

INTERVIEW TIPS

All reporters work to a deadline. It may be a strict daily deadline in the case of a news reporter or even an hourly deadline for radio and television reporters. Reporters will appreciate your thoughtfulness if you ask them for their deadline and then do your best to help them meet it. If you cannot provide answers by the deadline, let the reporter know.

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When a reporter calls requesting an interview, don't hesitate to ask the subject of the interview and for some sample questions. If you need time to collect your thoughts and the reporter's deadline allows, offer to call back later at a specific time -- and follow through.

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During an interview, avoid academic or technical jargon. Journalists value the academic expert who can skillfully present complex concepts in straightforward language. So, speak simply, use metaphors that help to convey complex ideas in everyday terms and explain technical terms if you must use them.

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If the reporter's questions don't relate to the main point of your research, you can ensure you get an opportunity to effectively convey your points by saying, "I think the important aspect of my work is....." or "The main point here is"

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Have you ever wanted to say "let's change the subject" to a reporter in the middle of an interview? There are a number of ways to "flip" an interview. One technique is "The Hook," a statement that begs the next question. For example: You answer the reporter's question, and then say something like:

"But that's not where the real problem is." Stop. Wait for the next question.

Or

"Of course, many people overlook one very important thing." Stop. Wait for the next question.

A good hook is a tantalizing statement that leads the reporter irresistibly to the question you want them to ask.

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Don't expect every word, fact and figure to be reported - that is simply not the reporter's role. Every news story, for example, contains at least one major point, but rarely more than three. Thus, a reporter will be looking for the one to three major points about your research, expressed as simply, directly and colourfully as possible.

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When interviewed about your research, don't hesitate to convey your excitement about your findings or passion for your work. Television and radio reporters, especially, gravitate towards those who can not only explain their findings and the significance of their findings in everyday language but who can also connect with audiences by conveying their commitment to their work and their joy over eureka moments.

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Nobody's perfect. So when you give a less-than-perfect answer to a reporter's question, or give an answer that's factually incorrect - start over. Be straightforward and tell the reporter you would like to rephrase your response. If you discover after an interview that

one of the facts you gave is incorrect, call the reporter back with the correct information. Reporters want their stories to be accurate.

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When preparing for an interview, think of two or three main points you want to make about your research or project. Gather facts, figures and anecdotes to support your points. Anticipate questions the reporter might ask and have responses ready (News & Media Services can help by advising you about the kinds of questions you will likely be asked).

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Have printed materials to support your information whenever possible in order to help the reporter minimize errors. If time allows, offer to fax or mail the reporter printed information in advance of the interview.

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Be aware that reporters' schedules are determined by the "breaking" news of the day. Do not be offended if an interview gets canceled or rescheduled because a more urgent story arises.

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If you are quoted in an official news release, journalists will expect you to be available for further comments or questions. Expect media calls.

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Don't over-estimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. When a reporter bases a question on information you believe is incorrect, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information when necessary.

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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.

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Never say "No comment." Instead, if you cannot or do not choose to answer, explain why. For example, "Our policy prevents us from discussing lawsuits currently in litigation" or "I can't answer that because I have not seen the research you are referring to."

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Avoid saying things "off the record." A reporter may or may not honour this. If you don't want to see it in print or hear it on the evening news, you had better not say it. And, remember: the interview isn't over until the reporter leaves.

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If merited, give positive feedback to reporters after a story appears. Like the rest of us, they usually hear only complaints and rarely get a call or note to say they've done a good job.

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During an interview, use natural frequencies to communicate your statistical findings. According to a recent article in Science, most people, including experts, find it much easier to understand statistical information as natural frequencies (one-in-four) rather than in terms of probabilities (25-percent chance).

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When communicating risk, saying there's 'zero risk' is the sci-communications equivalent of 'no comment'- it begs suspicion and distrust. It's essential for science communicators to make a distinction between 'risk management' and 'risk issue management', says Canada's risk-communication guru William Leiss. The issues in risk communication, such as the credibility of the communicator, are distinct from the scientific and technical aspects of the risk. How the public perceives a risk, whether nuclear energy or agbiotech, often has more to do with communication than the substance of the risk.

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As we explore further into the realms of neutrinos and dwarf galaxies, the numbers become increasingly challenging to communicate. Several months ago the National Post ran a numerical retraction when a science story pegged the Earth's age at 100 million years, rather than 4.5 billion.

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To help avoid these size hurdles, always relate really big and really small sizes and distances to human-scale ones. For example, describe the distance to a star by comparing it to the number of human generations it would take to travel there in a current day space ship.

Television and Radio

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Be brief! Television and radio stories may use only a 10-30 second cut. The shorter your comments, the less likely they are to be edited. Even print reporters are looking for interviewers who know how to get to the point.

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Speak with conviction in a conversational tone while retaining your composure. Be confident. Remember that you are the expert. Be colorful -- tell stories and anecdotes that illustrate your point. Give examples.

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Stick to your main points and do not allow yourself to get drawn off on tangents. Most people make the mistake of talking too much. Repeat your points if necessary to get back on track.

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Speak in complete sentences. The reporter's question may be edited out, and your response should stand on its own.

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For television interviews, plan to wear solid-colour clothing. Stripes, plaids or other designs can cause problems with color TV pictures. And, look in a mirror, if possible, prior to going on camera. The reporter may not tell you that your hair is out of place or your collar is folded over.

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In a taped interview, do not answer questions too quickly; pause briefly before answering each question. This helps the journalist get a "clean" sound bite. Remember, it's okay to stop and start over again if you don't like the way you worded your answer.

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In a TV interview, look at the reporter and not the camera. The only exception is in a satellite interview, when the reporter or anchor may not be on location. If you're uncertain where to look, ask the journalist.

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During a TV/radio interview, stay stationary in front of the radio or TV microphones and avoid sitting in a chair that rocks or spins. Wandering around or rocking in your chair can cause the recorded volume to rise and fall.