



Media Interview Tips

Keys to a Good Interview

- Talk in lay terms, using as little professional or technical jargon as possible. Tell stories and anecdotes that illustrate your point and give examples.
- Keep the answers short.
- Think about what you want to say before you speak. Define two to three main points you would like to make about your subject. Gather facts, figures, and anecdotes to support your points. Anticipate questions the reporter might ask and have responses ready.
- Speak in complete thoughts. The reporter's question may be edited out and your response should stand on its own. This is especially important for television interviews.
- Never say anything you do not want to read in print, hear on the radio, or see on television or the internet.
- Be confident. You are the expert.

Preparing Before the Interview

- Prepare a single communication objective and two or three secondary points you want to make.
- Anticipate the reporter's questions, especially the hard ones. What are your key messages? Answer difficult questions as briefly as possible, then bridge to your message.
- If you can provide the reporter with a written summary of information, main points or statistics, do so. Reporters always need perspective (i.e., How many people are affected? When did the issue arise? Is this part of a national trend?). Don't hesitate to put the issue into perspective, even if the reporter doesn't ask.

During the Interview

- State the most important information first – then provide the background.
- Keep responses brief, but long enough to help the reporter get quotes.
- Stick to your main points and do not allow yourself to get drawn too far off on tangents. Many people make the mistake of talking too much. Repeat your points if necessary to get back on track.
- Mention your subject by name several times during the interview, rather than saying "it" or "they."
- Make eye contact with the reporter.
- Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. If a reporter bases questions on information you believe is incorrect, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information where necessary.
- Identify anything you say as either fact or opinion. Your opinions are your own, but fact is fact.
- If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification rather than talking around it. If you do not have the answer, say so. Tell the reporter where to find the information, if possible.

- If you feel unprepared to answer a certain question, tell the reporter you will get back to him/her with an answer. Avoid discussing hypothetical situations.
- Never say, “No comment.” Instead, if you cannot or do not choose to answer, explain briefly. For example, “I can’t answer that because I haven’t seen the research paper you are referring to.”
- Avoid saying things “off the record.” Reporters may or may not honor this, and it annoys them.
- Be honest. Don’t try to conceal negative information; rather, let your interviewer know what you are doing to solve a problem.
- Don’t joke. Be friendly, but not complacent. Assume everything you say, even in a social situation, may appear in print or on the air.
- Reporters can use silence to make you feel uncomfortable and talk or say things you may not want to say. It is best to stay quiet between questions. Don’t fill in with chatter or become hyperbolic (sometimes called “nervous talk”).
- Make your final comment clear and concise, reemphasizing your main point. If you feel that you failed to get the message out, force it in at the end. (“I think we’ve missed the real, critical issue here, which is....”)

AAAS Mass Media Science and Engineering Fellows

Bethany Halford’s Tips for Scientists in Communicating with the Press

- Don’t go on vacation the week your paper comes out. The press wants to talk to you, not the P.R. person.
- Don’t just give a PowerPoint presentation.
- Your work is interesting, but you must learn to talk to people who aren’t scientists. You do it all the time – family dinners, with your dentist, on airplanes. Reporters are just the same.
- Just because someone doesn’t understand everything about your work, that doesn’t make them stupid. Just make it simple. Try to say it in a sentence or two.
- An analogy or image – even if it is flawed – can really bring a point home. I have described the layers of the atmosphere like an onion, and self-assembling carbon nanotubes as Slinkys, Lifesavers candy and spiral staircases.
- A good picture will get your work a lot of attention. People like cool things to look at.
- Reporters don’t generally work on the same kinds of deadlines that you do. Respond as soon as you can. It would not be unusual for a reporter to have to turn something into a story within a few hours.
- Reporters are also limited in terms of time and space.
- They are not your advertising firm. A good reporter will write a balanced story. Don’t be afraid of that.
- Be kind if a reporter makes a mistake. Often the error occurred sometime after the story left their hands. The editorial process is labyrinthine. A good reporter wants to be accurate, and if they’ve messed up, they’ll generally try to correct things, or get them right the next time they report. If you throw a fit, they’ll just find someone else to put in the paper ... and they’ll tell their friends.