

Advice for Interacting with News Media

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Before you agree to an interview

- 1. Do not do an interview in response to a cold call.** Ask for their information, ask for time to prepare and tell them you'll call back.
- 2. Research the reporter (or ask an institutional public information officer (PIO) to do this).** A Google search will tell you what kind of stories they typically write and help you speak at an appropriate level. You may find they write for a sensational outlet. It's okay to talk to them -- their reach may be broad -- but have a PIO in the room, and record at least your own side of the conversation. (Note: in 13 states and DC it's the law to tell people you're recording them.)
- 3. Prepare.** Have an agenda: 2 to 5 message points. Read -- do a Google News search for recent stories on the topic to see what the reporter may have read. If you're being asked to comment on a paper, read the paper and the press release that was written about it.
- 4. Practice.** If you're inexperienced, ask a PIO to shoot you questions. If you can face a colloquium audience, you can do this.

Random tips for video or TV

- 1. Appearance.** Avoid loud patterns. Stripes are especially bad. Take off badges and lanyards. Ask if there will be a hair and makeup person. If not, do your best on your own and ask someone on the set if you look okay before you begin.
- 2. Bring props.** If there's any relevant prop you can have in your hand, bring it!
- 3. Posture.** Sit on the front half of your chair and sit up straight; this makes you look better, more active. Ask where they want you to look -- at an interviewer, or at the camera? Use your hands when you talk.
- 4. Video conferencing.** Make sure you're well lit. If there's a window in the room, position yourself so the window is in front of you or to one side, not behind you. Place the camera at your eye level so viewers aren't looking up your nose. Use earbuds so there's no echo or feedback. Sit in a quiet place; coffee shops don't work. Don't look at the Skype screen, make "eye contact" with your camera instead.

During the interview

- 1. Respect your audience.** Your audience is the reporter's readers, not the reporter. Don't condescend. Do provide necessary context. Avoid jargon. Do not use acronyms or initialisms. If a reporter's question irritates you, don't let that show -- don't take it out on the audience. Give them an answer that you'd be proud for an audience to hear.
- 2. Speak in soundbites.** Most reporters want to quote you, and to do that, you must answer in a series of standalone sentences. This feels weird because it's not normal conversation, but it's an interview, not a conversation. It's okay to pause to collect your thoughts. State your key point up front, and make it a complete sentence that makes it clear what the question was. Try to keep your sentences short and clear; don't ramble. Avoid using the words "we" or "it" - state the subject each time. If you get lost, acknowledge it, regroup, and say: "What's really important is," and state something from your agenda.
- 3. Avoid speculation.** If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. If appropriate, state how you would try to figure out the answer to the question, or explain why the answer is unknowable. Or offer to connect the reporter with someone else with expertise. Whatever you do, don't lie.
- 4. If you don't understand a question, don't answer it.** Either ask for the question to be rephrased, or:
- 5. Bridge to your agenda.** "I'm not sure about that, but what I can tell you is..."
- 6. There's no such thing as "off the record."** Don't say anything you wouldn't want to see in a newspaper. If you do, and it gets published, it's your fault.

Follow up

Thank the reporter for their interest and ask them for a link to the article/show when it's posted. Offer to respond by email to clarify any points of confusion. Jot down a few notes on your experience for your own records, and share those notes with your PIO. Most reporters will not send you their story in advance, but you can offer to fact-check and see what happens.

Being Interviewed by the Media?

Advice for Planetary Scientists

Advice from author David W. Brown

What reporters need: **A timely response.** This is the most important thing. We live and die by the deadline. Writers are happy to get a response of “No! Go away!” Total silence, on the other hand, kills us. I can always find another scientist if I know you’re not interested. There will be no hard feelings.

What reporters need: **Your expertise.** Few journalists are trained scientists. We do our homework and know our stuff, but if I’m calling you, it’s because you know something very specific that I do not. An interview is no time for modesty. Be the expert that you are.

What reporters need: **Usable quotes...** but please do not worry about “sounding” like you are being interviewed. We will find the best quotes from the interview, and use them, and generally summarize the rest. So just speak naturally, don’t worry about “ums” and “you knows.” We will edit that stuff out.

Don’t be afraid to ask for: **The deadline. The publication. How long the interview will last.** A writer will almost always tell you that information in the email, but if the writer forgets, just ask.

Don’t be afraid to ask for: **The questions in advance.** Some writers won’t do it, and some editors don’t want us to do it. But nobody will be offended if you ask. If you get a no, ask for a tight summary so that you can be prepared. This is OK!

Don’t be afraid to ask for: **An email interview.** Some of us hate speaking extemporaneously. If you have anxiety or fear that the technical details will be lost in translation, just say, “Hey I can only do this by email.” Nobody will mind.

Don’t be afraid to: **Pass on a question.** Really! Just say “I’m not qualified to answer that and would prefer not to.”

If you are: **Not the world’s foremost expert** in the area about which you are being called, don’t immediately shy away from the interview. *Sometimes all we need is someone with a solid grip on the subject.* If that is you, then your voice is needed.

If you are: Subjected to any form of **harassment or discrimination**, let the publication know, and reach out to National Association of Science Writers or the Society of Professional Journalists.

Media Advice for Planetary Scientists

Advice from Space Reporters Barbara & Leonard David

Be sure of your facts. If a journalist asks you a question that perhaps is out of your field and you're not sure of the answer, tell them you will get back to them on that - or refer them to an expert that you know will be able to answer their question.

Journalists are usually your friends. Don't be intimidated by journalists - especially space/planetary science journalists. They have chosen you to interview because they respect you and believe that you likely have the answers to their questions. They have a good background on your topic, and will ask you important and interesting questions.

Science reporters & general reporters. If you are talking to a journalist who is new to planetary science, or is not a science journalist, your interview will likely be more about educating them. They will probably be enthusiastic about learning more. If possible before the interview, send them some links to brief descriptions of the topics they want to interview you about, and other reliable links that might be helpful to them. During the interview, define all your acronyms and terms they may not know.

Background information and quotes. Sometimes reporters are looking for background information as well as quotes on a planetary science topic. Realize that even if they interview you for 20 minutes or more, that they may only use a few sentences from your interview. Don't be offended. You may have educated them more on the topic, or they may just be confirming facts. On controversial topics, they will likely be interviewing at least three experts.

Off the record. If you want to tell them something that is "off the record", tell them that

specifically – that the comment is off the record before you talk about it.

Provide photos, artwork & graphics. Often reporters and their editors are hungry for imagery or easy-to-understand graphics to shape their story about your research. Photo research can take a lot of the reporter's time, so help them out if you can. Be sure to include captions and photo credits. Don't forget head shots or action shots of you carrying out research!

Contact information. Don't forget to provide the reporter your title, position, and affiliation and contact information in case they want to contact you later.

Reviewing articles. Realize that most journalists won't be able to email you back your quotes that they be using in the article – and likely won't be able to send you their whole article to review before it's published. Ask if they can send you a link to the article as soon as it is published, so you can read it prior to your colleagues reading the story.

Feedback for journalists. Keep track of which reporters did the best job in capturing your comments – and those that missed the mark. Do let them know if something isn't accurate. If it's online, they may be able to have it corrected. And, thank yous are always appreciated by reporters.

Contact local media. Newspapers and other publications, as well as TV and radio stations, in the area where you live are always interested in the local news. Don't be shy. Contact them when you have news or about doing a feature on your area of expertise. If there's a science topic that's in the national or world news, they will likely welcome a local scientist's perspective or opinion.