A MEDIA GUIDE
FOR SCIENTISTS

Before the Interview

DURING
THE INTERVIEW

AFTER
THE INTERVIEW

SAS USA
SENSE *about* SCIENCE

Preparing for your interview

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 collected from these individuals. 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 do journalists rarely share their questions with interviewees?

By Meehan Crist

Most journalists are happy to explain the subject of their piece to an interviewee and offer a general sense of what they'd like to talk about. Some journalists may even send a few questions as prompts or follow-ups, but most won't typically give interviewees a list of questions beforehand (even if they have agreed to do the whole interview over email). This may be confusing or even frustrating for scientists, because if they had a list, they could prepare.

But, that's the thing—most journalists don't *want* you to prepare. Giving an interviewee a list of questions can undermine a journalist's ability to do good journalism. There are myriad reasons for this, ranging from practical to ethical.

In a practical sense, it's a journalist's job to support a story with engaging quotes from expert sources. Conversation is unscripted and unpredictable—the best quotes often arise from a spontaneous moment. Sending a list of questions beforehand can forestall spontaneity, which includes moments when a scientist is at her best, being genuinely thoughtful, intelligent, witty, or just plain lucid.

Conversations can also lead in unpredictable directions, which can make for a better story—more nuanced reporting of recent findings, a more compelling narrative of scientific discovery, etc. A journalist will come prepared, but she may not know exactly what the scientist has to offer. The best journalists are great listeners; they know how to come up with new questions as potentially interesting avenues open up during an interview.

But the most compelling concern is ethical. Even if giving an interviewee a list of questions before an interview seems harmless (or just efficient) in a

particular instance, over time this practice can create a culture of expectation counter to the fundamental principles and practices of journalism.

Most journalists don't mull over it every day, but it's our job to uphold freedom of speech and freedom of the press. A free press requires access to information as unfiltered as possible by political, economic, or personal interests. (Interviewees are not called "sources" for nothing—it's a journalist's job to get as close to the source of a story as possible.) Consider political reporting: if every journalist had to get a list of questions approved by a politician before an interview, the public would know considerably less about their government.

When it comes to science, the stakes may be different but the principle remains. Universities have interests. Companies have interests. And individual researchers have interests such as credit, funding, and tenure. For example, if a journalist gives a list of questions to a scientist before an interview, those questions may be vetted by another party—such as a PR office—hoping to manipulate the media to their advantage. This sort of thing doesn't always happen, but the risk can undermine the ability of journalists to do their job.

Context matters, of course. Sometimes a quick email and a quick response from a scientist are all that's needed for a story. And different journalists work differently. But it's safe for a scientist to assume that if a journalist asks for an interview, it's because she genuinely wants to *talk* with you.

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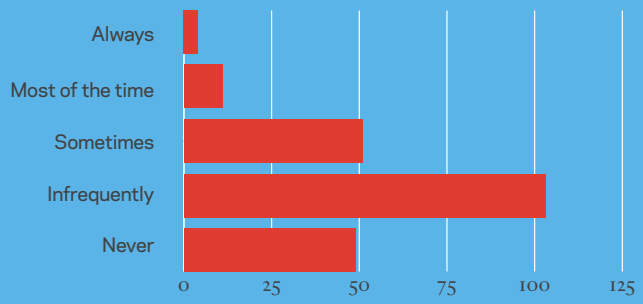
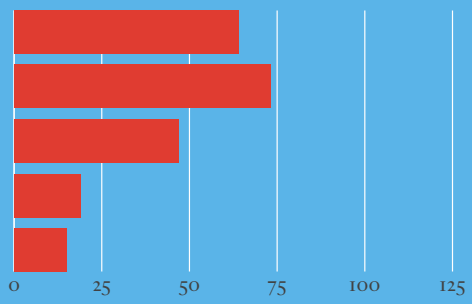


We asked journalists, will you send a draft of questions to scientists prior to the interview?



We asked journalists, will you send a draft of questions to scientists, if explicitly asked to?

94%

of journalists always or most of the time read the articles or review the scientist's research before contacting them for an interview.

What to do when you are contacted by a journalist

- Respond to the inquiry in a timely fashion
- Ask what topics will be covered
- Ask for sample questions
- Ask who the audience is
- Ask what the deadline is
- Ask how long the interview will be
- Ask if the story is broadcast, news, feature, or a policy piece
- Schedule your interview in a quiet place
- Look up the reporter and read their previous pieces
- Look up the journalist's publication

What not to do when you are contacted by a journalist

- Don't assume that the journalist is an expert in the field
- Don't be offended if you don't receive sample questions before the interview
- Don't read from prepared responses
- Don't assume that simple questions imply misunderstanding

"If they ask for a specific list of questions, I generally tell them that I prefer not to do this because you can end up with a source who 'reads' their prepared, written answers over the phone instead of having a probing two-way conversation. If they insist on it as a condition for the interview, I usually send some questions along but give a disclaimer that I may ask questions not on the list during the interview as well. I can't always anticipate every question I'd like to ask someone about their work. Many times my questions arise in my head as I'm listening to their previous answer!"

"I don't know exactly what the story will be when I start out… I've done enough research to have a good idea, but that narrows and changes quite frequently…. [S]cientists need to understand that I interview people and based on those interviews I choose a way to frame the story that tells my readers something true, something interesting, and something they aren't reading everywhere else."

As you prepare for your interview, keep in mind

- Journalists are looking for a story—details and backstories are good
- You are always on the record—unless you explicitly ask to be taken off the record before saying something
- Not all journalists are the same—if you had a bad experience with one, don't punish all journalists

If you are interviewed about a specific topic or paper

- Jot down three to five main points you want to get across in the interview
- Have examples and stories relevant to your points
- If your main points don't come up during the interview, be sure to mention them

95%

of journalists report that they always or most of the time explain to scientists what the story they are working on is about.

"Regarding whether I let my source know my familiarity with their area of study: I usually don't because then they talk to me in jargon and bump over the important bits that need to be spelled out for readers less familiar with such work."

"[W]e very much want to help our audiences understand the importance of science and its effect on their daily lives. It's important to understand that we're not writing to promote any particular scientist's work but to help people understand what it all means. In other words, we may focus on one part of a study that may be less exciting to the scientist, while paying less attention to other parts of the paper (many of the methods, for example)."

Be engaged throughout the interview

- Turn off your email and phone
- Stay away from jargon and technical details, unless asked for these details
- If you don't understand a question, ask for clarification
- Respond to every question, especially the simple ones—journalists need explanations in your own words
- Remember that you can always be quoted!

32%

of journalists said that they always or most of the time already had the angle in mind when preparing for an interview.

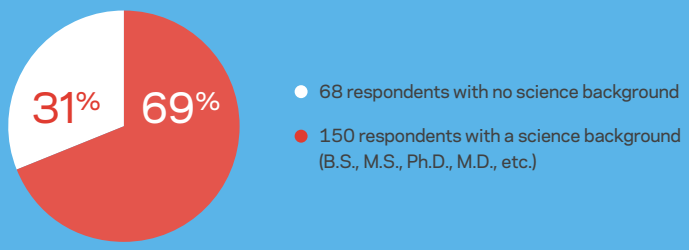
"I am never looking for just quotes. I always want to hear the scientist's perspective, their experience with the material, and whatever else they might think is relevant. I sometimes mostly want their honest opinion of someone else's research so we can make a decision about whether to cover it or not. I always say that up-front."

How we put this guide together

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



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