

## HOW TO TALK TO REPORTERS

Reporters rely on researchers to explain complex issues. They will turn again and again to scholars who understand their needs and speak in accessible and compelling ways.

Reporters may contact a researcher in response to a press release or expert available email from the Scholars Strategy Network, their university, or their publisher. They may contact a researcher for comments on breaking news or for background research on an article they are writing. In general, reporters are more likely to reach out to scholars they saw on TV, heard on the radio, read in other outlets, or have worked with before. Researchers can reach out to reporters about forthcoming research, to comment on a journalist's reporting, or to introduce themselves to reporters who cover their area of expertise.

### BEFORE TALKING WITH A REPORTER

Reporters appreciate sources that are available and prompt because they are often on tight deadlines. Be as quick as possible when responding to reporters on the phone or email, especially if you contacted the reporter or if SSN did so on your behalf. This will make the reporter more likely to contact you in the future.

However, when a reporter calls or emails unexpectedly, do not feel pressured to talk immediately. It's good practice to ask what the story is about and what deadline the reporter is working on. You can also ask, "Who have you spoken to already?" to learn how the reporter is approaching a story. Then set a time to talk or offer to call back shortly. Take a minute to consider the news outlet's audience, determine your message, and choose a few stories and statistics to illustrate why your contributions are worthwhile. Try to pin down 1-3 key points that you want the reporter, and their audience, to take away from the conversation. This is also the best time to anticipate and prepare for difficult questions. On the other hand, if you contacted the reporter originally, be sure to consider these questions in advance of the call.

### WHILE TALKING WITH A REPORTER

Reporters value simple, direct answers and short, vivid stories. Be sure to guide the reporter to your key points and things the reporter really needs to understand. These days, media outlets employ fewer specialists, so reporters may not have the background to know

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the best questions to ask. In that case, you can politely move the conversation toward what you think the important questions are. Feel free to do this explicitly by saying, “The most important thing to know is...” or “What I really think your audience should understand is...” This tells the reporter that your next few sentences contain key information and potentially a good quote.

A few words of caution: anything said in an interview can appear in print. To go “off the record” is generally unwise, and “no comment” is never a recommended response. You do not have to answer a question you do not want to answer. Just move back to your main point. Sometimes a reporter will create a silence for you to fill. The appropriate response in such moments is to wait; the reporter will offer a new question. If a reporter asks you a question that you do not feel qualified to answer, you can suggest a colleague who is.

## **AFTER TALKING WITH A REPORTER**

Reporters appreciate positive, constructive feedback. Reporters will often, but not always, quote you if you have taken significant time to share your knowledge. If you are not quoted in the final article, you can send an email that says: “I saw your piece and thought you gave the issue an excellent treatment. But I noticed that you never quoted me by name. Is there something I should do next time we chat, so that you will have a quote to use?” That will remind the journalist of the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

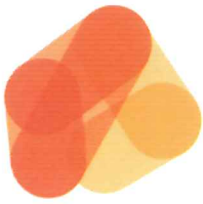
If the reporter did quote you, and if you liked the piece, send them a short, positive note of thanks. If you are active on Twitter, send out a link to the article and tag the reporter’s handle. Most reporters are required to be on Twitter and they are always appreciative of public praise and links that send readers to their article. On the other hand, if an important part of the story is factually incorrect, you may ask for an official correction. Contact the reporter directly before you go to an editor.

## **FOCUS ON LOCAL MEDIA**

Local newsrooms across the country have been decimated by budget and personnel cuts. Your contribution is especially valuable to these overburdened local reporters who may not have the time or resources to find experts for their coverage. Let local reporters and editors know that you are available to comment and specify which kinds of local and state developments you can speak to. When talking with local reporters, make the connection to their readership clear by citing local examples or explaining how larger trends or policy decisions might play out in their area.

Local media can often have a larger policy impact than national media. Local, state, and even federal policymakers care about what’s happening in their jurisdiction and what their local papers are covering. Building relationships with the local media can often serve as a great door opener to build relationships with these decisionmakers. Citing a policymaker by name, especially if you are supportive of their actions, can be particularly helpful in relationship building as most have alerts set up to notify them if they are mentioned in the local press.

