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A MEDIA GUIDE  
FOR SCIENTISTS

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BEFORE  
THE INTERVIEW

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DURING  
THE INTERVIEW

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After the Interview

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## From your interview to publication

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Between the time an interview is wrapped up and a story is published or aired, journalists are juggling various tasks: conducting additional interviews, writing the story, fact-checking, copy-editing, coming up with a headline and collecting relevant multimedia—and sometimes all this needs to happen in a matter of hours or at best a few days.

While scientists and journalists are both committed to accuracy, the ways in which these groups convey factual accuracy of scientific concepts and progress differs. Scientists are often in dialogue with colleagues who are familiar with their field, while journalists are communicating to a public who may or may not be familiar with the topic. Don't be dissuaded if everything you talk about isn't covered in the article, but think about how you can build a lasting relationship with journalists to ensure that they have a trustworthy resource for similar stories in the future.

Finally, as we've said previously, investing time in talking with journalists and the public is an important endeavor, and we would like to provide you with the resources you need to do so. In 2015, we surveyed 218 science journalists; the data and quotes in this guide represent the responses we collected. We hope that with this guide, the final one in a series of three, you will be better prepared for an interview and better informed on why journalists work the way they do.

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# Why you can't see the whole piece before publication

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By Alexandra Ossola

*As a journalist, I'm sympathetic to scientists who speak with me for stories, especially young scientists trying to move forward in their careers. It can be scary not to have approval over the final product to which your name is attached. But I very infrequently show my stories to my sources. And I feel this practice is important, not only to preserve the integrity of the story, but also for the journalist's sanity.*

When I first started working as a journalist, editors told me that I'm not allowed to share my story with sources. People's immediate thought is that this is to shield the journalist from critique while she is working on some sort of exposé or unflattering piece that will misrepresent or infuriate the scientist. But the vast majority of the time, that's not the case. Usually, the journalist is on a crazy tight deadline, and though we still want to get all the facts right, we don't have time to navigate another person's agenda while still trying to accomplish what we set out to do in the piece.

Interviews take a lot of mutual trust—the journalist has to trust the source to be as accurate as possible, and the source has to trust that the journalist won't misinterpret that information. Since I write mostly for the web and don't usually have the luxury of a fact-checker, I put a lot of trust in my sources, and work hard to hold up my end of that bargain. I don't hesitate to reach out to sources if there's a technical point I didn't understand, or if I am unclear about the exact meaning of a quote I'd like to use. And because I do all these things, I don't think it's necessary to share the whole piece with a source.

There have been times when I have done so. That's usually only been in cases where the subject matter was very technical or very sensitive. But these cases are the exceptions.

At the end of an interview, sources often ask if they can see their quotes. I'm more than happy to oblige them, but I always give them this warning in my email: "Keep in mind that, since our conversation was on the record, I'm under no obligation to change your quotes. But I'm not particularly interested in embarrassing either one of us, so I'm willing to work with you on them as long as your changes seem reasonable. Also please note that anything that's not within the quotation marks is likely to change as the piece is edited (both by me and my editor)."

Once I send those quotes, I view my obligation to my source to be complete. As promised, I make any changes I deem reasonable (most of the time these changes are warranted, though I've encountered many situations where a source recommends a change that is irrelevant to the larger point, or complex wording that makes the piece harder to read, and I usually reject those).

If I were a scientist nervous about giving an interview, I would suggest the following piece of advice: Ask to see your quotes, but don't ask the reporter to read them back to you. Most reporters will oblige and send you an email several hours or days or weeks after the conversation. Try to get a sense of when the piece is due so you know to watch your email around that time. That way, you can respond quickly if the reporter is emailing you at the last minute.

ALEXANDRA OSSOLA is a freelance science journalist based in New York City. She has contributed to Popular Science, Newsweek, Scientific American, Audubon, Nautilus, and others. She writes mostly for the web, but occasionally does print assignments as well. You can tweet her at @alexandraossola.



68%

noted that an editor  
would write the headline  
for their piece.

“Journalism is about telling stories to inform and entertain. A story by necessity cannot include each and every piece of information about a topic. If you find yourself tempted to fault a story or a journalist due to leaving material out of a story, first ask yourself if that material really, truly would have been crucial to include in terms of informing and entertaining a story’s audience—typically, general readers. You will usually discover that the answer is ‘no.’ Keeping this perspective in mind can help you achieve positive outcomes from your interactions with journalists.”

“I stake my writing reputation on accurately presenting scientists’ work. If I have questions about information as I’m writing the story, I’ll go back to the scientist for clarification and may paraphrase what I’ve written to make sure I have the correct context.

But sometimes scientists dispute their quotes when I’ve taken them verbatim from our recorded interview; they just don’t like the way it makes them sound/look in writing.”

## Follow-up and fact-checking after the interview

Be available to fact-checkers, research assistants, or the journalist, who may want to double check quotes and information with you

If you feel that you made a mistake in the interview or misspoke, contact the journalist—factual mistakes need to be corrected; but if you feel you didn’t like what you said, it is up to the journalist to decide if that will be changed or corrected

## After publication

Let the journalist know if there is a factual mistake—if that doesn’t work you can go to the editor

Let the journalist know if there is a follow-up in the study or new findings—s/he might want to write about it again

50%

of journalists noted that research assistants, copy-editors or fact-checkers at a publication do the fact-checking.

