high-temperature superconductors. Such superconductors could be used to significantly improve energy networks in terms of efficiency.

There is a theory that hydrogen-based compounds could be used as superconductors. Superconductors can rely on electricity without losses, which make them very useful for energy networks. Unfortunately, temperature of superconductivity is very low for most compounds, so cooling these compounds to necessary temperatures is very expensive.

Physicists are trying to find substance called high-temperature superconductor, which should be superconductive at indoor temperatures. One of possible substances with desired property is metallic hydrogen, yet it cannot be obtained by using existing technologies.

Group of Russian scientists from Skoltech and Chinese researchers which includes Dmitry Semenov and Di Zhou published a paper about creation of hydrogen-praseodymium compounds and research of their physical properties. Using high-pressure and high-temperature chamber, they have obtained several substances which differ in atom ratio of these two chemical elements; i. e. PrH_3 and PrH_9 .

Excerpt (31) introduces the topic of Lorentz invariance and its possible invariance. The author defends his standpoint providing evidence for the violation of Lorentz invariance; however, it doesn't meet the genre requirements. Excerpt (32) makes an attempt to announce the research event; however, the research event itself is found only in the last paragraph of the press release. Thus, both press releases failed to meet the requirements of the genre.

Table 2. Leads analysis

Moves identification	Number of moves found
Move 1: Anchoring the news point	2
Move 2: Evaluating the research event	13
Move 3: Announcing the research event	10
Move 4: Contextualizing the research event	3

According to the data given in Table 2, the leads demonstrate a trend toward blended structural patterns, with Move 2: *Evaluating the research event* and Move 3: *Announcing the research event* to be the main ones. On the other hand, there is an opposite trend toward emphasizing the research component of the press release with the leads to be similar to the Introduction of a research article. In both patterns, the hybridization of a press release is lost.

Conclusions

Back in 2000, P. R. R. White argued that “the modern mass –media news reports, one of the most influential of contemporary text types, is the focus of on-going debate both in the academic literature and in popular culture” [White 2000: 379]. Twenty years later, these words are still true.

These “debates” are caused by the hybrid genre of a news report and, specifically, on-line science press releases where the research component goes hand in hand with telling a news story.

The hybrid nature of a press release traditionally causes a lot of errors for L2 writers. Especially it is true for the headline –secondary headline — lead structure that serves as an “initial summary” of the text [van Dijk 1988: 53].

The paper is aimed at sharing the author’s perspective on teaching a press release as a genre in a Russian technical university as a part of Academic Writing course. The strategy of synthesizing the ESP approach and the Genre Analysis approach allowed to combine the focus on text linguistics and the social dimension of the text. The process of teaching included the deconstruction stage and the independent construction stage, analyzing the texts on the pre-writing and post-writing level.

After reading and analyzing press releases within their own fields of expertise as well as participating in group discussions with their groupmates, students could better see genre-specific language features across cultures (headlines) as well as structural choices represented in moves (leads).

The results of the independent construction stage have shown the interference of the Russian cultural tradition in the process of constructing the headlines (nominal elements in headlines, absence of secondary headlines, use of the Russian expressive means). The lead has demonstrated two main patterns. Though anchoring the news point (Move 1) was not found in many papers, students tended to positively evaluate the research event (Move 2), announce the research event (Move 3), and contextualize the research event (Move 4). Contextualizing the research event often creates a shift from a research event to the topic and problem of a news story, thus not only making the text uncohesive but also violating the genre requirements of a press release.

We believe that better awareness of the genre-specific features of a press release helps in a more effective process of teaching and learning in the context of genre pedagogy.

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Преподавание пресс-релиза как гибридного жанра в курсе академического письма (английский язык, технический вуз)

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Научный медиадискурс динамично развивается в XXI в., и жанр пресс-релиза приобретает все большую популярность в эпоху медиатизации науки. Несмотря на это, он остается недооцененным как в медиалингвистике, так и в прикладной лингвистике, преподавании английского языка для специальных целей и академическом письме. Цель статьи — описать процесс преподавания пресс-релиза на занятиях по академи-

ческому письму и показать его потенциал в контексте современной жанровой педагогики. Прежде всего задачей является описать гибридную природу жанра, обратившись к структурно-значимым текстовым компонентам — заголовку, подзаголовку, лиду — на английском и русском языках (этап деконструкции). На этапе производства собственных текстов проанализированы англоязычные пресс-релизы с особым вниманием к структуре и стилю рамочных элементов текста. Результаты демонстрируют следующее. Студенты предпочитали не использовать подзаголовки, избегали хеджирования и выбирали любимые выразительные средства русского языка — аллитерацию и олицетворение, таким образом демонстрируя влияние русской культурной традиции. При написании лида студенты использовали две основные стратегии. Первая заключалась в рассказе об исследовательском событии и «забывании» научного компонента истории, вторая — в вынесении на первый план научного компонента текста. Студенты увлекались избыточным разъяснением читателю научной темы и проблемы, делая лид похожим на введение в научную статью. В обоих случаях гибридизация была утрачена. Эксперимент подтвердил важную роль пресс-релиза для преподавания курса академического письма. Без сомнения, это хороший способ познакомить студента с современным социокультурным контекстом медиатизации науки, а также с разнообразием жанров и их диалогической природой. Работы студентов демонстрируют влияние русской культурной традиции в заголовках и игнорирование гибридной природы жанра в лидах.

Ключевые слова: пресс-релиз, гибридный жанр, академическое письмо, заголовок, лид.

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