*For more assistance connecting with reporters, contact Danielle Kim at [danielle.kim@scholars.org](mailto:danielle.kim@scholars.org) and Dominik Doemer at [dominik@scholars.org](mailto:dominik@scholars.org).*



# BEST PRACTICES FOR CLEAR, CONVINCING COMMUNICATION

Communicating with the media, whether in writing, on the phone, or in person, should be clear. Use simple language in your OpEds, pitch emails, meetings, and interviews.

## I. KEEP IT SIMPLE

The simplest way to explain your idea is usually the best one. A middle-school aged child should be able to understand everything you say.

- **Keep your argument straightforward.** There will always be more you want to say or more evidence you could provide, but usually less is more.
- **Repeat your main point.** Focus on a single, key takeaway and repeat it multiple times.
- Use simple and short sentences. **Limit adjectives, adverbs, and compound tenses.**
- **Keep vocabulary basic**, even if it may seem less precise. For example, instead of “analogous to” or “based on partisanship” use “similar to” and “based on political party”.
- Opt for **several easy words in place of one complex word**. For example, instead of “disenfranchised” use “prevented from voting”.
- That said, **replace wordy phrases with a single word** where possible. For example, use “investigate” instead of “conduct an investigation of”.

## II. AVOID JARGON

Different audiences will have different levels of familiarity with technical language. Don't make assumptions about your audience's knowledge. As Steven Pinker suggests in *The Sense of Style*, “...assume that your readers are as intelligent and sophisticated as you are, but that they happen not to know something you know.”

- Explain what **specialized or technical terms** mean or leave them out altogether. Some specialized terms will come as second nature to you, but limit your use as much as possible.
- **Avoid acronyms and abbreviations.** This depends on your audience. Using “NOAA” (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) may be fine when speaking to an environmental reporter but not a general reporter. Err on the side of caution, even with acronyms and abbreviations that you think are well known.

## **BEST PRACTICES FOR CLEAR, CONVINCING COMMUNICATION**

- **Provide context.** Even some non-specialized terms may benefit from further explanation. For example, give titles and context when you use people's names, like Secretary of Education under President Trump Betsy DeVos.

### **III. BE CONCRETE, GIVE EXAMPLES**

Concrete examples are always better than abstract statements or generalizations.

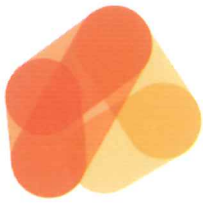
- **Use vivid stories.** These may be stories from your personal life or your research. If you don't have a story, give a hypothetical example. For example, say "Imagine you are the mayor of a small town..." to give context for local policy decisions.
- Give examples that mean something to the **lives of the people you are speaking to** or your intended audience. Keep in mind the audience of the media outlet.
- **Use statistics strategically,** but do not assume that they speak for themselves. Explain why they matter. Pair them with other types of evidence like stories and do not overuse them. Even the strongest statistic won't stick with your audience as much as a powerful example.

### **IV. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT**

Before a big interview, it's good to rehearse your main points and get comfortable communicating your research with a non-academic audience.

- **Practice with your family.** Explain your research to an aunt or a nephew and ask them what your main point was. Talk to somebody who is not familiar with your research and integrate their feedback next time.
- **Write out a practice elevator pitch.** Try to condense your message until you can express it in less than one minute. Figure out what you want the audience's main takeaway to be. Focus on making this point clearly and supporting it with examples or stories.
- **Tape yourself.** Smartphones have made audio and video recordings easy and accessible. Record a quick video or audio clip of yourself and listen back to see how you can improve.

*For more assistance with practicing clear and convincing communication, contact Danielle Kim at [danielle.kim@scholars.org](mailto:danielle.kim@scholars.org) and Dominik Doemer at [dominik@scholars.org](mailto:dominik@scholars.org).*



## TIPS FOR TELEVISION AND RADIO INTERVIEWS

Interviews for TV or radio can be nerve-wracking, but with a bit of practice and a few helpful tips, you can have a great interview. Before the interview, make sure to clarify if it will be broadcast live or edited later and whether it is recorded in person or remotely.