# 66%

of journalists would always or most of the time let a scientist know if the focus or tone of the story changes while they are writing or editing.

## What not to expect after the interview

Seeing the whole piece before publication

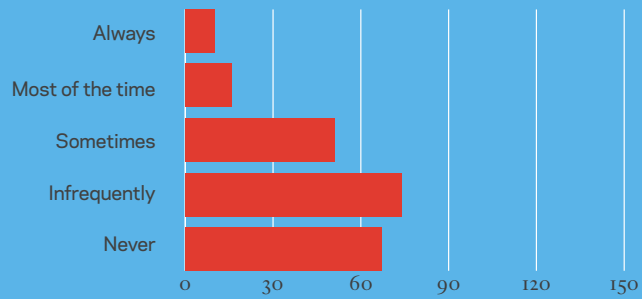
Being quoted in the piece—sometimes quotes are cut at the last minute or if the story changes direction

# 94%

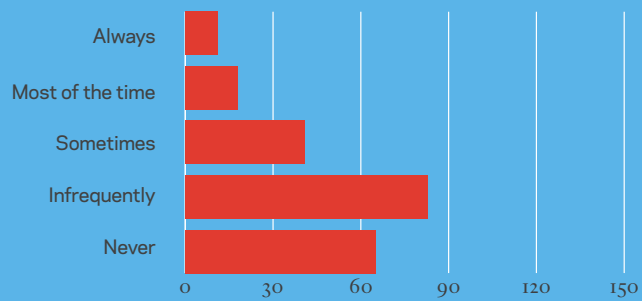
of journalists want to hear from sources if they think they were misquoted or misrepresented, or if they think there is a factual error in the story.

*“We strive to get the science right. When it is not right, it is my job, my editor’s job, and the pub’s job to fix the error. Getting it right is of extreme importance, and I will do everything I can to make sure I do. I will take a middle of the night call at home if I got something wrong. What I do not do is always make everyone happy... Maybe there are weaknesses in the methods that need to be pointed out. Maybe the applicability of the research is under debate, and that needs a mention. Most of the time scientists appreciate this—they also do not like overhype. It is my job to get everything correct. It is not my job to make everyone happy.”*

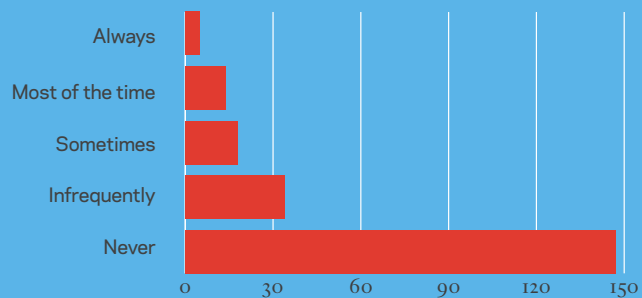
## In the days or weeks after the interview



Do you send relevant parts of the story to the source for approval?



Do you send quotes to the source for approval?



Do you send the whole piece to your source for approval?

*“I’ll sometimes send a sentence or two about a very complex topic to the source, but will never, ever send quotes. Sending entire stories to them for review is considered a breach of journalistic ethics for several reasons: we’d have to do it for each person, all of whom have their own interest, and it creates at least the appearance that we’re allowing someone to influence our reporting.”*



“[I]f the story has changed in a way that alters the storyline I discussed with my sources, then I definitely contact them. Similarly, if new findings come out that change the story we started with, then I would appreciate some follow up from the scientist.”

92%

of journalists responded that they are always open to scientists calling them if they have more information.

“Circumstances can change after we interview them. Unexpected events may crowd out stories previously scheduled, negative comments may kill a story, and editors may edit their comments out of a story.”

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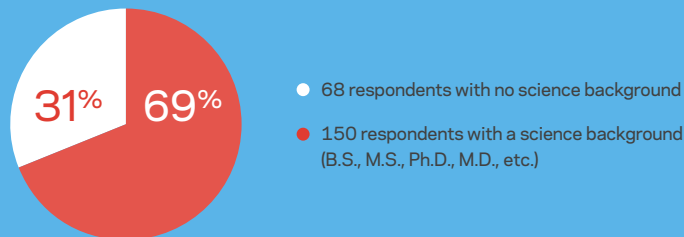
## How we put this guide together

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In the summer of 2015, Sense About Science USA worked with its network of young scientists to see what questions and concerns they had about being interviewed. Similarly, we asked several science journalists what questions and concerns they most often hear from scientists. With these insights, we composed a short survey to better understand how science journalists work, what the conventions in their field are, and what concerns they have; in September 2015, we invited science journalists in the US (via various science writer organizations and societies) to participate in our online survey.

Of the 218 (mostly science) journalists who took our survey:

- 115 were freelance journalists, 103 were staff journalists
- 58% have undergraduate or graduate journalism degrees, or both
- With the exception of three general assignment journalists, all others are science, health, environment, and/or energy journalists
- Most worked at print or online media outlets



This guide is available online at: <http://www.senseaboutscienceusa.org/guides-for-scientists/>  
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