

## Thirteen Tips for Great Media Interviews

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1. Prepare for the interview. Ask if you can return the reporter's call in 5 or 10 minutes and use that time to organize your thoughts and make sure statistics and other important information are at hand. Mentally review the most important facts a reporter will need to know. If you want to suggest other experts for interview, have their contact information handy. Take some deep breaths, sit up straight, smile, and return the call. The only exception to the preparation rule is a media blitz, when you've been talking to reporters all day about the release of a hot new study.
2. Do NOT insult the reporter by asking "what are your qualifications for writing about my highly technical research?" This poisons the atmosphere.
3. DO ask how well informed about the topic this reporter's audience is likely to be. Writers know that audience is everything. Subscribers to the Atlanta Journal & Constitution want to know a lot less about a new way of modeling the earth's carrying capacity than readers of Bioscience or Conservation Biology.
4. Visualize explaining your newest publication, or the events you've been asked to comment on, to a specific layperson – such as your mother, your fifth grade teacher, or a stranger seated next to you on an airplane. Use analogies and metaphors. Borrow imagery from sports, cooking, gardening, automobile or household repair, or popular TV shows or music – anything consumers are likely to know a little something about.
5. Skilled reporters often try and formulate metaphors or analogies during an interview. If this happens, work with the reporter to make the imagery as clear and accurate as possible. If an analogy is close, but not entirely accurate, work with the reporter to make it right. Otherwise you're to blame when the faulty analogy appears in print.
6. Prepare a concise answer to the "So what?" question. Be ready to explain, in plain English, the significance of your message. Does your finding add to what was previously known? Challenge the conventional wisdom? Add weight to an existing public health recommendation? Suggest that a certain health practice might be ill advised?
7. Assume that everything you say is "on the record." If you do not want to be quoted on a specific point, ask to go off record on that point only. Be clear about when you're back on record.
8. Don't fake it when you're unsure about a fact or a statistic. If this information is readily available on a web site or in a common reference book, tell the reporter where to look. Or, if you think you can find the answer before the reporter's deadline, offer to do so and then follow through.

9. Your own enthusiasm and passion for your work makes it interesting to others. Cool “scientific” detachment does not sell stories. If you became a marine ecologist because you witnessed a devastating oil spill as a child, or if you loved a species of frog that has largely disappeared today, say so! If your great uncle invented a process that has saved lives or made homes more energy efficient, tell the story. Illustrate abstractions with human interest stories whenever possible.
10. If you are speculating about the meaning of an event or a new finding, say so. Expert opinions provide valuable perspective for lay readers, but they should always be labeled as conjecture, not fact. Make it clear that you are not telling individuals to make radically different – and possibly dangerous – changes in their daily lives.
11. Be generous with suggestions about where additional information can be found and who else to interview. Science is about exploring the unknown, and intelligent people disagree about many new research findings. Your credibility soars when you suggest other experts – including ones who are familiar with your research but interpret your findings differently.
12. Do NOT demand to see a draft of the article before it’s published. Most newspapers and magazines forbid this. Instead, offer to answer follow-up questions by phone or email. I’ve had scientists tell me that being nervous keeps them from explaining clearly during interviews. A statement like this encourages reporters to call and check facts.
13. Expect off-the-wall questions. Even if you’re an expert on sustainable economic development, the reporter may suddenly remember a recent article about frog parasites and ask for your professional opinion. Rather than go out on a limb, it makes more sense to stay focused on what you know about.

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The preceding notes, verbatim, were provided by Professor Thomas as part of a class-seminar she conducted at the UGA Institute of Ecology in December, 2006. See <http://kleonard.myweb.uga.edu/academica/media-interviews.htm>.

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