### I. MAKE A SINGLE POINT CLEARLY

Know your message going into the interview. Make sure you have 1-3 key points that you want the audience to walk away with. They should be clear, concise, persuasive, and believable. Typically, the simpler the message, the better. Back up your key points with statistics, stories about real people, and personal experiences. Active, visual language is particularly useful to illustrate your point and make it memorable.

Try to be clear enough that a middle-school aged child could understand your main point. Deliver your message at the beginning of the interview and repeat it multiple times during the interview.

### II. REMEMBER THE AUDIENCE

The audience is not the interviewer. You are talking directly to the viewers of the program. It is your goal to try to connect with them. This makes clear, simple language and vivid examples especially important. Decide what examples and points you want to highlight based on the audience that will be listening to or seeing your interview.

### III. USE TRANSITIONS TO RETURN TO YOUR MESSAGE

If an interview gets off course, turn the discussion back to your main points.

- If you get a question that moves you away from your core points, do not give a long answer to that question. Instead, answer briefly and, before you stop speaking, add your own point with a bridge like “but we also need to remember that ...”
- In the rare event that you get a question you truly do not want to answer, you can acknowledge the question without really answering it. Use a response like “That is a problem, which is exactly why...” or “My research does not speak to that. But what I can say is...” and continue on with your message.

## **TIPS FOR TELEVISION AND RADIO INTERVIEWS**

- You can use a more powerful response to pull a conversation back on track **rarely** during an interview. You can say: “The truth is...”, “What’s more important is...”, “I think what’s really going on is...”, or even “No, that’s not how I see it.”

### **IV. DRESS FOR TELEVISION**

As a general rule, do not wear anything that will distract from your message. Television viewers should focus on your face and what you say, not on what you are wearing.

- **Clothing:** Dress in a simple, conservative, and boring manner. Wear solid colors, not patterns. Avoid white and red. If wearing a suit, try navy or gray with a blue shirt and a basic tie. Wear long socks so your skin does not show if you cross your legs. Avoid short skirts, particularly if sitting. Cameras like tighter, properly fitted clothing.
- **Accessories:** If possible, wear glasses with non-reflective lenses and adjust them so they stay up. Do not wear jewelry that dangles or makes noise.
- **Skin and Hair Products:** Whether you usually use make-up or not, apply powder on the nose, forehead, and face to avoid shine. Hot lights will make you sweat. If you wear other make-up, use natural colors. Avoid hair products that add shine.

### **V. MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT AND BODY LANGUAGE**

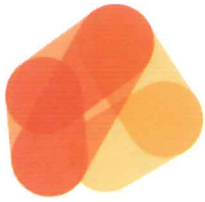
For in-person interviews, look at one of the interviewer’s eyes, the one closest to the camera. If the interview is direct-to-camera, look into the lens of the camera as deeply as you can see, focusing with one eye (your eyes dart when you focus with both). If you are doing an interview on your computer, place it or prop it up so the camera is at eye level. If using a phone camera, use a tripod or a pile of books to steady the phone.

If the camera shot only includes your head, do not move your head much and do not move your hands or body at all. If there is a wider shot, you can use your hands to make small gestures. In either case, make sure you are standing or sitting straight and never look away from the camera before answering a question.

### **VI. MINIMIZE NERVOUSNESS**

Even experienced interviewees can get nervous. To avoid fidgeting and unnecessary gestures, interlace your fingers in front of you or in your lap. When only your head and shoulders will be visible, sit on your hands if you tend to use expressive gestures. If there is a table, you can dig your fingers under it – pros have found that a little discomfort will distract you from your nerves. If you are standing, curl your toes towards the floor; it will help you stand straighter and stronger. Do not tap on any surface. If you are interviewing in person, it may feel more comfortable to focus on the interviewer’s forehead than eyes.

