

# Physics for future Presidents

Department of Physics, Carnegie Mellon, Fall 2019, Deserno

**Homework 7**, *draft* due in recitation on Thursday, Sep 26<sup>th</sup>;  
*finalized essay* due the next day, in the lecture on Friday, Sep 27<sup>th</sup>

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## Press Release

Imagine you are in the following situation: You have recently secured the pretty well-paid job of press secretary for a big power company. That has been awesome for a while, but now that very company has experienced an accident at one of its nuclear power plants, resulting in some leakage of radioactive contaminants to the surrounding area. Experts estimate that, as a result of the accident, the local population of 500,000 people would each receive an accumulated dosage of 200 mrem during the next year if they continued to live in the area, but after one year there would essentially be no more accident-related radiation.

It is your job to write a short press release which your boss will read to the news reporters. The purpose of this news release is to give the public a realistic view of the health hazard associated with living in the area. You have learned in class how to quantitatively assess the health risks, so you should do that first before writing anything. (You might want to attach this to your homework, but it should not be part of the essay.) Importantly, the general public will not have this knowledge, they will not be able to follow the math, will not want to be lulled in by any lengthy technical explanation, and will be generally skeptical of anything you say. And yet, it is your job now to inform them, as best as you can, of what their health risk is due to the accident your company is ultimately responsible for.

So, now you have to write that dreaded press release. Try to be quantitative whenever possible, but don't drag the audience through calculations. Don't scare anyone, but don't play anything down, either. Explain the situation in terms the public will be able to understand, but don't lecture them. Make sure they understand that you take their worries serious, so don't be dismissive. But then, don't be patronizing, either. And above all, *don't lie*.

Oh, one more thing: If you mess this up, the press will crucify your company and your boss will fire you.

Whoa, that sounds like a tough call. Well, but getting the high-paid job of press secretary for some such big company comes with certain occupational hazards.

Your briefing should begin with "Ladies and Gentlemen: ...".