

## THINK LIKE A REPORTER

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### Understand a journalist's job and constraints.

Journalists think in story form. Humans have been storytellers since the beginning of time. It's a reporter's job to be skeptical. Don't take it personally if they ask tough questions. Their job is not to make the scientist feel good about his or her work or make the University of Arizona look good, but to drill down to the essence of a story. Reporters are not your friend, but they aren't your enemy either. Their job is to be neutral and to be loyal to their audience, not to us. You should also assume they do not have a science background.

### Present your research in a punchy and concise way.

For a news release, your research has to be presented in a way that is punchy and concise, 750 words or so. A news release is a story, meant to arouse the reporter's curiosity about your work. It is not a review paper detailing every aspect and nuance of your research.

### Be available.

A news release is also a bit like a party invitation – you've got to be home. Make sure you're available if reporters want to talk to you. If you prefer not to talk to reporters, please spare yourself and us the work and refrain from putting out a news release in the first place.

### Be respectful of deadlines.

Journalists always have deadlines, and they come fast and furiously. Time is measured in minutes and maybe hours, not days and weeks. So, when a reporter calls, always assume they need the information right now. It is absolutely OK to ask, "What's your deadline?" to get a sense of how pressed for time the person is. TV is especially fast. Typically, when a local TV station calls you, they are looking for an interview the same day, if not the next hour.

### Understand the request.

Make sure to ask reporters what they want to interview you about. It's awkward if you expect them to ask you about your latest findings of the endangered yellow-dotted fuzz ball snake camouflaging itself using invasive cactus seedlings and then a TV journalist sticks a mic in your face, camera rolling, and wants you to explain why global warming is bad.

## GET YOUR POINT ACROSS

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### Plan ahead.

When doing interviews, work to get your point across clearly and concisely. Shoot for a maximum of three points, and the key is to be pithy, not parenthetical. Writing yourself notes in advance about what you want to say to any reporter is a good idea. Saying the same things to more than one reporter is fine. The conversations will go differently, but what ends up in the news is soundbites, not lengthy explanations. Practice your pitch or "elevator speech."

### Reporters are likely to ask the following:

- › What's new?
- › Is it a unique advance?
- › What's the significance or why would/should anyone outside the scientific community care? (This is a big one!)
- › Is this surprising?
- › How did you get the idea/how did you do the experiments?
- › What is your next step?
- › Can you help me out by providing pictures or video? (Stories with good visuals get read more and will be an easier sell to an editor.)

## OTHER TIPS

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### Take a breath.

If you're nervous when a reporter calls out of the blue, give yourself a breathing space. Say you're in the middle of something, which you probably are, and that you need to wrap that up and then get back to him or her. Agree when you'll get back, and stick to it. If you say 5 minutes or 15, don't get sucked into something else and let the request dangle. But use that time to compose yourself, write notes about what you want to say, and then call back.

### In a tough interview:

- › Stick to what you know.
- › Don't talk about what you don't know. It's OK to say "I don't know," or "I'll need to check on that and get back to you."
- › Don't get sucked into speculation.

### Don't say anything you don't want in print.

When speaking with journalists, everything you say is "on the record." If you don't want something to appear in print/on the screen/on air, don't say it. Plain and simple. Some reporters will tell you that something is off the record and stick to that, others won't. Unless you have a very good rapport with a reporter and know them well, assume that everything is on the record.

### You won't be able to review the story.

Journalists generally won't let you see their story before it goes out. Some reporters may agree to run it past you for accuracy, but others can't because their editorial policy simply won't allow it. What you can do is make it very clear to the reporter that you are more than happy to answer further questions as he or she works on the story, and provide your cell phone number. When a reporter calls for clarification, respond as promptly as possible, as they may be up against a deadline.

## WHAT TO DO AFTER A STORY IS PUBLISHED IF...

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### You're happy with the story.

Let the reporter know! Drop him or her an email. Mostly reporters hear complaints, so knowing you liked the story is good for them – and for your future relationship.

### You hate the headline.

It's inflammatory or inaccurate. Stop. Take a deep breath. Believe it or not, the reporter may not have written the headline – a copy editor did. And the reporter may be just as upset as you are.

### The story has errors.

Again, stop and take a deep breath. Ask yourself, did you say that? Remember, it's all on the record. Or, did you use science speak that the reporter just didn't understand? It's your job to be crystal clear, so let it go if you're at fault.

Then ask yourself, is this important? Is this "wrong wrong" – or just not the wording you would have used if you had written the story? If it's a matter of wording preference, let it go.

If it's "wrong wrong" or you didn't say it (the reporter got it backwards, transposed your numbers, said you were a professor at Arizona State University when your appointment is at the University of Arizona), contact the University Communications team, who can reach out to the reporter on your behalf to request a correction.

## RESOURCES

**"Am I Making Myself Clear? - A Scientist's Guide to Talking to the Public."**

By Cornelia Dean, Harvard University Press 2009. A quick and easy read.

**"Explaining Research – How to Reach Key Audiences to Advance Your Work"**

By Dennis Meredith, Oxford University Press 2010. More in-depth but very substantial and full of good information.

*This cheat sheet is based on a version created by former University of Arizona science writer Mari Jensen.*