*For more assistance with television or radio interviews, contact Danielle Kim at [danielle.kim@scholars.org](mailto:danielle.kim@scholars.org) and Dominik Doemer at [dominik@scholars.org](mailto:dominik@scholars.org).*



## TIPS FOR PODCAST INTERVIEWS

Podcasts are an increasingly popular medium that offers a new way of connecting with an audience. From professional radio stations like *NPR*, to think tanks like Brookings, and even just your next-door neighbor, it seems like everyone has a podcast these days. While many of the tips for podcast interviews are similar to TV or radio interviews (check out our tip sheet on radio and TV interviews for more details), there are a few additional things you should keep in mind.

### I. PODCASTS HAVE MANY FORMATS

There is no universal rule for how a podcast is structured. If you are invited to be a podcast guest, make sure to listen to a few episodes before coming on the show. This will give you a better sense of what they are looking for in a guest. For example, some podcasts feature short interviews with multiple guests, others can run as long as three hours, and others yet are heavily produced and only run snippets of previously recorded interviews. Understanding the format of the podcast will help you prepare for the conversation.

Most podcasts are not live. Unlike many TV or radio programs, podcasts are typically edited and produced before being released. This gives you the opportunity to re-do an answer if you are not happy with how it came out the first time or to suggest a different question if you can't speak to the one that was posed. Producers will often appreciate this as it gives them multiple versions to choose from, though make sure to only do this sparingly and ask first if it is alright to re-do a part. Similarly, don't be afraid to take a short pause to collect your thoughts so you start out strong and answer the question clearly. This is good practice if you are prone to using filler language in your responses, see below for more.

### II. PODCASTS ARE PERSONAL, BE PERSONAL

Podcasts are an inherently personal format. Hosts are in their listeners' ears, often with nothing but their voices and some music to guide them along. When you are speaking on a podcast, make sure to have concrete examples and/or stories prepared to reinforce your point and engage the listener. Personal stories are especially powerful if you have them. Similarly, use visual and active language when you can. Paint a scene for the listener with your words. Described what you are talking about in a way that allows the listener to imagine it.

## **TIPS FOR PODCAST INTERVIEWS**

Don't be afraid to be personal, goofy, or laugh with the host. These very human interactions often make for great audio and can help ensure that you don't sound too scripted. Joke around a bit with the host if that feels natural, or share something personal if you're comfortable doing so.

### **III. IT'S AUDIO ONLY**

Do your best to avoid "ums," "ahs," and lip smacks, these really stick out in podcasts since they are audio only. Practice can help you to avoid these common speaking habits. For example, practice telling a story and slow it down a lot so you can be very deliberate about not saying "um". Work with a friend or colleague and ask them to raise their hand every time you say this common filler word. You can also use a voice recorder app on your phone to record yourself and then listen back for some helpful self-critique.

Since podcasts are typically not live, you also don't have to rush to start speaking before you are ready. It's okay to be thoughtful about what you want to say before giving an answer. It's common to feel pressured to answer a question right away – this is when “ums” often creep in. Similarly, if you are a fast speaker, try to slow down a bit and take a breath at the end of each sentence. Podcast listeners only have your voice, there is no text scrolling at the bottom of the screen, no subtitles, and no images or video to help listeners follow along.

When recording for a podcast, make sure your settings will allow for the highest quality audio possible. Speak directly into the microphone and avoid tapping your fingers on a table, loud jewelry, shuffling papers. Make sure to find a quiet room to record in if you are not in a studio.

### **IV. GETTING ON A PODCAST**

If you are interested in being on a podcast, the best thing to do is to start listening to them. There are over 500,000 podcasts according to Apple. Use your podcast app of choice to find shows relevant to your expertise – most podcast apps allow you to search or filter by different topics. Reach out to the show's producer if you find a show that you like and it features outside guests (a large number of podcasts just have one commentator or a group of people discussing topics on a regular basis). Producers, not hosts, are typically in charge of planning out the show and finding guests to bring on.

In your outreach, reference a previous episode or two you enjoyed; this shows the producer that you are familiar with the podcast and what they are looking for in a guest. If you have a recording (audio or video will work) of yourself speaking on a related topic, include this in the pitch, it will demonstrate to the producer that you will be a good guest. Expect a call from a producer if they are interested in bringing you on. These “screeener calls” help producers ensure that the potential guest will work for the show, so make sure you are prepared for such a call and come across clearly and professionally.